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“Own work” in primary school – A teaching and learning practice in the context of administration and control

Kerstin Bergqvist*

Abstract
What picture of schoolwork do we obtain if we take a close look at everyday classroom activities and consider what students and teachers do and say about them? This is the basic focus of the study reported here which examines a teaching and learning practice called “own work” (eget arbete) in the context of primary classroom settings in a Swedish comprehensive school. One theoretical assumption is that knowledge is integrated into situated practices and thus relative to context. Data were collected by means of observations and tape-recorded discussions between the teacher and individual students. Students’ responsibility for making effective use of time, achieving much and finishing what they had planned was emphasised. The activities the participants engaged in and how the participants looked upon successful work and learning are discussed as being contingent on certain administrative and controlling functions of the institution.

Keywords: classroom interaction, situated practices, primary school, own work

Responsibility for own work
In Sweden, as well as in other Nordic countries, a comprehensive school system developed after the Second World War, with children working together in the same class irrespective of their academic, ethnic or social backgrounds. Core ideas of the communicative patterns were early linked to a progressive tradition with a strong impact on education ideology and school practice, emphasising factors such as co-operation, individualisation and activity. Since the late twentieth century ideals about student activity have meant an increase in self-regulated individualised ways of working. In the Swedish context, this way of organising teaching and learning is often referred to as “own work” (eget arbete). In Norway and Denmark, it is generally referred to as “responsibility for learning” (ansvar for egen læring) (Gleerup & Petersson, 1999; Lyngsnes, 2007; Meland, 2011).

From an ideological perspective, it is obvious that students’ responsibility for work and learning and for freedom of choice is to result in motivated, inquiring and self-governing students who have a say (Dovemark, 2004). This direction was evident in

* Linköping University, Department of Behavioural Sciences and Learning. E-mail: kerstin.bergqvist@gmail.com ©Author. ISSN 2000-4508, pp.283–296
the Swedish official curriculum document of 1994 which stated that “school should strive towards a situation in which every pupil develops an increasing responsibility for his or her own results” (Lpo/Lpf 94, p. 16) (my translation). An evident shifting of responsibility from teacher to student is expressed in this document also in the sense that “teaching” has been replaced by “learning” (Carlgren, et al., 2006; Vinterek, 2006).

A range of concepts describes these forms of teaching and learning. In Sweden, for example, self-regulated ways of organising teaching and learning are referred to as “own work”, “own learning”, “independent work”, “individual time for study”, “own planning” or “work with own goals”. This has been referred to as a “seductive rhetoric” (Popkewitz, 2000) indicating student activity, personal flexibility, responsibility and freedom of choice. A transformation of the ideals in classroom practices has given rise to a variation of individual work, which has spread markedly across all levels of school in recent decades (Carlgren, 2005; Österlind, 2005; Hensvold, 2006, Söderström, 2006; Lyngsnes, 2007; Skolverket, 2009; Alm, 2010).

**Bureaucratisation of schoolwork**

As part of an advanced liberal policy and globalised economy in late-modern society an emphasis on the individual, along with a striving to govern through the integration of individuals’ autonomy, interests and needs with institutional demands, has spread over the Western world (Lindblad & Popkewitz, 2004; Krejsler, 2006). Ideas of flexible learning and self-organisation together with the democratisation of relations have brought new expectations concerning classroom practices and teachers’ and students’ roles as empowered and capable and a notion of education as a market (Popkewitz, 2000). Consequently, schooling has become imbued with economic theories including individuals’ freedom of choice as well as accountability in terms of results (Ball, 1994). The general decentralisation of the Swedish school system and introduction of management by objectives and results have meant that not only has the structure of the school system been reframed but so too has the meaning and content of schooling (Carlgren, et al., 2006; Englund, 1993). This has led to an increase in teachers’ and students’ administrative tasks. With this way of organising teaching and learning, teachers’ overt control of a whole class has been considerably reduced and students’ work has come to comprise much of what used to be teachers’ tasks (Bergqvist & Säljö, 2004). The introduction of the official curriculum (Lpo/Lpf 94), in which students were made explicitly responsible for their own learning, resulted in many new ways of keeping track of individual students while satisfying growing expectations of evaluation and documentation.

This work organisation, as well as the initial ideals for a comprehensive school such as individualisation, co-operation and student activity, was developed partly as a practical solution to difficulties of teaching heterogeneous classes. Individual students were said to work “at their own level and pace”, to plan and evaluate their work and decide when and for how long to work with what. This meant that learning became
an individual matter to be accounted for and checked by means of an abundance of tools for documentation. Many types of documents such as individual development plans, evaluations, follow-ups etc. must be written and accounted for (Andreasson & Asplund Carlsson, 2009). Activities and results must be documented, evaluated and reported by teachers and students. This has promoted what Englund (1995) referred to as a “culture of documentation” and contributed to the increasing bureaucratisation of schoolwork.

**Theoretical framework**

What studies within perspectives guiding this work have in common is that teaching and learning are analysed as communicative practices. This research does not represent a unified field but, as claimed by Mercer (2004), “those within it treat communication, thinking and learning as related processes which are shaped by culture” (p. 138). By being involved in certain contexts and communicative activities, and in the negotiation of meaning in diverse settings, students appropriate new ways of talking, thinking, valuing, acting and being (Hicks, 1996; Mercer, 2000). This is how they understand what is expected of them and how they learn to “do school”. Knowledge is jointly construed through communicative practices in which people participate and cooperate. People’s actions are embedded in social practices and thus relative to context (Elbers, 1987; Säljö, 2000). According to Lave (1991), learning is not just situated in a practice, it is “an integral part of generative social practice in the lived-in-world” (p. 35). This points to the intimate relationship between talk, work, learning, activities and the use of material as a situated social practice. From this perspective, classroom context and daily work are seen as intimately, and reflexively, intertwined with the learning context and what is said and with what is regarded as work, knowledge and learning. This reflexivity implies that what it is about is what Foucault (1982) called “practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak” (p. 49).

Pedagogical practices are constitutive of the production of student activity at the same time as they provide norms for what constitutes good pedagogy and successful students. Classrooms arranged for students to sit still and listen imply certain expectations of teachers’ and students’ roles and produce certain notions of knowledge and learning. Settings where students engage in their “own work” are likely to produce different notions of knowledge, learning and student and teacher roles. It is no accident that recent ideals of autonomous students are reflected in educational practices where the learner is seemingly in control. Like any pedagogical practice, this implies and communicates a conception of teaching and learning with consequences for how these are conceived of and for how the learner is expected to think, talk and act.

One basic assumption behind this study is that a close examination of language use and interaction can give significant insights into practices and contribute to our knowledge of schooling. The specific purpose of this article is to identify what schoolwork means in a context where students are talked about as being responsible for
their own work. What picture of schoolwork and learning do we obtain if we consider what the teachers and the students say when they talk about the students’ individual work? How is teaching and learning situated in this context construed? This will be the focus in what follows.

**Empirical field and method**

This research was carried out as a field study in one primary school. It is a recently built small school situated in a mixed housing area with low-rise houses. The children have a mixed social background, including other ethnic backgrounds than Swedish. Three classes, each with 20 students in grades 1–2, aged 6–8 years, were followed and data were collected from periods of “own work” during one and a half years (2006–2007). This was done by means of field notes made during observations of students’ classroom work and tape recordings of discussions between the teacher and individual students. Planning books, portfolios and various learning materials made up the main part of the working material in the classroom and were also included in the data. One reason for choosing this particular school was that “own work” had been a way of organising teaching and learning for a long time. The teachers had been colleagues for many years and were very confident in their teacher role and about their way of working. Together they had developed a well-structured model for classroom work and the control of students’ results.

**Results**

*A classroom setting for student activity and free choice*

The classrooms were identically furnished with tables and chairs arranged in groups and drawers for students’ workbooks and files. The walls were covered with drawings, sketches etc. from projects and wall charts describing learning tasks and work routines, such as specific procedures to follow when planning work, learning a letter or reading a book. The environment invited students to move freely about and choose their individual options from an abundance of learning materials which were displayed on tables and bookshelves. Individual work was carried out at the tables while common activities took place on a large round carpet. This organisation was explained to the students on their first day at school: “When you listen you sit in the ring, when you work you sit at the table”.

On the carpet or “in the ring”, as this was often referred to, the students were informed about events involving the whole group. The teacher handled administrative matters, introduced an activity or gave instructions about future events. Now and then, the students were invited to share something with the others, who were then supposed to listen and ask questions. One activity that recurred on the carpet every Monday morning was when the teacher checked parents’ signatures in the students’ contact books. This routine certified that the parents had read the teachers’ message(s), if any, and what the child had written about what he or she had learnt during the week.
It showed that parents knew what was happening in school and how their children were doing. This activity was above all a manifestation of the students' responsibility. The students were supposed to take their contact books home with them on Friday afternoon, show them to their parents and bring them back after the weekend. This was carefully checked and those who forgot to do it were blamed: “This is your Friday work, your responsibility. It’s not me, not your mother. It is you who are responsible. It’s your job to remember”.

Activities on the carpet were perceived as different from “real work”. Somebody might well say after a while: “When will we begin to work?” or “Are we allowed to go and work now?” Talk on the carpet could also be brought to an end when the teacher said: “Well, now it’s time to go and work”, or “Now, let’s start working”. The students then went to their tables and began to schedule their individual work for the next week(s).

The students searched for exercises on the shelves, corrected work, discussed with peers, practised writing letters, showed the teacher something they had finished, asked for help or visited other rooms. All of these different activities made the classrooms very communicative and lively settings. In a more traditional classroom, much of what the students did here like moving around, talking to classmates or changing tasks would have been regarded as inappropriate. Yet in this organisation these activities were expected. However, they had to be carried out in specific ways. Students who often walked around, made too many contacts with peers and changed tasks without finishing them were regarded as being “immature” and as “having difficulties concentrating” in this kind of work organisation.

The design of these classrooms, allowing access to optional learning materials and activities, was not accidental. In line with what Walkerdine (1998) once claimed, a classroom context like this manifests a coupling between Piaget’s developmental psychology and pedagogical space arranged for facilitating student activity in child-centred teaching and learning. An open classroom for moving freely about, with access to learning materials to choose from, is based on assumptions about activity as a condition for learning and about children’s capacity and innate will to engage in learning activities. In addition, the teaching and learning context contributed to a notion of students taking responsibility for monitoring their own work.

**Reflexivity and self-control**

On the first occasion involving “own work”, one of the teachers explained to the first-graders how they should think and do when they planned their work. She emphasised that they were free to choose from among the abundance of learning materials in the classroom and that they should decide which tasks to work on: “You keep in order what must be done and see to it that this is finished. You choose”. The teachers had already decided that the greater part of the tasks should involve reading, writing, arithmetic, social training and arts. Within these fields the students were free to choose which
tasks to work on: “I and the other teachers have decided what the ‘must-do tasks’ are. If you fill this in in your schedule you can see what you have to do during your work period”, one of the teachers explained.

During “own work”, it was obvious that the students were busy doing quite different things. Some wrote what they intended to work on during the week, initially with support from the teacher, writing “must-do tasks” and other tasks in their planning books. Others sat on their own and focused on the tasks they had decided to work on, now and then leaving the table to fetch some material or put something back on the shelves. They easily found something to work on and did not wait to ask the teacher. These students were described by their teachers as “good at planning and doing a lot”, as “good at finishing things” and as students who “can see what they have to do and who know how to use time effectively”. Other students seemed to be more undecided about what to work on. They waited for assistance, occasionally looking at their neighbours’ work, checked a drawer or looked for a pen. Some students walked around more at random, as if looking for something to do, or stayed at other students’ tables and talked with peers. According to the teachers, they had “difficulties getting started, seeing what they had to do, sticking to a plan”, and “finishing tasks”.

Planning was seen as a means of getting students to develop a self-reflective attitude to their work and learning. It was a useful technique for “thinking about” and “seeing” how much one manages to finish, what one usually prefers to do and, perhaps, avoiding doing and becoming aware of how long things take to do. This was explained by one of the teachers on the students’ first day at school: “When we plan, this means that we think about what needs to be done”. You are supposed to think about what you need to do and you fill this in in your planning book. In the beginning, you need to think about and feel how much you can manage to finish. After some time you know if you usually manage to finish more than the ‘must-do tasks’ or if you only just manage to get them done” (emphasis added).

Students who finished what they had planned and still had time left, or who initially knew that they could manage to do more, were expected to select something to do in a more open sense. This was referred to as “free choice” or “your own choice” and was to be fitted into the schedule, as were the other tasks: “If you know that you can manage to finish more, you can decide at that very moment what you want to devote that time to and enter this in your planning too”. In spite of the name and description of this activity, it was evident that the students could not choose just anything they might have wished to do, as was made clear by the teacher: “You should think: what is it I want to finish? What do I need to practice? Think of what you choose so that you develop as much as possible”. In fact, this task was assigned a very specific meaning; the student should think of what he or she “needed to practice”. This should be something that is part of normal schoolwork that is “worth devoting time to”, as seen from the perspective of the institution. According to the teachers, this task was important for promoting self-reflection and self-knowledge. By applying “your own
choice”, students who usually finished early were kept busy and for them this was a kind of reward for working effectively and finishing in time. When a student was told to think of what he or she needed to practice to “develop as much as possible” it is worthwhile reminding the reader of the fact that quite young children are involved here.

The students were made responsible for planning work and finishing tasks. They were supposed to reflect on what they were doing and check themselves and their work. In fact, success in monitoring and checking work distinguished “successful” students from the “less successful”. “Successful” students were aware of how much they had to do and keen on finishing what they had planned. According to the teachers, they could “work effectively and do a lot”. These students were often pushed to do more, whereas students who were considered to be “less successful” and had problems concentrating on their work were recommended to plan less. This means that those students who were already considered as “successful” were encouraged to exert themselves while those who were considered “less successful” were not.

Tools for documentation and evaluation
A salient feature of the classrooms was the abundance of learning materials to which the students had access when choosing what to work with. These were all sorts of textbooks, workbooks, games, cards and files with exercises for training reading, writing, arithmetic, social skills and arts. In addition to this material and a contact book and planning book, the students had a range of workbooks of their own such as “the factual study book”, “the book of thoughts”, “the drawer reading book”, “the book of events” and “the writing book”. The students soon became acquainted with the various materials and with what they were called and used for and whether they belonged to “reading”, “writing” or something else. When informing their parents by writing in the contact book about what they had learnt during the week, the students referred to activities and to the materials they had been busy with: “I have done handwriting and fifteen minutes on the ‘drawer reading book’”; “I did two ‘yellow houses’”; “I finished ‘the factual study book’ and did two pages of maths”.

When a task had been finished this was accounted for and ticked off in the planning book. In addition, some activities were supposed to be reported on paper forms designed for this specific purpose and this was the students’ responsibility. This was how work with “the drawer reading book” was documented. The students chose a book which was intended for free reading for half an hour every morning. After each reading occasion, the student reported the number of pages read in columns, together with the title of the book. When the page numbers had been marked, the activity was finally ticked off in the planning book. Another form, “the maths dragon”, was used to account for work in mathematics. On this form a student marked how many pages they planned to finish in the mathematics book. When all the sums were finished in the book, the student coloured the corresponding page numbers. Finally, the student
ticked off the task in the planning book and put “the maths dragon” together with the mathematics book in a “marking box” to be checked by the teacher.

For the “portfolio”, the students selected items from their work which they were satisfied with. Here, one idea was that when the students examined and wrote about what they had done this would help them “see and think about” their work. On the back of each item, a sheet of paper with the following questions was glued: Why did I choose this item? What did I find to be good about it? How can I make it even better next time? These questions were meant to help the students reflect on their achievements, become aware of their ways of working and encourage them to do even more and better in the future. At the beginning, the teachers supported the students when they decided what work to choose and what to write about it: “Initially, we talk about what one can think of, to help them learn to reflect, then they manage to do this on their own”, one of the teachers said. When examining, talking and writing about themselves, the students were expected to become aware of, and possibly improve, their ways of working. More freedom for students to choose when to work with what, and for how long, resulted in greater demands regarding self-control and documentation of results. Tasks were ticked off and could easily be accounted for by means of the various tools for documentation.

Finished tasks – a manifestation of learning

During “own work”, the teachers moved among the tables, checked the students’ planning books and talked with them about what they had planned to work on. Looking at Eric’s (7 years old) planning book, the teacher read what he had written:

Teacher: Five p-cards (arithmetic), spring poem (writing), five squares with maths, three yellow houses (writing), one half-hour of homework. What will you choose from the maths shelf?

Eric: “The 100-game”

Teacher: And in the mathematics book?

Eric: Page 48 to 50.

Teacher: That means a lot of work. Can you manage to do that?

Eric: Yes.

Eric had decided what he was going to work on and how many pages he was going to finish. The teacher checked that demands regarding “must-do tasks” were met and that Eric was sure he would be able to finish what he had planned to do. As can be seen from this short conversation, work was described by mentioning tasks and material and it was talked of in terms of time and quantity. The teachers posed questions such as: “How many ‘yellow houses’ will you have time to do?”, “How far have you come?”, “How long will it take you to finish the ‘book of events’?”, “Will you be able to make more?”, “You can choose to make several cards. So think of how many you think you will be able to finish.” The students’ responsibility to make their own choice and “think
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of and see” how much they could finish was emphasised in the conversations. By means of reflection the students were supposed to check themselves and their work.

Students who were looked upon as “successful” kept themselves busy and finished the tasks they had planned. Tasks were ticked off by means of the various tools for documentation and regarded as instances of learning. These students were considered to be “mature” and as “good at working independently”, as was the case with Brita (6 years old), who explained what she found to be typical about “own work”: “One must manage to finish things. You shouldn’t leave them unfinished”. The importance of finishing tasks was the most frequent topic in talk about “own work”. In fact, it happened that time was entirely devoted to finishing work:

Teacher:  Today we are going to work on getting things finished. I want you to check: How do I stand? What can I do more of?
Student:  Finish things.
Teacher:  Exactly. You can finish things. You must use the time for work so that you finish things.

Students who focused on their work and used the time effectively were often pushed to do more than they had initially planned. It was taken for granted that students like Kevin (7 years old) who do a lot also learn a lot.

Teacher:  Do you think you can you do this in a week? Will you manage to finish in time if you use every minute?
Kevin:  Perhaps.
Teacher:  I think you can. How many did you do last week? Can you do as much as three if you use the time effectively?
Kevin:  Handwriting, two times reading, maths dragon and creative thinking.
Teacher:  And have you finished “the book of thoughts” too?
Kevin:  Yes.
Teacher:  So have you finished the four tasks already?
Kevin:  Yes.
Teacher  Then I’m sure you can finish two more.

The teachers helped the students with how they could think about their planning and how they could manage to finish all the tasks they had planned to do. In the following example Agnes (7 years old) comes to understand that she has an idea of what tasks there are that count. She suggests she can wait with the “creative cards” as long as the other task (handwriting and free writing) are more important. The teacher, however, wants her to finish as many tasks as possible.

Teacher:  What have you left?
Agnes:  “My space journey”, “think creatively” and “handwriting”.
Teacher  “Think creatively” you’ll do pretty quickly, won’t you?
The teacher suggested that Agnes should begin with the tasks that take a long time to finish and do the “creative cards for a short while”. Agnes understood what the teacher said as if the “creative cards” were not as important as the other two tasks and that therefore she could save them until last. The teacher, however, was keen to point out that as long as the “creative cards” belonged to the “must-do tasks” they should also be finished. Different ways of understanding could perhaps have triggered talk about the significance of different activities, knowledge content and learning. However, neither the precise nature of the learning tasks, nor any specific knowledge content was mentioned in the conversation. Instead, Agnes was encouraged to consider what she could do to be able to finish as much as possible.

**Discussion**

This paper has presented a descriptive account of how teaching and learning methods called “own work” were put into practice in a Swedish comprehensive school with children in grades 1–2. The students were talked of as being responsible for their own work and learning. They planned their weekly by work writing down which tasks they intended to work on, what material they were going to use and how much they had in mind to finish. The students must do work within certain compulsory fields. Yet they were free to choose from among various tasks and when to do what and for how long.

As could be seen and heard in these classrooms, the work organisation and the cultural context promoted a conception of learning as doing tasks with certain materials. This was how learning was talked and written about. Talk concerned the planning of work, the importance of using time effectively and achieving a lot. Tasks should be finished and accounted for on forms, in planning books, schedules and portfolios. Demands for detailed follow-up and documentation of activities contributed to notions of work and learning as units to be ticked off. Rather than promoting learning of particular knowledge content, “own work” thus served the purpose of the administrative organisation and contributed to a perception of institutional knowledge as doing what can easily be accounted for. This shows how conflicts between educational goals and controlling functions of an administrative organisation arise at the interaction level in the classroom.
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Recent trends in education which emphasise student accountability and self-regulatory individualised ways of working imply new expectations of classroom practices. Restructuring efforts entail a general decentralisation of the Swedish school system and the introduction of management by objectives and results, with demands regarding the detailed follow-up and documentation of individual students’ results. This has promoted an increase in working methods and techniques for documentation and control and led to the considerable bureaucratisation of schoolwork (Andréasson & Asplund Carlsson, 2009). According to Carlgren et al. (2006), “own work” is a useful tool to meet these new demands. It has “fitted like a glove with goal steering and standardisation” (p. 307).

It has been argued that restructuring efforts such as standardisation, tests and management by objectives and results have meant an increase in technical elements of classroom work and resulted in the trivialisation of knowledge content (Ball, 1994; McNeil, 1986; 2000). Linda McNeil (1986) convincingly described how patterns of knowledge control in classrooms vary with different administrative contexts. Analysing classroom work and forms of content and knowledge, she illustrated how demands regarding the detailed follow-up of objectives and results led to the documentation of easily measured results. McNeil pointed to the intertwining of controlling functions with teaching and learning and claimed that “bureaucratic controls are not separate from the educational purposes of schooling; rather they play an active role in determining the quality of teaching and the nature of what is taught” (p. 10). Similar effects were pointed out by Klette (2003) (also see Carlgren et al., 2006), who described the situation in Norwegian schools. Klette argued that the documentation used when monitoring and checking students’ work has turned learning into a relationship between the teacher, the required texts and the individual child which reduces the teachers’ “active engagement within substantial subject matter to a minimum” (Carlgren et al., 2006, p. 309). In Sweden, Söderström (2006) argued that an expression like “learning on one’s own responsibility” may become superficial and mechanical if responsibility is understood as equal to finishing tasks you have been assigned (p. 190).

One theoretical assumption behind this study was that cultural context and pedagogical space as well as daily work and talk in classrooms are intimately, and reflexively, intertwined. They are constitutive of student activity and produce norms for work and learning. Here “own work” as a practice was situated in a context where architecture of the classroom, activities and material invited students to choose from among tasks to be ticked off as work and learning. Finished tasks facilitated administration and control and became a manifestation of students’ learning. It goes without saying that the realisation of individual self-regulated work, like any organisation of teaching and learning, varies from school to school, and that students vary in how successful they are at monitoring their own work. It might well be asked whether students at this young age are truly able to take responsibility for their work and learning. However,
this would miss the point made here, namely that pedagogical practices are reflexively intertwined with ideological notions. What is said and done about classroom work and learning by teachers, students and parents is related to norms. The pedagogical setting, activities, material and talk about all this are reflexively intertwined with what is seen as learning and knowledge (Foucault, 1982; Walkerdine, 1998). Even when activities are sometimes not in line with what they are assumed to be, they are still legitimised through talk about students’ activity, “own choice” and responsibility for their own work and learning.

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*Kerstin Bergqvist* is professor in Education at the Department of Behavioural Sciences and Learning at Linköping University. Her research primarily concerns classroom interaction and premises for teaching and learning in daily activities. She has studied everyday classroom work at different levels in the Swedish school system.
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