Beyond the Book Cover: Curriculum Goals and Learning Materials

History Knowledge and Learning Outcomes

The subject-specific learning outcomes in the Swedish history curriculum correspond fairly well with the definition of knowledge, which is a cornerstone of the general curriculum for Swedish compulsory education:

Knowledge is a complex concept, which can be expressed in a variety of forms – as facts, understanding, skills and accumulated experience – all of which presuppose and interact with each other.¹

Learning outcomes in all subject-specific curricula are divided in two parts. The first, labeled “Goals to strive toward,” expresses and specifies, as the general curriculum puts it, the orientation of the work and the qualitative development desired in the school. The second, consisting of “Goals to be attained,” defines the minimum knowledge – understood as facts, understanding, skills and accumulated experience – that a pupil should have attained by the time he or she finishes school.

The goals to strive toward are addressed to headmasters and teachers ("The school should strive to ensure that all pupils…") but are nevertheless formulated in terms of what the pupils ought to learn and/or achieve. They are, however, so extensive that not even the most dedicated teacher or pupil can expect to achieve them during the limited amount of classroom hours that are assigned to history as a school subject. A possible interpretation is that they are meant to act as a basis for planning and that pupils should meet the subject in such a form and content that they, in the future, are able to further develop their knowledge and put it to use as the goals suggest.

¹ Curriculum for the Compulsory School System, the Pre-school Class and the Leisure-time Centre (Stockholm: Skolverket, 2006), 6.
The four forms of knowledge specifically mentioned in the general curriculum can all be found in the subject-specific “goals to strive for”:

The pupil should have factual knowledge about “important historical figures, events and periods” and also achieve a “broad and in-depth knowledge of their cultural heritage, as well as that developed by different national minority groups.” There are only a few specific topics mentioned, but when leaving compulsory school after school year 9 (age 16) all pupils are supposed to have “knowledge of modern history, covering progress and the striving for peace, as well as genocide, especially the Holocaust, revolutions and war,” and pupils in school year 5 (age 12) should “be familiar with the history of their home district and how this has shaped its culture.”

The skills that pupils are supposed to develop include the ability to “differentiate between historical structures, development trends and processes of change,” to “use history as an instrument for understanding other subjects,” and to “assess different texts, media and other sources, which interpret and explain historical processes.”

Understanding includes the pupils’ ability to understand the importance of heritage for shaping one’s identity as well as “background to historical phenomena and events and their relationships,” so that “these can be understood, explained and interpreted from different perspectives.” Also mentioned is the insight that “historically determined societal and cultural forms are conditioned by time and that people from different periods should be viewed in terms of the conditions prevailing at that time.”

Accumulated experience, finally, is the form of knowledge that is the hardest to grasp. It is sometimes described as a kind of silent knowledge, the craftsman’s safe choice of the proper tool for the given task. When it comes to history as a school subject a certain form of accumulated experience suggests itself as a possibility: the experiential knowledge that can be described as historical consciousness. One of the goals is to ensure that the pupils “acquire a sense of history, which makes easier the interpretation of current events and developments, and creates a preparedness for the future.”

Historical consciousness is a concept that has held a central position in the field of history teaching during the last two to three decades in Germany and Scandinavia, and during the last few years in the UK as well. However, this does
not mean that the concept can be unequivocally defined. To the contrary, many scholars have pointed out the concept’s ambiguity (see e.g. Jeismann 1979, Jensen 1997). The Swedish historian Peter Aronsson has suggested three distinctive interpretations. He distinguishes between

- “Historiskt medvetande” for which I suggest the translation awareness of history: to know about the existence of the past and our relationship to it;
- “Historiemedvetande” or, according to the wording of the syllabus, sense of history: to have an idea of how the past, the present and the future are related to each other;
- “Historiemedvetenhet” or historical consciousness: to be aware of one’s own existential place in the stream of history, the individual ability to relate to dimensions of temporality.

Awareness of history can be seen as the least sophisticated form of the three but it nevertheless goes far beyond a concept of history as being nothing but facts about past events; it allows for some kind of connection between the past and the present, and events can be linked together in causal relationships. A sense of history opens up the more complex insight that our knowledge about the past is influenced by our views of the present and the future. Our knowledge and understanding of the past is therefore not given once and for all and causal connections can go both ways along history’s axis of time. Historical consciousness, finally, adds an emotion-based understanding – i.e. history is about me.

The school curriculum gives no suggestion as to which of the three varieties of “consciousness” the pupils should develop. The aforementioned wording, “a sense of history, which makes easier the interpretation of current events and developments, and creates a preparedness for the future,” seems to accentuate the past-present-future relationship but not necessarily in a way that underlines that such a relationship goes both ways: the past has shaped the present, but our


views of the present also shape our picture of the past. Nor does the curriculum mention emotion-based understanding.

Historical knowledge, as it appears in the “goals to strive toward”, nevertheless appears as a complex mixture of facts, understanding, skills, and accumulated experience. This is clearly expressed in the assessment criteria that are given in the curriculum as guidelines for grading:

A basis for assessment in history is the pupil’s knowledge of the course of events in history and the ability to discuss their causes and their complex nature as a starting point for understanding the present.⁹

Another criterion is the pupil’s ability to identify similarities and differences and continuity and change, when studying events and epochs. The student’s ability to observe connections between human conditions and societal change is also a criterion, as is his or her ability to examine and evaluate different accounts and presentations of events in the past.

To sum up: the curriculum promotes a kind of historical knowledge where the capacity of analytic reasoning and familiarity with concepts such as similarity and difference, continuity and change, create the necessary conditions for a personal, reflective relationship with a past that is connected to the present and the future. The memorizing of facts, the ability to recapitulate separate events, is a necessary, albeit not a sufficient, prerequisite for attaining this goal.

Historical Knowledge and Goal Achievement

To what degree, then, does the Swedish school (and its pupils) attain the stipulated goals? As there are no national standardized history exams, we lack reliable data. Skolverket (the Swedish National Agency for Education) has on two occasions, 1992 and 2003, performed major evaluations of the compulsory school. The 2003 evaluation showed that between 25 and 75 percent of the pupils (depending on the questions given) had difficulties identifying important events of our time, even when the questions were related to topics that ought to be well known. A significant pattern that emerged was that the pupils’ answers indicated a fragmented knowledge, which led the evaluation committee to ask whether Social Studies education (including history) is dominated by rote learning and collecting information, rather than by giving pupils the opportunity to discuss and reflect over causal connections or similarities and differences.¹⁰

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⁹ History Syllabus.
¹⁰ Skolverket, Nationella utvärderingen av grundskolan 2003: Huvudrapport – natur-
This question suggests that nothing much has changed since the previous evaluation in 1992, when Skolverket’s evaluators concluded that what dominated history education was a study of the past wie es eigentlich war: a single, fact-based account to be learned properly and with little room to examine or problematize. Classroom work mainly consisted of a traditional, chronologically ordered description of development, while comparisons or source examinations played a negligible part.¹¹

In-depth studies, albeit on smaller populations, show similar results. In a study of how pupils use the Internet, Mikael Alexandersson and Ulla Runesson demonstrated that pupils have an insufficient ability to discern causal connections and to evaluate information in terms of reliability and validity. The Internet search itself appeared often to be of greater importance than the items searched for. Many pupils did not have a well-defined goal for their search. If questions were formulated, they were often forgotten along the way. The pupils tended to choose websites brimming with facts and figures – dates, population numbers, maps, etc. – that later appeared in their work. Courses of events were described chronologically, but without causal connections.¹²

Nanny Hartsmar presents a similar picture in her dissertation Historiemedvetande – elevers tidsförståelse i en skolkontext. Hartsmar chooses Halvdan Eikeland’s distinction between history instruction as an objectivistic mediation of culture and history instruction as problem solving and active learning with ample room for critical source examination as a starting point. Hartsmar’s own conclusion is that the history instruction she studied in seven different classes (in the school years 2, 5, and 9) is wholly dominated by teaching as objectivistic mediation. History is studied within a strict chronological framework. The past is seen as consisting of isolated events, actors, and artifacts. The pupils read textbooks and/or other books; they collect facts and write summaries reproducing this information. Neither pupils nor teachers can give good reasons for why certain events or periods are chosen.

Hartsmar also underlines the incongruity between rhetoric and practice. Pupils and teachers alike are well aware of the correct answer to the question “Why history?”: the importance of history studies is to lay a foundation for the understanding of causes and consequences and thereby to obtain an under-

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standing of our present. This is also a frequent answer given in the national evaluations conducted in 1992 and 2003. At the same time, however, pupils have great difficulties in formulating causal explanations on their own, and teachers apparently seldom plan their teaching in order to facilitate the understanding of causal connections or the subject’s relevance for the present:

The fact that convention rules the planning while the teacher has no clear idea of why a concept is chosen indicates to me that there is no prepared plan for what, exactly, ought to be developed when it comes to historical consciousness. It is possible that teachers have an implicit trust that the textbook authors choose the parts that are deemed indispensable by the experts. If one learns these parts in the prescribed order, historical consciousness will develop itself automatically.  

How teachers deal with this dilemma (if they see it at all) is an open question. Many teachers do probably see school rhetoric as a desirable ideal that unfortunately cannot be realized due to a multitude of causes: insufficient time (classroom hours), lack of sufficient teaching resources, or the expectations colleagues, pupils and parents of what history instruction should be. An example of the frustration that a teacher can feel is given in one of the reports from Skolverket:

I feel like a dealer in a horse-market when informing pupils and parents of what we are supposed to achieve in history class. What I say is nothing but a lot of fancy words that I know I will never be able to realize.  

**Historical Knowledge – the Tools**

It is not particularly bold to suggest that history textbooks are of limited use for those teachers who want to take classroom work beyond a one-dimensional and fact-based mediation. Elsewhere in this volume Dagrun Skjelbred and Monica Reichenberg point out that textbook accounts and tasks are often inadequate for promoting critical thinking skills. Other studies and reports support this as well. If teachers are supposed to assess their pupils’ ability to discuss causes

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13 Nanny Hartsmar, ”Historiemedvetande – elevers tidsförståelse i en skolkontext” (Malmö: Malmö University 2001), 238.
and consequences as well as to reflect on similarities and differences, continuity and change, the pupils must also be given the opportunity to develop these abilities. If the textbooks mainly consist of condensed reproductions of confirmed facts in chronological order but without clear connections, they cannot even be used as a starting point.

In his examination of textbooks for non-compulsory school (school years 10–12), Kenneth Nordgren exemplifies this through a close reading of textbook accounts of migration. Migration as a phenomenon is mentioned only occasionally and described only briefly until the books’ chronological accounts reach the late 19th century and the Swedish migration to North America. This is a topic on which the authors dwell at some length and where a selection of general theories on migration is also presented. The pupils encounter causal explanations as well as generalized concepts – but these explanations and concepts are never used to compare this with other waves of migration. The Swedish experience stands out as more or less unique, without any obvious connections, similarities or differences to other examples of migration. Considering the fact that a significant part of Swedish students are first or second generation immigrants, migration history offers a great opportunity not only for comparative analyses and critical reflection of generalized models of explanation but also for bringing together the pupil’s individual history and the public narrative of Swedish society, its past and its present. That the textbooks fail to take advantage of this opportunity must be considered a serious drawback.

The impact of textbooks and other learning tools is difficult to assess. One of the significant differences between the school evaluations of 1992 and 2003 was that a majority of the teachers in 1992 stated that the textbooks guided their work. In 2003, however, almost all teachers (95%) mentioned their own ideas and interests as the most important factor, while 64% stated that textbooks guided their work only to a relatively limited extent. It is of course still possible that the textbook remains the most frequently used tool when teachers give their ideas and interests a concrete form in classroom work. The textbook does not seem to have lost its important role; in the 2003 evaluation 75% of the pupils stated that it is used every day or at least every week.

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16 Kenneth Nordgren, *Vems är historien? Historia som medvetande, kultur och handling i det mångkulturella Sverige* (Karlstad: Karlstad University, 2001), 191–201.

Means and Ends – the Teachers’ Opinions

One issue that was not discussed in the 2003 evaluation of the Swedish compulsory school was whether the teachers found the textbooks sufficient or lacking in any respect and, in the latter case, what additional learning material they chose to make up for the insufficiency. Even if the results from the survey *History in Textbooks and Teaching Materials* (presented in the first chapter of this part of the book) are open to interpretation and the number of respondents is too small to permit any generalized conclusions (especially on a national level) they can nevertheless serve as a starting-point for formulating new questions.

Question number 7 of the survey read “What are the most important roles of teaching materials in your opinion?” and aimed at capturing the teachers’ expectations of the material used. Five alternatives were to be ranked. The respondents from Sweden (59) gave, using a simple weighting process, the following ranked list:

1. Providing a historical overview
2. Encouraging independent thinking among students
3. Defining and strengthening student identity
4. Conveying values
5. Offering insights into the theory and principles of history

The results from Sweden correspond with the overall Nordic picture. Providing an overview was clearly seen as a top priority by most respondents: 50.8% of the Swedish and 47.4% of all respondents placed this alternative at the top of the list. Overviews can have different shapes and serve different purposes. In a following question (number 9) the respondents were asked to rank what was most important when providing a historical overview in teaching materials. The Swedish answers were ranked thus:

1. Context and cause-effect relationship
2. A sense of time and chronological order
3. Major and dramatic events
4. A vivid account
5. Influential and important individuals

In this case, the ranking is not clear-cut and the range is more marked. A relatively large share of the respondents put “a vivid account” at the top, and there were also a large number that put “a sense of time and chronological order” at the bottom of the list. The Swedish results also differ from the overall Nordic picture where the alternatives were given the following order:

1. Context and cause-effect relationship
2. A vivid account
3. A sense of time and chronological order
4. Major and dramatic events
5. Influential and important individuals

It must be noted, however, that the differences could be illusory and dependent on how the alternatives are interpreted. One may draw a line between history as colorful anecdotes of dramatic events with heroes and villains on the one hand, and history as structures and relationships, as a scholarly exercise on the other. The “vivid account” can stand for both alternatives: the dramatic narrative or a rendering that underlines context and causal relationships.

Nor should the difference between context/relationship and time/chronology be exaggerated. A chronologically ordered overview does not necessarily visualize a causal relationship or a context but if it is combined with an understanding of temporality, the difference may be seen as one of semantics rather than one of content.

The option “Insights into the theory and principles of history” was given a low priority by the teachers. When asked how the textbooks could facilitate such insights (question number 11) the alternatives were ranked thus:
1. By teaching students methods of source criticism
2. By encouraging an independent search for knowledge among students
3. By showing how knowledge and interpretation of history are in a constant state of review
4. By allowing students to access and use primary sources
5. By giving examples of historical research

The overall Nordic picture corresponds with the Swedish one, and one might conclude that a rigorous use of source criticism, in the tradition of Kristian Erslev and the Weibull brothers, is still seen as fundamental to history education. Even if teachers have some expectations of the books’ qualities when it comes to presenting source criticism, however, they do not find it vital that the books also contain source material for practice. Teachers may of course find such material elsewhere, but it could also be that they give a lecture on the principles for source criticism without giving the pupils the option to try them out for themselves.

However, textbooks meet teachers’ expectations only to a limited degree. As has been mentioned above, teachers first and foremost expect that the textbook can provide a historical overview. That the respondents, when asked what functions the textbook fulfilled, also placed the option “a historical overview” on top of the list thus seems to fit perfectly. A closer look reveals a picture that is far from perfect – namely that the textbooks do not meet teachers’ expectations in full. While the Swedish teachers prioritized context and causal relationship, they found that the main emphasis of the textbooks lies on influential and dramatic
events. Likewise, the textbooks cannot be said to meet expectations when it comes to providing insights in the methodology of history. While Swedish teachers prioritize knowledge of methods for critical review of sources they do not find the textbooks helpful in this respect – half of the respondents ranked this alternative fourth or fifth and not a single teacher placed it at the top.

The picture, albeit preliminary, rendered by the survey shows that Swedish history textbooks do not fulfill the teachers' expectations, nor are they well adjusted to the goals of the curriculum. This of course does not mean that Swedish history education as such fails to meet the standards of the curriculum. Teachers in the Swedish school system have ample room to plan classroom work after their own preferences and therefore have significant opportunities to supplement the textbook with other teaching materials.

In the survey's final question (number 21) the teachers were asked to what extent they used other tools or materials in class. The following table shows the Swedish teachers' answers with regard what material they use frequently (“Very often” or “Often”):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teaching material</th>
<th>Percentage of teachers using</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Textbook (student textbook)</td>
<td>83.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher's own narratives and lectures</td>
<td>72.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maps</td>
<td>65.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internet</td>
<td>61.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Documentary films</td>
<td>56.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic publications</td>
<td>54.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher's guide</td>
<td>35.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Photographs</td>
<td>32.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Primary sources (texts)</td>
<td>32.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student project work</td>
<td>30.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feature films</td>
<td>27.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Educational games (role play, simulation, etc.)</td>
<td>25.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fiction literature</td>
<td>22.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Workbook</td>
<td>10.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Statistical material</td>
<td>10.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Artifacts</td>
<td>5.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Field trips</td>
<td>3.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Museum visits</td>
<td>1.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The results fit into the picture of history education (from both teachers’ and pupils’ points of views) that was presented from the national evaluation of 2003. The textbook remains the most frequently used teaching material. At the same time, and not surprising considering that the teachers themselves say that their own interests and own ideas guide their planning, ample room is also given to
the teachers’ own narratives, accounts, and lectures. This gives quite a bit of opportunity to supplement or compensate for an insufficient textbook.

The dominant role played by textbooks and lectures also corresponds with what the national evaluation found was the most common form of classroom work:

Table 2: Mode of work during all/most social studies classes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mode of work</th>
<th>Pupils’ answers (percent)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pupils listen, teacher talks</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pupils work individually with various tasks</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher and pupils discuss together</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher talks and asks questions answered by the pupils (one by one)</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pupils work with larger projects</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pupils work in groups with various tasks</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Nationella utvärderingen av grundskolan 2003: Samhällsorienterande ämnen, 31 (Table 7)

Also worth noting is that the materials used frequently by at least half of the teachers are of a kind that could possibly deal with the past as something that has occurred once and for all and that does not really need to be questioned and/or discussed: maps, academic/non-fiction books, documentary films, and so on. This of course does not imply that these materials are used in such a way. It is just as possible that they are used to show that there are alternatives to the textbook accounts, thus providing a starting point for discussions about interpretations of history and about how history is written.

The pupils’ own essays, projects or reports provide another possible starting point for such discussions. It can be noted here that less than a third of the Swedish teachers state that they frequently make use of these resources. Although the data from Sweden generally corresponds with the overall Nordic picture, this is a point where there is a marked difference – the overall figure for the Nordic countries is 59.9 percent.

Also worth noting is the comparatively sparse use of literature (fiction) and feature films. This is a kind of material that can bring a historic context to life, visualize causal relationships, and offer objects of identification that may lead to a sense of empathy towards people of the past, something that would come close to the curriculum goal that the pupil should be able to view people of the past in terms of the conditions of their time.

Most striking, however, is the rare occurrence of primary sources, artifacts and statistical material. This kind of teaching material is indispensable if pupils are supposed to develop an ability to assess texts and other materials that interpret and explain historical processes. More than two thirds of the Swedish
teachers use such materials only occasionally. Visits to museums or field trips are almost non-existent. Resources of this kind are relatively uncommon in the other Nordic countries as well, but 10.7% of the Nordic teachers (compared to 1.7% of the Swedish) make visits to museums a part of their teaching.

Conclusions

The overall picture given by the survey data, although preliminary, does not allow us to describe Swedish history teaching as leaning towards an objectivist transmission of factual knowledge even if the textbooks tend to do so. The crucial factor of course is how the teachers use textbooks and other learning material, and how they draw up their own lectures. The experienced teacher has ample opportunities to cover causal relationships, point out similarities and differences, provide useful concepts, and visualize the past in a way that facilitates understanding and empathy.

The data indicating a dominance of fact-reproducing teaching materials (textbooks, maps and so on), taken together with findings from other studies showing that “frontal teaching” still dominates the classroom, give reason for concern. Without sufficient opportunities to exercise thinking skills, it might lead to the pupils learning “to know that” rather than “to know how” – in other words, to learn about history rather than to learn history. It must be remembered, however, that the survey gives information on teachers’ views on textbooks and learning material. It does not tell us how the teachers actually work in the classroom or how they would wish to work given ideal working conditions. That a comparatively small number of teachers use teaching materials aimed at promoting critical thinking skills might be suggestive but does not say anything about what is really happening in the classroom. A picture can be used in many ways: either as a simple description (“Here you can see what it looked like when the Winter Palace was attacked”) or as a starting point for creative reasoning (“What is happening in the picture? Can you explain why? What do you think happened next?”). Even if teachers stick to frontal teaching they may do it despite their own ambitions. The number of hours assigned to the subject, the school’s library and ICT resources, the expectations of headmasters, colleagues, parents and pupils are factors that can prevent the teachers from trying alternative teaching models.

The preliminary character of the results presented here demands further studies, not least studies that are praxis-oriented and aimed at what is actually

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18 “Frontal teaching” can be defined as when the teacher imparts new knowledge to the pupils with limited problem-oriented learning and pupil collaboration.
happening in the classroom. We still lack well-founded knowledge of how history teaching is carried out in the Nordic countries as well as studies of possible and/or desirable alternatives to current models of teaching. As has been pointed out by Bengt Schüllerqvist, much of the research hitherto performed has been (mainly due to insufficient funding) relatively small case studies with scopes too limited to allow for generalized conclusions.\textsuperscript{19} It is to be hoped that the Nordic networking presented in this volume can be carried forward in the near future. As history instruction in the Nordic countries shares many similarities, but also displays differences, a comparative approach comes out as both suitable and valuable.

As a compliment to future research it is also necessary to continue a vital discussion on history teaching, historical knowledge, appropriate teaching material and teaching models, as well as to give teachers opportunities to develop their professional competence. The national Historical Associations and History Teacher Associations as well as institutions for teacher education share a common responsibility to contribute to this goal.

References


\textsuperscript{19} Bengt Schüllerqvist, Svensk historiedidaktisk forskning (Stockholm: Vetenskapsrådet, 2005).


