

## Swedish Teachers’ Unions: Swedish Teachers’ Unions : A shared strategy

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### Abstract:

Education faces major challenges and teachers’ unions have a major role to play. We discuss how unions reacted to Swedish educational reforms and which career path they advocate for their members. We particularly examine the 2011 teacher certification reform, when the teachers’ unions pushed to strengthen the professional legitimacy of their members. Arguments for reform are examined as an expression of an ideological process. We analyse ideas and ideologies to see how policy is shaped in the relationship between union representatives and politicians and how messages are formulated and addressed among stakeholders. This article is based on the authors’ research.

### Introduction

A large number of decisions have been reached on educational reforms over recent decades, both by Social Democrat-led and centre-right governments; at the same time, the public discourse has seen lively debate regarding the loss of teachers’ professional status. The research also paints a picture of an undermined profession that, through the decentralisation and streamlining of the public sector and rising demands for influence from other social groups, has lost much of its room for manoeuvre and prestige. Generally speaking, the ideological shift from the social democratic welfare state towards neoliberal competitive governance has had far-reaching implications for education and the professions (Baltzer 2020; Ringarp 2011).

In this article, we discuss the professionalisation of teaching in Sweden in the light of the teachers’ unions’ arguments for the introduction of teacher certification, as well as how significant this discursive change was to making the reforms of the 2010s possible. There are three key questions: How did the trade unions’ professional strategies emerge and how were they greeted politically? How is the teaching profession viewed in research? What positions do the unions, the state and other stakeholders adopt in this debate? These questions are based on the relationship between the intentions and argumentation of teachers’ unions and state governance, as seen in the debate surrounding the development and implementation of the certification reform.

The article’s theoretical points of departure are i) Abbott’s (1988) system of professions and ii) curriculum theory, with the emphasis on the arena concept (Lindensjö & Lundgren 2000) and developments over recent years (Uljens & Elo 2019). This foundation implies that teachers’ unions and state institutions alike are viewed as both driving and receptive actors, facilitating the problematisation of ideologies and rhetoric.

By analysing material from teachers’ unions and government agencies and selected articles in the press, we contribute an empirical third position on how policy is shaped in the relationship between trade union representatives and politicians. From here, we examine their dialogue in arenas where policy is formulated and mediated, and how messages are formulated and addressed between actors.

Our analysis begins by studying the path to the introduction of teacher certification in three policy arenas: teachers’ unions, politics and the media. These arenas will be discussed in subsequent sections. While focus is primarily on the present-day education discourse, we also touch on the 1990s reform discourse to examine the capacity of Swedish teachers’ unions to represent their members interests and how this has changed over time.

### Two teachers’ unions and their opinion forming

In Swedish history of education research teachers’ unions emerge as participants in the major reforms undertaken during the twentieth century, the reforms also actualised conflicts between two different teacher identities and visions of education: the grammar school tradition, rooted in the Middle Ages; and the elementary school tradition that emerged during the nineteenth century. This schism is manifested in the division of the teaching profession into different unions with diverging political positions. Until the 1960s, the most common forms of school were elementary and grammar. When Sweden decided to abolish these parallel school systems and introduce a common form of compulsory schooling, the differences between the two categories of teacher decreased. This was far from a painless process, as reflected in the differing professional strategies adopted by the unions to protect their members’ interests (Baltzer 2020; Ringarp 2019).

Both of the unions that represent Swedish teachers today – the Swedish Teachers’ Union (*Läraryrket*) and the National Union of Teachers in Sweden (*Lärarnas Riksförbund*) – have their roots in the parallel school system. Today, the Swedish Teachers’ Union organises teachers, head teachers, student teachers and study and career counsellors throughout the education system. Its base and historical roots are however in the old elementary schools and later among teachers working in more vocational or artistic programmes. The history of the National Union of Teachers goes back to 1884, when a union was formed to safeguard the interests of grammar-school head teachers and teachers. In 1913, the union adopted the name National Union of Grammar School Teachers (*Läroverkslärarnas Riksförbund*). During the early years, it became evident that the union’s activities would be dominated by the issue of grammar school teachers’ salaries. The fundamental argument was that it should pay to get an education; ergo, grammar school teachers should receive the same salary as other civil servants with a comparable education. This argument notwithstanding, grammar school teachers often found themselves with inferior working conditions and salaries compared to other civil servants, even if they did receive a conspicuously higher salary than elementary school teachers. While the commissions of inquiry and committees appointed during the twentieth century generally found merit in the teachers’ demands, the unions maintained that they were continuing to fall behind. In addition to the salary issue, the National Union of Teachers sought to reach both its members and the general public with its views on issues of significance to school and education policy, not least through its journal *Skolvärlden*. The 1990s did however see the

teachers’ unions adopt a new common strategy that would eventually see them both lobbying for teacher certification (Baltzer 2020; Ringarp 2019).

### Professional and union strategies

One less explored field of research in Sweden and internationally is how teachers’ unions have pushed their professional agenda and sought to form opinion in the contemporary education policy debate. Earlier research suggests two dominant and competing perspectives. The first of these describes unions as reactive organisations run along New Public Management (NPM) lines, while the other describes unions as strong policy actors with a significant interest in professional education issues. Both Swedish and international research into teacher certification also follows two main lines of inquiry, one that considers certification as an expression of increased state control and NPM logic, and a second that sees it as a tool to strengthen the teaching profession and improve the quality of teaching (Baltzer 2020).

In terms of union and professional strategies towards teacher certification, and the political response it elicited in Sweden, the decision of the Riksdag in 2011 to pass the reforms can be seen as an eventual success for the National Union of Teachers’ argument. Having advocated for certification for two decades, it was not until the 2000s that the National Union of Teachers was able to carve out a common strategy with the Swedish Teachers’ Union and formulate a demand for a government commission of inquiry into teacher certification. The unions also discussed the importance of cooperation to strengthen their position and increase their chances of exercising influence. During the 2000s, both unions were at pains to emphasise that they had the ear of politicians on issues such as certification and career paths for teachers. This marks a clear difference from the situation in the 1990s, when the National Union of Teachers in particular described the challenges of being heard in the debate (Baltzer 2020).

Other aspects of professionalisation that emerged during the period 1992–2014 concern links between teachers’ professional practice and the scientific basis of teacher training. The Swedish Teachers’ Union in particular argued for the introduction of educational science and demanded that postgraduate teachers should be employed in schools. It was also argued that more money was needed so that teachers could pursue third-cycle studies and to strengthen collaboration between higher education institutions, municipalities and schools (Baltzer 2020).

### Teacher certification introduced

A review of government documents such as motions, bills and reports by commissions of inquiry from the period 1992–2014 clearly demonstrates that the issue of certification divided Sweden’s political blocs until the mid-2000s. While centre-right parties argued throughout this period for changes to teacher training linked to certification, the Social Democrat government remained unconvinced of the need for national certification until 2006, when it appointed a commission of inquiry. The terms of reference for the inquiry were expanded later that year when a centre-right government took office, culminating in a proposal from the commission for national certification. The commission’s report underlined that the percentage of qualified teachers had declined as a consequence of market-oriented reforms during the 1990s. It was also argued that stricter entry requirements were needed to increase equivalence in schools and enhance the quality of teaching. So, in addition to certification, the commission advocated the

introduction of a system of qualifications for teachers to stimulate professional development (Baltzer 2020).

In 2010, the centre-right government presented a bill on teacher certification in line with the commission’s recommendations. The bill clearly stated that, in order to be employed until further notice, teachers and preschool teachers must be certified and, with certain exceptions, only certified teachers should be entitled to issue grades. A proposal was also tabled to establish senior subject teacher and specially qualified teacher posts from 2012. The certification requirement was not, however, the only change during this period. The package of reforms proposed by the centre-right government also included changes to teacher training, from the previous model with a single teacher training programme for all primary and secondary school teachers to four separate degrees: Bachelor of Arts in Pre-School Education, Bachelor of Arts in Primary Education, Master of Arts/Science in Secondary Education, and Higher Education Diploma in Vocational Education (Baltzer 2020).

These reforms exemplify both the impact of the teachers’ unions’ professionalisation efforts in the political arena, and how successful they were at forming opinion in the first decade of the twenty-first century. The decision to introduce teacher certification is analogous to the healthcare professions psychologist and nurse, both of which successfully campaigned for certification in the mid-twentieth century (Baltzer 2020).

In his empirical studies, Abbott (1988) underlines the central role of lobbying in the certification and licensing of doctors in the United States, and that licensing legislation was viewed as an important indicator at national level that doctors had jurisdiction over their own work. For the teaching profession in Sweden, subject-based qualification was the basis for certification, an issue that the National Union of Teachers had driven since national regulation of teaching posts was abolished in 1991, having, like its predecessor the National Union of Grammar School Teachers, marked out professional, academic grounds that excluded uncertified teachers. Using the terminology of curriculum theory, one can describe this as the teachers’ unions exercising influence over the political formulation arena. Here we can see a difference compared to the reform process of the late 1980s and early ‘90s. The certification reform was decided on in broad political agreement and in collaboration with the teachers’ unions, while the municipalisation of education two decades earlier was implemented *despite* the fierce opposition of both teaching unions and most political parties. Although the period 1992–2014 saw the influence of both teachers’ unions increase, above all the introduction of delimited degrees for different categories of teacher met the demands that the National Union of Teachers had been voicing both before and after 1992. The prosecution of this policy can therefore be viewed as an expression of an educational ideal largely derived from the grammar school tradition. Other initiatives were also implemented during this period, both in local politics and within the teachers’ unions, to develop schools and strengthen the teaching profession. These include the development of school development agreements and common professional ethical principles for teachers (Baltzer 2020; Ringarp 2019).

### Teaching: a profession in the making?

The second question we initially asked was how the teaching profession has been viewed by researchers. The literature contains an extensive discourse on what characterises a profession and how different professions (including teaching) should be categorised.

Two different viewpoints emerge. The first of these is that teaching is generally viewed as either semiprofessional with little possibility of gaining full professional legitimacy, an occupation that, in contrast to the so-called classic professions, lacks the common professional attributes; or as externally controlled organisational professionalism. The term *profession* itself, with its strong, positive charge, has been used to govern and discipline professions within the public sector. Organisational professionalism is diametrically opposed to classic professionalism and its values of collegiality and trust. Instead, it is increasingly built on governance and external control in the form of evaluation and standardisation. We share this view of organisational professionalism as an extra-professional policy construct linked to the emergence of NPM during the twenty-first century (Baltzer 2020; Ringarp 2011). In line with the above, Lilja (2014) contends that, by mimicking a well-established profession such as the medical profession, teachers’ unions have attempted to create the impression that teachers deserve the same legitimacy as medical professionals. Lilja reaches the conclusion that the teachers’ professional project is a postmodern construction and a political project.

Scientific explanations that define teaching as less than a fully fledged profession may however be interpreted as an expression of power based on the privilege of formulating agendas and values, rather than the result of analysis. Typical male-dominated professions have provided a model for defining female-dominated occupations such as teacher, nurse and social worker as less valuable. In many countries, this has led to the same professions enjoying statutory protection. Sarfatti Larson (2018) underlines that, in fact, it is good political relations with the state that have endowed professions such as physician with monopolies and privileges, rather than the aspects of the profession, such as specific knowledge, that are often highlighted in profession research. This argument highlights a central aspect of Abbott’s theory. It implies that professions portrayed as strong, or classic, in the literature tend to have achieved this status by formulating their own criteria and thus have an interest in maintaining the power they have vested in themselves (Abbott 1988).

One key argument that researchers avail themselves of to explain why teaching is not considered a fully fledged profession in Sweden is that it lacks a scientific foundation in as much as educational science has failed to provide teacher training with a solid basis in research. But studies also suggest that mid-twentieth-century pedagogic research was dependent on central government and that researchers have remained loyal to their state paymasters by conducting the type of research demanded of them. At the same time, we contend that reforms enacted in conflict with the teaching profession have been part of an ideological endeavour to fundamentally change the role of teachers. By municipalising Swedish schools in the late 1980s and early 1990s, politicians were sending a clear message that the opinions of teachers were of little interest. The policy objectives in themselves were an expression of mistrust in teachers, and they stripped teachers of influence over their own professional practice (Baltzer 2020; Ringarp 2011). In this way, the teaching profession’s room for manoeuvre was circumscribed in favour of greater political control. In this regard, it seems reasonable to assume that research has contributed to the perception of the teaching profession as a passive receptor rather than an actor. Attempting to illuminate this problem, even with the best intentions, runs the risk of engaging in a pedagogical discourse that helps to maintain the notion of the powerless teacher (Baltzer 2020). As Biesta (2012) has it, ideological practice is internalised as “common sense”. Meanwhile, we believe that there is reason to assume that the professional status of teachers

has been strengthened by the reforms enacted from 2010 onwards. Our conclusion is that the ideological processes during the period 1992–2014 have both deprofessionalised and reprofessionalised the teaching profession.

### The media debate on professional demands

Our third question deals with the positions that the various actors – i.e., the teachers’ unions, the state and other stakeholders such as journalists – have taken in the debate in the media. Our review encompasses just over 400 articles with the intention of reconstructing a newsfeed reporting the development and implementation of the teacher certification reform in Sweden. From a curriculum-theory perspective, the debate has been analysed as discourses taking place in the arenas of formulation, mediation and realisation.

In the 1990s, the National Union of Teachers in Sweden launched a media campaign advocating certification, higher salaries and improved career paths to increase the status of the teaching profession. The National Union of Teachers spoke in terms of a crisis in Swedish schools, citing a lack of trained teachers and the inability of teacher training programmes to attract enough motivated students. According to the National Union of Teachers, certification would strengthen and develop the profession, as would continued professional development and higher salaries. As the 1990s drew to a close, *Dagens Nyheter* affirmed that the campaign was bearing fruit and that politicians had been impressed by the National Union of Teachers’ efforts to systematically influence politicians, policymakers and the media and shape opinion on school issues. Politicians from various parties interviewed in *Dagens Nyheter* in 1998 underlined that the union’s campaign had been instrumental to the dominant position of schools in political debate. Just over a decade later, the Social Democrats stated in an article that the party was positively inclined towards proposals put forward by the centre-right government and would like to see a cross-bloc policy on schools (Baltzer 2020). This was justified by the belief that a system of certification would help to ensure the quality and increase the status of the teaching profession as a whole.

So, from the late 1990s onwards, a sea-change in education policy, incorporating conservative and free-market elements, coincided with a newfound willingness to listen to long-standing demands from the teaching profession and improved results from students. These tendencies might be described as a classic professional discourse in parallel with a free-market education policy discourse. The Social Democrats’ swing towards a more free-market solution during the twenty-first century provided an incentive to push the reforms through. Certification and career opportunities thus became an argument for (re)professionalising the teaching profession at the same time as the rhetoric demonstrated a political will to act.

### International trends in education policy

Under the influence of the OECD’s Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), a new dimension was added to the role of education in the market-oriented education policy situation. As Sweden’s international ranking dropped, all rhetoric suggested that the solution was better teachers. Driven by economics and status, the discourse followed an international trend inspired by examples such as the United Kingdom, where career paths were deemed to make the profession more attractive. Consequently, here too political expediency coincided with the demands of the teaching profession (Ringarp 2016).

It was only some 20 years later, when the reform was to be finally realised, that a number of problems regarding how the state was to assess teacher’s qualifications and expertise were laid bare. A competence-oriented discourse became apparent from 2011 onwards, as the Swedish National Agency for Education and higher education institutions set about assessing teacher training and degrees as a basis for certification. The repeated reform of teacher training had created divergence that was now to be brought back into line, and obstacles to identifying a common standard were soon discovered. The Social Democratic Party, Green Party and Swedish Teachers’ Union, among others, were strongly critical of the Government’s continual postponement of reform and tinkering with the original proposal (Baltzer 2020).

From a curriculum-theory perspective, this is exemplified by the influence of mediation in various arenas on the complex relationships between policymaking, implementation and transformation. Lindensjö and Lundgren (2000) contend that the governance of education is largely a matter of how reforms are described and perceived in the media, and that the dilemma for policy is when governance fails to have the expected or desired impact. The authors also argue that long-term planning is hindered by short mandate periods that simultaneously create sensitivity to acute problems, leading to reactive policy measures, and insensitivity to long-term structural issues.

These explanations for the conditions and dilemmas of governance have however been criticised as overly functionalist in the later development of curriculum theory, as they fail to address agency between levels of governance (Uljens & Elo 2019). As such, whether the point of departure is profession theory or curriculum theory, power aspects are key whenever curriculums and policies are challenged by neoliberalism.

It has also become more difficult to discuss teaching in recent times. According to Biesta (2012), since the 1980s, the ideological and rhetorical language of learning has eroded a meaningful understanding of teaching and the teacher, while at the same time concepts of teaching and learning are being defined by others, rather than teachers themselves. Biesta also argues that the educational discourse on *learning* is grounded in postmodern constructivist theory, something that has contributed to the invisibility of the teacher and teaching. The new language of education that describes schools as “learning environments” and students as “learners” overlooks the teacher in its haste to focus on the activities of students. Harnessed to the ideology of New Public Management, this language conceptualises the teacher as victim and object. In our opinion, it is high time that this image was challenged. The teaching profession must be analysed as the agent of professional legitimacy.

### Conclusions:

A series of education policy reforms during the 1990s fundamentally changed the Swedish school, both as an organisation and a workplace. Today, Sweden has municipal and private schools, all of which receive government funding and are free-of-charge to students, and all of which employ members of the two main teachers’ unions. In this altered landscape, for the teachers’ unions, individual industrial relations strategies have taken a back seat to professional strategies. As a result, Swedish teachers’ unions have increasingly collaborated over recent years and in early 2022 the members of the two organisations voted to merge into a single union to maximise their influence.

In this article, we have demonstrated how teachers’ unions have driven education issues from the 1990s onwards. One conclusion is that increased influence over public opinion, education policy and legislation has strengthened the profession’s legitimacy. This has manifested itself in a number of ways, including the certification reform of 2011 and the establishment of new career paths as senior subject teachers and specially qualified teachers. This trend has also been noted in previous research that suggests that the proletarianisation and loss of autonomy experienced by the teaching profession over the past 30 years has now been halted. Instead, representatives of the unions have been appointed to the Swedish School Commission, for which teachers’ career paths and continuous professional development were high on the agenda. It has been proposed that the Swedish National Agency for Education should have overall responsibility for the national professional programme for teachers. It is also proposed that the influence of the profession be ensured by creating a council for school professions under the Swedish National Agency for Education, with representatives from the professions, education organisers, higher education institutions and the agency itself.

In conclusion, the article has illustrated that, through their joint strategic efforts, the teachers’ unions have helped to strengthen teachers’ influence over education policy issues.

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