

Qualifications of future teachers

Ideas and ideals in the liberal discourse about teachers and teacher education in Sweden¹

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In autumn 2006 Sweden changed governments. A coalition of Conservatives, Liberals, Christian Democrats and Centre Party politicians came into power. The Liberals are in charge of the Ministry of Education. In different policy documents, policy-making texts and political statements, it is possible to identify ideas and ideals about the qualifications of future teachers and the corresponding teacher education. The intention of this article is to identify and examine some of the ideas and ideals that have been introduced with the new government. In particular, I want to address the ideal of brain research for teacher education and teaching practice.

Keywords: teachers, teacher education, teachers' knowledge, Swedish liberalism.

Introduction

In contemporary political discourse in Sweden, school and teacher education have played a central role in the last decade. One recurring issue has been the competence of teachers. The present Minister of Education who is also the leader of the Liberal Party, Jan Björklund, has repeatedly argued that contemporary teachers in Sweden do not have the necessary qualifications to achieve the goal of teaching, in other words that pupils learn what they are supposed to learn in school.² To change this critical situation for the future of Sweden, it is not sufficient to change the present situation in Swedish schools. It is also necessary to change current teacher education, which has resulted

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in teachers with qualifications that are both insufficient and wrong. From different policy documents, policy-making texts and political statements we may learn what the Liberal Minister of Education expects from future teachers and what future teacher education has to include in its programme.

A programme to improve working teachers' competence

In autumn 2007, after only one year in power, the Ministry of Education launched a programme to improve the teachers' subject knowledge and subject didactics (*Lärarlyftet* [Teacher boost]). The programme consists of two parts. One part offers courses in subject theory and subject didactics to working teachers and is administered by the National Agency for Education (*Skolverket*). The declared purpose of the programme is "to raise the teachers' competence in order to increase the pupils' goal achievement" (*Skolverket* 2007). Additionally, it offers a licentiate programme for working teachers. Temporary graduate research schools have been established in order to organize a two-year licentiate programme where teachers work 20% in their schools and study 80% at the graduate research school over a period of two and a half years. The goal of the licentiate programme is to give the teachers deeper subject knowledge paired with subject didactics in order "to strengthen the quality of teaching and increase the goal achievement" of the pupils (*Ministry of Education* 2007).

The licentiate programme may be compared with a Swedish doctorate programme that is supposed to take four years of full-time study. Thus, the licentiate offered is half of a doctorate. It should also be noted that it is a temporary and not a permanent programme. Furthermore, all teacher categories that do not teach subjects are not included in the programme. Teachers who graduate from the graduate research schools seem to be limited to using their research education only in teaching subjects (*Ministry of Education* 2007). The inspiration for this programme can probably be found in the history of the Swedish school system, where lecturers were employed in upper secondary schools. It would, however, be possible to extend the use of the research education (although it is limited to two years) by engaging research-educated teachers not only in teaching, but also in research that can be used in their own practice (*Bengtsson* 1993, *Bengtsson* 2007).

Ideas and ideals for future research on the teaching profession and teacher education

In a report about Government research funding (SOU 2008:30), the investigator, Madelene Sandström, levelled heavy criticism against the national programme for research in the field of teacher education and the teaching profession (Utbildningsvetenskapliga kommittén [Committee for Educational Science]) at the Swedish Research Council. In the report the programme's "failure to use available register data about effects of educational reforms" is criticized as being "particularly remarkable" (SOU 2008, p. 104). The model for "how high scientific quality, method ability and practical relevance can be achieved" is offered by research that provides "an evidence-based foundation for political decisions and evaluation of investments and reforms" (SOU 2008, p. 105). Consequently, if future research in the field of teacher education and the teaching profession is to be of high quality and useful in schools, it has to be conducted in the form of effect studies and applied in evidence-based practice.

In the latest assessment of Swedish teacher education by the National Agency for Higher Education (Högskoleverket 2008), some of the educational programmes are criticised for not having enough qualified teacher educators involved in the education. Many teacher educators are experienced schoolteachers, but do not have a PhD, and this is required for teaching at universities and university colleges. In a political editorial in the liberal newspaper *Dagens Nyheter* (2008-04-24), Hans Bergström discussed some of the results from the assessment. Among other things, he argued that Swedish teacher education lacks a scientific foundation. To use his own words, "a large part of the educational 'research' that is supposed to constitute the scientific basis is in fact not very scientific. For one thing because it has not sufficiently learned from modern brain research". This judgment is Bergström's and cannot be found in the assessment.

Some weeks earlier, in an interview in the liberal newspaper *Göteborgs-Posten* (Hultén, 2008-04-06), the Minister of Education himself expressed his view of Swedish educational research. On the question of what educational research he bases the reforms of Swedish schools on, he replied that it is certainly "based on research, but not on Swedish research, on international". He plainly stated that Swedish educational research "is not up to the standard". He was nevertheless unable to present references to any relevant studies.

This statement by the Minister of Education could be taken to express the paradox that the ideas of future knowledge-focused schools and scientific teacher education are themselves not based on scientific

knowledge. Irrespective of what his ideas about future teachers and teacher education are based on, the ideas about teachers and teacher education presented above are all expressions of contemporary Swedish liberal school ideology, although loosely connected to each other. In principle all of them may be realized, but in practice probably only some of them. One idea or ideal that stands out as more surprising than the others is the understanding, expressed above, of what constitutes scientific educational research. The minister does not consider Swedish educational research to be scientific, and the liberal op-ed columnist Hans Bergström clarifies what is unscientific about Swedish educational research, in other words that it has not learned from modern brain research. To be sure, this is not the main research direction in Swedish educational research, but one of the most prominent Swedish brain scientists, Martin Ingvar, has expressed how he believes brain research should be used in a school context in the liberal newspaper *Dagens Nyheter* (Ingvar, 2008-03-09).

The ideal of brain research for future teachers and teacher education

I now want to proceed to a discussion of some of the problems of using this kind of research as an ideal for future teachers and teacher education. However, I am not going to analyze the place of this ideal in Swedish liberal ideology. It is probably not indispensable in liberal ideology, but it is of interest to know what the consequences of this ideal may be for future teachers and teacher education if implemented.

Ingvar's main point in his article, entitled "Skolan struntar i hur barns hjärnor fungerar" (The school ignores how the brains of children function), is that education depends on how the brain functions. He believes that the Swedish school does not take this into consideration, but "uses muddled models for learning that completely ignore contemporary knowledge about the brain". I do not want to question his main point, but it is necessary to problematize it.

Education certainly depends on the brain, but it also depends on many other things. To start with, education does not only depend on one favoured part of the body. The body is an integrated organism, in which its different parts cooperate. The brain cannot ride a bicycle or write by itself. Intellectual activities depend on the entire body and cannot be reduced to only brain activities. Thinking does not function properly if the body has, for instance, an infection. However, thinking is not only dependent on the whole body. It depends on the entire human being. If a pupil is worried about his father who is missing

after an earthquake the day before, his thinking is affected by that particular situation. But thinking is not only limited by more or less dramatic situations that may occur in life, but also by the life history, view of life and, in general, the entire life-world of the human being.

Bergström argued in the above-quoted article that Swedish teacher education needed a firm foundation in brain research. In this way, the competence of teachers' daily work in the classroom can be guaranteed. How, then, can brain research contribute to raising teachers' professional competence? How can teachers use knowledge about the brain in their daily teaching in the classroom? Ingvar argues in his article that children should learn languages when the brain is young. This knowledge does not seem to be very helpful for the daily work of teachers. It seems rather to belong to questions about the national curriculum: what, when and how much of different subjects should be taught in school? But why should only languages be learned when the brain is young? Does this not apply to many other subjects – that they are easier to learn when the brain is young? And why should only the young brain be considered and not the fact that the entire human being is young?

In this light, brain research seems to be of little use for teachers' daily work in the classroom. Teaching has to take the entire human being into consideration and not only the brain. The possible use of brain research for making decisions about the national curriculum does not contribute to improving teachers' daily work in the classroom. If teachers can use brain research, it can only provide a (small) part of all the knowledge teachers need. It cannot replace all other kinds of knowledge and it cannot be used as a measure for all other kinds of research and knowledge. In the political discourse about the Swedish school, brain research has been used (and misused) in this ideological way.³

The theory of the lived body

Although the use of brain research for teachers and teacher education may be limited, I think that it is important that we notice the place of the body in education. Today, too much educational research and practice is focused on cognitive activities of both pupils and teachers. Thus, there is a need to find a balance between cognition and body instead of ignoring one of them.

Such a balance is not easily found neither in brain research nor in cognitive research in the field of educational science. The predominant understanding of the human being in brain research is either materialist or dualist. In materialist ontology, the human being is reduced to

different constellations of material qualities of the body, sometimes to qualities of the brain. Dualist ontology includes both material and mental qualities in the understanding of human beings, but the two kinds of qualities are so different that they are not compatible with each other; they can only coexist with each other, but never be united. This understanding is expressed in studies of the correlation between mental experiences and changes in brain activity. Also in cognitive research there seems to exist two main approaches: either idealist or dualist. In idealist ontology, human life is reduced to mental qualities of different kinds. Even the individual's own body is understood in terms of the conception of the body.

In my view it would be of considerable value, both in educational and medical research, if we had a theory that could integrate mind and body in an interdependent unity. Such a theory cannot be understood as a simple addition of missing parts to already existing theories about the body or about the mind. If a solution were to be found to the separatism of traditional ontological theories, the existing conceptions would have to be replaced by an approach that understands both body and mind in new ways. A theory of this kind can be found in the theory of the lived body as developed by the French phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty in his book *Phenomenology of perception* (1962).

In the theory of the lived body, mind is not only mental but also embodied, and the body is not only body but also a subject. From a materialist viewpoint, on the contrary, there is, strictly speaking, no place for someone who thinks, not for thinking at all. In idealist thinking everything is thinking in the broad sense of the word. Although a thinking subject may be introduced into this theory, without material qualities it will be a bodiless, free-floating subject. Dualism oscillates between a subjectless body and a bodiless subject that never encounter each other. In the theory of the lived body, body and mind are interdependent; they presuppose each other and cannot exist separately. The lived body is not a material thing among other things in the world; it is a subject. For this reason, it differs from material things that can be found in the world. A chair, for instance, I can leave behind me or move to another place, but I cannot distance myself from my own lived body, nor move it to another place in the same way as I can with a chair. It is always with me. We could, therefore, say that I am my body rather than that I have a body. My own lived body is the subject of all my experiences and never a pure object. Consequently, the lived body is the prerequisite of the existence of objects.

The mind, in its broadest sense, does not constitute an independent life of the mind. Life and mind always presuppose the lived body. Ex-

perceiving and thinking, feeling and dreaming, willing and acting are all embodied and their content is dependent on changes in the body. The embodied subject, who thinks and acts, always exists in a world together with other people, in a life-world, in other words a world that is equally dependent on the experiencing and acting subject as the subject is dependent on the world. Thus, the life-world is an open and uncompleted world in contrast to an objective world. The identity of the embodied subject in the social world, as well as the meaning of the world, is constituted by the worldly experiences of the subject.

With such an understanding of the human being, it is possible to take the whole human being in its multicultural ways of being into consideration in education. Knowledge from such an approach can also be used by teachers in their everyday activities in the classroom and can play an important role in teacher education.

Concluding remarks

The purpose of this article has been to identify and examine some of the ideas and ideals that have been introduced in the liberal discourse about the qualifications of future teachers and the corresponding teacher education, and to introduce an alternative view. In order to raise working teachers' competence, the government launched a programme in 2007 for further education of teachers with a strong focus on subject knowledge. In the report on Government research funding, the government's investigator levelled heavy criticism against educational research in the field of the teaching profession and teacher education and recommended research in the form of effect studies and applied in evidence-based practice. In an editorial about the latest assessment of Swedish teacher education, the liberal op-ed columnist Hans Bergström called for brain research to give a scientific basis to teacher education and teachers.

Among these different ideas and ideals about teachers and teacher education the last-mentioned, that is concerning brain research, expresses more than the others a new view in school politics. This position is strongly supported by the Swedish brain researcher Martin Ingvar, who has argued that the school ignores how the brain of children functions. An examination of Ingvar's use of brain research in a school context can be summarized in two conclusions: firstly, although it cannot be denied that education depends on the brain, it has to be acknowledged that education depends on the whole body or, actually, on the entire human being; secondly, brain research seems to be of little use for teachers' daily work in the classroom. As an alternative to this research approach,

the theory of the lived body is introduced. It offers an understanding of the human being as the intertwining of body and mind, situated in a life-world, and knowledge based on such an approach could be very useful in the teacher's work in the classroom.

Notes

1. This article is based on a symposium paper at the 11th conference of the International Network of Philosophers of Education in Kyoto 9–12 August 2008.
2. I have discussed the relation between teaching and learning elsewhere (Bengtsson 2001) and this will not be discussed in this text.
3. Ingvar also discusses several other school issues in his article, such as reading ability, marks and social inequality in school, but without using brain research to understand them. He simply uses his name as a brain researcher to support well-known liberal opinions on school issues (cf. Björklund & Leijonborg 2005), i.e. without scientific expertise in the field he discusses.

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