

Ola Strandler

Constraints and Meaning-Making: Dealing With the Multifacetedness of Social Studies in Audited Teaching Practices

- This article discusses how the implementation of outcome-focused reforms in Sweden were experienced, enacted and handled by ten experienced social studies teachers.
- The teachers were interviewed and/or observed before, during and after implementation.
- The emphasis in social studies teaching shifted from extrinsic dimensions toward intrinsic dimensions.
- The article argues that this development is problematic since it risks circumscribing central tools that can be used to deal with inherently complex subject dimensions.

Purpose: The backdrop of the article is the emergence of an international and politically motivated ambition that aims at standardising the purpose and outcomes of teaching practices via various forms of outcome controls. This ambition of standardisation is discussed in a Swedish context in relation to social studies teaching, which, at its core, has highly diverse and sometimes conflicting aims and purposes. The purpose of the article is to analyse tensions that arise in practice as ten experienced Swedish social studies teachers implement outcome-focused reforms in their teaching, and to critically discuss implications for social studies teaching.

Method: Interviews, observations and a conceptual framework built on Paul Ricœur's discussion on the concept of practical reason has been used to analyse tensions that arose when the teachers implemented standardised tests and grading.

Findings: Teaching practices shifted from social studies extrinsic dimensions (emphasising an open and individual understanding from social issues) toward social studies intrinsic dimensions (emphasising knowledge about a predetermined content) as a result of policy changes, teachers meaning-making of the reforms, and in relation to external constraints. In conclusion, it is argued that this shift risks circumscribing tools that can be used to deal with inherently complex subject dimensions.

Keywords:

Social studies, assessment, audit, new governance logic, practical reason

1 Introduction

As several researchers have pointed out, social studies is a multifaceted and elusive subject/concept that can both denote a separate subject with a focus on, for example, social issues (Morén & Irisdotter Aldemyr, 2015), and label a collection of loosely associated social science subjects like history, geography and economics (Parker, 2010). Hence, even on a conceptual level, social studies is already characterised by elusiveness and multifacetedness, with different meanings in different educational systems, as well as on different levels within the same educational system. This vagueness is even further enhanced by sometimes fierce discussions on what social studies is, or ought to be, which juxtapose the generally 'modern aura' of the subject social studies with 'old,

stagnated and out of date' subjects such as history (Evans, 2004); disciplinary approaches with multi- or inter-disciplinary approaches (Davies & Dunnill, 2006); subject-focused essentialism with pupil-oriented progressivism (Elgström & Hellstenius, 2011); 'academic' understandings of the subject with 'applied' ones (Ikeno, 2012); and the transmission of facts with critical analysis (Bruen, 2013). There are however, as Barton (2012) argues, reasons to be cautious about using a polemic or conflictual tone in these types of discussions, not least since their effects on actual teaching practices are highly unclear – what is enacted in classrooms tends to differ from policy discussions (Ball, Maguire & Braun, 2012; Ozga, 2000).

However, there is neither a lack of (politically motivated) attempts to pin down what social studies (or any other subject) is, nor any reason to assume that social studies teaching is unaffected by such attempts. On the contrary, reforms in many countries' educational policy aim at standardising the purpose and outcomes of teaching practices via various forms of outcome control. For example, Suurtamm and Koch (2014) describe how teachers reluctantly adapt teaching to categories of the grading systems; Pope, Green, Johnson and Mitchell (2009) depict discrepancies between teachers' perceptions of pupils' needs and their perceptions of institutional requirements (such as grading and standardised testing); and Au (2007), in a metasyntesis, argues that

Ola Strandler is a lecturer and PhD student in the Department of Pedagogical, Curricular and Professional Studies, University of Gothenburg. His research interest concerns the relation between educational policy and teaching practice. He is currently writing a dissertation on the effects of increasing assessment reforms on teaching practice in Sweden.
Department of Pedagogical, Curricular and Professional Studies, University of Gothenburg, P. O. Box 300, SE 405 30, Gothenburg, Sweden
Email: ola.strandler@gu.se



high-stake testing exerts significant control over the structure of knowledge, ways of teaching and selection of content, although the specific influence on social studies may differ due to different test designs, policy enactment and teaching traditions (Au, 2009). There are thus strong reasons to suggest that these types of outcome-focused reforms entail a change in governance logic that can potentially restructure teaching practices in social studies (as well as in other subjects), although in highly complex, context-dependent and, sometimes, unintended ways.

The purpose of the article is to analyse how ten experienced Swedish social studies teachers enacted, experienced and handled the implementation of outcome-focused reforms in their teaching practices, and to critically discuss implications for social studies teaching of the new governance logic. Sweden is an example that is particularly well-suited for such a study since policy changes have focused on standardisation and outcome control during the last few years: introducing national tests in social studies, grading in lower years, new knowledge requirements and core content to be taught in each subject (Olovsson, 2015; Wahlström & Sundberg, 2015). Ten experienced social studies teachers in year 6 have been observed and/or interviewed during their first year of implementing grading and national tests in their teaching. In order to analyse how the teachers experienced and handled the reforms in practice, a conceptual framework built on Paul Ricoeur's (2007a, 2007c) discussion on the concept of practical reason has been used (Strandler, 2015).

2 Setting the scene: Social studies in Sweden

Since the introduction of a comprehensive school system in Sweden in 1966, history, geography, civics¹ and religion² have been regarded as a particular group of subjects under the term social studies. Discussions about social studies have often revolved around the organisation, aims and content of these four subjects (Schüllerqvist, 2012). With the comprehensive school system, progressively inspired ideas of thematic and pupil-oriented approaches (Broady, 1994) gained ground and challenged the boundaries of older subjects (Samuelsson, 2014; see also Evans, 2004; Osborne, 2003). History, geography, civics and religion were increasingly integrated in a thematic social studies block, at times even into a common subject, with shared aims, knowledge requirements and no content specified (Karlsson, 2009; Swedish National Agency for Education, 2015).

A restructuring of Swedish educational policy in recent years has entailed a sharp and deliberate alteration of this trend, which has strongly influenced how social studies is governed, conceptualised and organised. Extensive policy changes have been launched in response to an increasingly strong perception that Swedish education is in a "state of crisis", where deteriorating results in international surveys have been used to justify reforms with a greater focus on outcome control (Pettersson, 2008). In politics, as well as in the media, the notion of a

progressive, unfocused school has been contrasted with neoconservative and neoliberal ideas of tradition, clearer notions of knowledge and market logics (Wiklund, 2006; cf. Apple, 2004).

The emphasis on clarity and outcome control in these discourses is part of a broader change in governance logic in public sectors, which is based on auditing techniques, principles and routines to verify compliance with administrative norms and regulations (Strathern, 2000; Power, 1997). The change is closely linked to new public management reforms that were launched in Sweden and elsewhere in the 1980s and 1990s; privatisation, managerialism, marketisation, decentralisation and outcome controls (Tolofari, 2005) were promoted with the promise of a more decentralised, democratised and effective model of governance (Hood, 1995). However, in order to govern public services under new circumstances, these reforms also came with, or were followed by, a (new) recentralised form of governance that increasingly measured, assessed and monitored professional and social life (Lundahl, Erixon Arreman, Holm & Lundström (2013). This has nurtured a demand for external tools that clarify the unclear and condense practical activity into (supposedly) objective measures of, for example, educational outcomes (Forsberg & Lundgren, 2010; Hardy & Boyle, 2011).

In the light of this logic, the progressive, thematic-driven and pupil-centred social studies block appeared as obsolete. History, geography, civics and religion are thus (again) thoroughly separated in the latest Swedish curriculum of 2011 (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2011), although still grouped under the label social studies. While the previous thematically organised social studies syllabus (of 1994) only specified general and broad aims such as "know and reason about the fundamental ideas of a democratic system, and practise democracy in everyday actions" (in year 5), the new syllabuses have more specific aims in each of the four subjects, where in civics for example, pupils should "analyse social structures using concepts and models from the social sciences" (Swedish National Agency of Education, 2011, p. 189).

The introduction of grades at earlier ages (now in year 6 instead of year 8) has further separated social studies in grade 6 since pupils now are assessed in accordance with content-specific knowledge requirements in each of the four subjects. In civics, for example, pupils need to meet the following requirement for a pass grade (E):

Pupils have good knowledge of what democracy is and how democratic decision-making processes function, and show this by applying developed reasoning about how democratic values and principles can be linked to how decisions are taken in relation to local contexts. (Swedish National Agency of Education, 2011, p. 196)

Furthermore, newly added *core content* specifies 54 topics to be taught from years 4 to 6, divided between the four subjects. These include, for example, the Swedish natural and cultural landscapes in geography; cultural interchanges through increased trade and



migration in history; key ideas behind rituals, precepts and holy places in Christianity in religion; and the tasks of the Swedish parliament in civics (Swedish National Agency of Education, 2011). Finally, subject separation has been strengthened by the introduction of standardised tests, in which the pupils are examined in one randomly selected social studies subject in year 6 and 9³.

The delineation of clear subject areas and a focus on educational outcomes are symptomatic of the new governance logic's reliance on measurable, evaluable and comparable data (Power, 1997). The logic is thus better suited to *certain* dimensions of social studies teaching, while being less suited to others (Wahlström & Sundberg, 2015). Generally, the logic corresponds to what will here be called the subjects' *intrinsic dimensions*. According to Husbands, Kitson & Pendry (2003), intrinsic aims and values "chiefly emerge from concepts and assumptions within the discipline itself" (29) and thus aim at an understanding of a subject in itself, of a clearly defined content and established conceptual constructs that are (often) based on scientific disciplines. The aims, knowledge requirements and content above are examples of these dimensions in social studies since they emphasise the *use* of specific models, *knowledge about* the subjects and a well-defined *content* with subject-specific topics. All in all, the examples rest on clearly defined subjects and contents that can facilitate assessments.

However, social studies continue to have dimensions that do not fit the descriptions of intrinsic dimensions. Teaching practices are still commonly organised under the label "social studies" until year 6, which is why schools can decide to register a combined social studies grade rather than four separate ones (although the knowledge requirements, aims and core content are subject specific). In addition, the civics, geography, history and religion syllabuses continue to stress generic and pupil-oriented aims: In year 6, religion includes existential individual-oriented aims such as reflecting over life issues and one's own and other's identities (cf. Osbeck, 2009); civics includes aims of active citizenship and critical thinking (cf. Morén & Irisdotter Aldemyr, 2015; Sandahl, 2015); history includes existential dimensions of historical consciousness (cf. Schüllerqvist & Osbeck, 2009); and geography should view the world from a holistic perspective (Swedish National Agency of Education, 2011).

These characteristics are examples of what will here be called social studies' *extrinsic dimensions*. In comparison with above, these dimensions lie outside of well-defined subjects, conceptual constructs and scientific disciplines – emphasising a more open and individual understanding of oneself, life and society (Husbands et al., 2003; Schüllerqvist & Osbeck, 2009). The elusiveness of these dimensions does not relate to well-defined content, aims or assessable skills and therefore the dimensions do not fit well with the new governance logic. Extrinsic dimensions are thus now primarily articulated in the overall aims in the curriculum, and only to a lesser degree in the core content and knowledge requirements. In a way, the

change in governance logic has thus altered the emphasis in policy toward social studies' intrinsic dimensions. For teachers, this alteration was most clearly manifested in the introduction of grading and standardised testing in year 6 social studies in 2012, which embodies the new governance logic in concrete and compulsory assignments.

3 Conceptual framework

The shifted emphasis in social studies policy confronts teachers with new tensions – dilemmas, choices, moments of insecurity – in relation to established teaching practices, preconditions, individual intentions, everyday working conditions etc. (Stronach et. al., 2002). How the teachers experienced and handled these new tensions in practice will here be construed through the lens of Ricœur's (2007c) discussion of a practical reason. In a broad sense, the concept of practical reason refers to discussions on how humans make decisions for action (such as teaching) in particular circumstances (see for example Wallace, 2014). Ricœur's position on practical reason was that it neither implies a knowledge of how things are, nor how they ought to be, but rather a capacity among actors (teachers) who try to reconcile seemingly conflicting dimensions of action. In particular, he stressed how a practical reason can function as an "arbiter and judge" between universal, institutional demands on action (such as the new governance logic) and the practice, which is always particular and in change (Ricœur, 2007c).

This does not necessarily mean that teachers solve all tensions that can arise, but rather that teaching is regarded as a perpetual struggle to manage an inherent complexity in (here) social studies teaching (Strandler, 2015). In teaching practice, social studies' intrinsic and extrinsic dimensions are neither dichotomous, nor mutually exclusive, but coexist and overlap – teaching that focuses on intrinsic dimensions does not exclude individual insights among pupils; and teaching that focuses on extrinsic dimensions always presupposes a certain content. Here, the dimensions are thus first and foremost used analytically, to depict two different points of entry into, or ways to think about, organise and conceptualise social studies teaching. While the extrinsic dimensions relate to teaching as an unpredictable activity where the subject is a tool for unfolding generic skills and pupils' individual meanings, the intrinsic dimensions relate to teaching that is about general conceptions and pupils' mastering of a clearly defined subject content that can facilitate assessment (cf. Hopmann, 2007). As the reforms clearly lean toward one of the dimensions (intrinsic), the two terms are used to describe changes in teaching, as well as tensions that arise in practice.

Practical reason is here used to focus analysis on how the teachers mediate between these tensions. More specifically, what will be used is how Ricœur's discussion on practical reason rests on a dialectic view on action, which he regarded as an individual undertaking that was concurrently *constrained* and given *meaning* through norms and values (Ricœur, 1981b, 2007b). Throughout data



collection and analysis, focus has therefore been on how the reforms on one hand *constrained* the teachers mediating position; and on the other hand how the same reforms were included as new *meaning-making* parts of their teaching.

4 Methodology

The implementation of national tests and grading in social studies teaching has been studied in year 6 classrooms. This is not a very well-researched area in Sweden, where research on social studies teaching has often focused on policy or teaching materials for older pupils (Johnsson Harrie, 2011). However, there are some analytical benefits to a study in year 6. Swedish pupils often change schools and/or teachers in year 7, which is why a relatively high proportion of teachers in year 6 had neither given grades, nor conducted national tests in social studies prior to the reforms. This enabled data collection from experienced teachers (ranging from 4 to 24 years of experience⁴), with little or no experience of grading or (standardised) testing in social studies. Data was collected from 10 teachers during the school year of 2012/13⁵, which was the first year that grades and national tests in social studies were implemented. The teachers differed in age (35 to 57 years) and gender (although nine were female), and worked in schools of different sizes and socioeconomic statuses, in both rural and urban settings.

Data was collected through interviews and classroom observations:

- All teachers were interviewed for the first time during the semester before the implementation of grades and national tests. The interviews focused on the teachers' experiences, backgrounds, perceptions of the reforms and expectations about how the reforms would relate to teaching practices. In short, the aim was to establish an initial understanding of the different contexts in which grades and tests would be introduced. The length of the interviews varied between 30 minutes and 1 hour.
- Half of the teachers were asked, and agreed, to have their teaching observed during their first year of implementing the reforms. The observations were conducted in continuous time periods of between three and five weeks, depending on the teachers' work and schedules. Approximately 220 hours were spent with the teachers inside and outside of classrooms.
- A second retrospective interview was conducted with all of the teachers in the semester that followed the implementation of the reforms. The interviews were structured around themes that had emerged during observations and in the first interviews. The same themes are to be found in the structure of the result section below and include how the reforms made teaching more transparent to external stakeholders, how time and competitive pressures affected how the teachers enacted the reforms in practice, and how the reforms provided teaching with clarity, meaning and weight. The questions focused on concrete events, actions and statements from the first interviews and observations (van Manen, 1997). The length of the interviews varied between 1 and 1 ½ hours. Both the initial and retrospective interviews were

transcribed before analysis. The teacher names have been changed in the article.

During both data collection and analysis, teaching has been regarded as a form of practical reasoning. As shown above, the retrospective interviews investigated themes that concern how the reforms both constrained and provided new meanings to teaching. The observations likewise focused on what kinds of teaching became feasible and what kinds of teaching became problematic. The interviews were conducted as semi-structured life world interviews (Kvale, 1996) and had the aim of getting as close as possible to the teachers' own experiences, perceptions and interpretations of the reforms in relation to their own practice. The fieldwork was conducted as semi-participant observations, which included observations, conversations and social interactions but no participation in the daily work of teachers. Field notes were used to document observations and conversations, which enabled a targeted focus on the teachers and teaching practices for a long period of time (Patton, 2002). All in all, the observations offered an opportunity to study social studies teaching practices in the field but "from the outside", with a distance that is difficult to accomplish with interviews (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007).

4.1 Analytical procedures

Ricœur (1981a) stated that an analysis without a moment of distanciation and objectification lacks direction and the potential for critique. Hence, to merely seek an understanding of the teachers' experiences would be incomplete, just as it would be incomplete to merely regard teaching as an effect from policy. Analytically, this has entailed a data collection and analysis that has oscillated between a moment of *close understanding* of the teachers and a *distanced explanation* of what type of social studies teaching that was facilitated/impeded by the reforms (Strandler, 2015).

The moment of close understanding was characterised by a listening, empathic attitude and focused on how the teachers experienced the introduction of grading and standardised testing and how they (based on these experiences) handled them in their established social studies teaching practices. Analysis was thus in a sense focused on how the teachers used a practical reason to mediate in the tensions that arose from the new governance logic.

The moment of distanced explanation was characterised by a focus on how the introduction of grading and standardised testing *affected* social studies teaching practices. In this moment, the concept of practical reason played a different role where it was not so much used to conceptualise teachers' mediating role, but rather to illuminate how the new governance logic restructured the preconditions for a practical reason to operate.

Although these different moments emanate from different epistemological levels, they are not separate, but rather are different analytical positions that have



been synthesised to enable an understanding of the teachers under particular circumstances, but also to enable a critical discussion of the implications for social studies teaching from the new governance logic.

The different types of data collection thus in part correspond to different parts of the analytical process – while the interviews provided data for a close understanding of the teachers, the observations provided a distanced perspective on how the reforms affected practices. The moments did however overlap and directed one another since, for example, themes that were identified during observations guided the retrospective interviews.

The moment of distanciation was further enhanced in analysis as the transcribed interviews and field note excerpts were continually regarded in the light of the new governance logic. Such a distanciation provided increased depth in the understanding of individual teachers, but also a perspective on teaching practices as *manifestations* of a new governance logic, which could form the basis for a critical discussion.

5 Results

5.1 Transparency

With the introduction of grades and standardised testing, the teachers of this study faced an increased pressure that teaching and teaching results should be made transparent to external stakeholders:

I really need to flesh out, and... so I have... if someone were to come and ask why, I really need to have proof for what I have done. (Diana, Interview 2)

one cannot just say... that you really feel that you do not really get there, you still have to be able to point out exactly what that is... that is my duty, that I can show that. (Mary, Interview 1)

The work this pupil has done is amazing, it is worth a lot, much more than most of the others in the class have done, and then I'm not able to just say... well I can say how fantastic that is, but I cannot display that somewhere. I find that hard! (Karen, Interview 1)

The pressure on transparency drew their focus in teaching practice towards the measurable, reportable and evaluable, which tended to make certain teaching approaches problematic. In an illustrative example, Mary often returned to an ideal of “surprise” in teaching that had no direct connection to predetermined aims or content, which meant fewer opportunities to foresee the outcome of teaching. Teaching segments that were congruent with this ideal typically included discussions, debates, dramatisations and the like, and were, according to Mary, opportunities for ‘surprising’ the pupils, creatively shaping lessons in responsive dialogue with pupils’ reflections, questions, and comments. On a general level, she found this ideal of surprise to be in tension with the increased focus on outcomes in teaching:

Interviewee: I used to think like that a lot, that they [the pupils] should not really know what to expect when they came in. I used to think that was something that was satisfying in itself. And I still think that something needs to happen during lessons. But... well, now there has to be a plan for what they should do, nothing unexpected can suddenly happen in that way, because every lesson needs to be part of this plan.

Interviewer: And the plan is directed toward...?

Interviewee: ...toward assessment. (Mary, Interview 2)

This type of influence seems to have been particularly troublesome in social studies where the teachers found it more difficult to fully integrate assessments into their established teaching practices. Instead, assessments were “constructed in a different way than teaching, turning them into something else than teaching, into something that is separate from and in tension with teaching” (Field notes, 121002). This tension between assessing and teaching social studies is further illustrated by the following conversation after a lesson where a social studies national test (religion) had been returned:

Afterwards, we talk. Gillian describes how pupils’ knowledge increasingly needs to be articulated in columns, boxes and matrices, which finally lead up to a grade. A system has emerged, she continues, that is unfavourable for pupils’ “social studies thinking”, where she needs to rush through spontaneous discussions and reflections that start during class, “where pupils can develop”, in order to make time for this [filling out and discussing grading forms]. /.../ An important point in Gillian’s reasoning is that it is neither content, nor the design of the national tests that affects teaching (she has been involved in constructing one of the social studies tests), but how teaching and its outcome need to be externally audited. (Field notes, Gillian, 130505)

The excerpts above show how the teachers felt constrained to a certain type of teaching as they took on the reforms. As the testing and grading assignments were introduced in practice, they in a way became a “model” for social studies teaching – one that prioritised well-delineated, well-defined and assessable content, and which could provide the teachers with grounds and arguments for specific grades. This “model” was highly congruent with social studies’ intrinsic dimensions, while it was in tension with the subjects’ remaining extrinsic dimensions. It is important to note, however, that the “model” did not constrain teaching in a direct sense, but primarily via indirect self-regulating processes. It was the teachers’ awareness that teaching was followed by grades and tests that affected what kinds of teaching they considered to be feasible. Mary above, for example, could certainly continue to surprise her pupils in teaching, but the emphasis on results, predictability and transparency in the reforms coupled such approaches with an element of risk.

5.2 Time

The teachers associated the risk in departing from the “model” above with a common dilemma in teaching –

the limitation of time. All the teachers perceived the new core content to be extensive, while the time available for social studies teaching was perceived as scarce. Sandy, for example, tried to use open, interdisciplinary teaching approaches to solve this dilemma and find time for all the topics included in the new core content, an approach she felt was encouraged by the National Agency for Education. The same approach, however, gave rise to a similar concern to Mary's, that certain disciplinary core content would be insufficiently covered and assessed (Sandy, Field notes, 130415):

They [National Agency for Education] have extensive, like really thick books, in which they really stress the importance of thematic work, saying that's how one ought to work, while the grading system is the opposite. Where is the logic in that? (Sandy, Interview 1)

A more common (and in a sense more successful) way to approach the dilemma between content and time included various forms of hierarchisation between topics, where matters considered to be peripheral were merely "checked" off the list:

When taking a look at the core content, immediately, you can say: no way that there is time for all that. Still, you have to. Then someone proposes, just touch upon it, at least you have to touch upon it. Ok, touch upon it, yes, you can do that, but what's the use, to only touch upon it, when they [the pupils] will not remember that anyway. (Diana, Interview 2)

...but I think it has to be like that, some parts will be a question of just checking off, and if someone really has learnt something, that... you don't know. (Mary, Interview 1)

The teachers also expressed new constraints on assessment itself. Most of them considered non-written assessments (for example discussions or debates) to be time-consuming and unreliable, while they considered written assessments (for example tests or reports) to be time-effective and reliable. In a way, the teachers used the results from written assessments as physical representations of pupils' knowledge that they could file, assess, compare and recall in order to justify grades. Time was a crucial factor in this development:

Interviewee: I have a hard time figuring out how to do it differently in social studies. I find that hard.

Interviewer: Why is that, I think I understand, but could you put into words why it becomes difficult?

Interviewee: Well, it might have been possible if you had more time, if I could sit down and have oral discussions where everyone could be heard. Because we had that sometimes, but it is still more difficult to see what they actually know, I think, even when I've had them in smaller groups. (Mary, Interview 2)

Here, it is clear how the new governance logic's increased demand on transparency entailed that primarily written and documentable results mattered. Simi-

larly, Sandy, in one of her attempts to work in an interdisciplinary way, included core content and knowledge requirements from several of the social studies subjects, along with Swedish and Art. However, as the deadline for registering the semester's grades approached, focus shifted from subject content to submitting in time:

"Since you have had weeks to work in social studies, she explains, you cannot come and say that you did not have time to work with this".

Grades will be registered on May 31 and before that, she [Sandy] needs to compile their work for grading. She says that she is hoping that the pupils see how serious this is. In the end, she encourages the pupils, telling them that she can see how they work; the problem is the lack of time (Sandy, Field notes 130425)

Generally, time increased the element of risk of deviating from teaching that was well-delineated, well-defined and assessable, which further circumscribed how the teachers could work with social studies' extrinsic dimensions. The lack of time turned each segment, project or assignment in social studies into an investment of time that needed to "deliver a return" in terms of transparent results. The teachers thus tended to choose a focus on clear and time-efficient learning *results* in teaching, rather than focusing on unclear and time-consuming learning *processes*. Of course, there is not necessarily a contradiction between a focus on results and a focus on processes - the latter always leads to the former in one way or another - but the governance logic's emphasis on *predictable* results certainly adds an element of uncertainty and risk to an unpredictable, open and process-oriented teaching practice - i.e. social studies' extrinsic dimensions.

5.3 Market logics

Beside time, the competitive situation of some schools further underpinned the importance of reducing vagueness and risk-taking. Mary, who worked at a new independent primary school, is a prime example of this. The school was recently established by one of the major companies that have emerged in the wake of marketisation. Since the new school's survival, and ultimately teachers' jobs, depended on pupil and parental choice, empty seats were a central concern at the school, and for its owner (Mary, Interview 1). In this case, the competitive pressure resulted in an informal understanding among the teachers to increase emphasis on the knowledge requirements and assessability in order to meet parental demands for transparency and clarity in teaching (Mary, Field notes, 120924). Such an emphasis, however, made the teachers more open to criticism, as Gillian described at the end of her first year of grading:

Interviewee: Why do I need to defend what I know by virtue of my profession, what I, in some way, consider myself to know /.../ Although I find it hard now, it is my profession, it is my job, it is what I do, and then you're questioned by the parents. I find that situation really troublesome.

Interviewer: Does that happen a lot?

Interviewee: Yes, it has happened quite often now since it's the first time that year six are graded and the parents get as stressed out as their children. Why don't they get an A?

Interviewer: That was after the first grades at Christmas, and then parents came?

Interviewee: Yes, and then you first needed to explain in every little tiny detail, that your daughter gets this, or your son gets that because of this. And then everything falls back on them saying that this is only an estimation. That it is only a subjective assessment. Yes, of course it is, that is what grades are. (Gillian, Interview 2)

This increased parental influence, which ultimately stems from pupils'/parents' right to school choice, further increased the demand for transparency and underpinned the need to reduce the impression of vagueness with regard to the subject or the teaching. The teachers therefore used an emphasis on clear outputs in social studies to give a transparent and credible outward image of their teaching, something which could expose them to criticism. The reforms' constraining influence toward certain result-oriented teaching practices thus has to be understood within the context of a highly marketised school system, where threats of a loss of reputation or lack of clarity and structure could affect the very existence of schools.

5.4 Clarity and meaning-making

The teachers also perceived the result-focus as something positive. As Paige describes, the new syllabuses were in sharp contrast to the previous ones:

In my opinion, it feels... it feels positive. It's a lot, but it feels simpler than the old one, which was... I felt that... it was more difficult to keep track of, what are we really supposed to do? So... I think that the core content is a positive thing: so this is what should be addressed. While at the same time, they should get here... these abilities... It feels more thorough and well conceived. (Paige, Interview 1)

The provision of clarity expressed in the excerpt is indeed another perspective on the increased demands for transparency. In nearly all schools, communication of results was dealt with via different types of learning management systems (LMS). The documentation of pupils' progress in these systems' matrices, categories and boxes in a way provided the teachers with some distance from the new and sometimes stressful act of grading since results, once registered, were perceived as more objective and fair. Also, the registering of progress in LMS further enhanced an impression of clarity to pupils, their parents, school management and other stakeholders, as Mary explains:

Well... perhaps... I think that grading feels less important suddenly, at least for me, and it does not feel as tough anymore, perhaps it is because we have Schoolsoft [LMS], where I fill in a subject matrix with the knowledge requirements. How far did you reach on this assignment?

Then it is sort of already filled out when I grade. In a way, I have already made an assessment based on the knowledge requirements, which makes it easier. It feels fairer, and the pupils find it fairer. Somehow, they think that what is written there is the truth, although it of course is my assessment the whole time. (Mary, Interview 2)

These processes of clarification and distancing helped the teachers to structure the social studies subjects in teaching, which provided a supposedly objective conceptualisation of clearly defined subjects, in which teaching was directed toward tangible, clear outcomes.

Here it becomes clear how the reforms on one hand constrained the teachers' handling of tensions, but on the other hand became a new and meaning-making part of their teaching practices. Increased transparency, time shortage and market forces constrained how the teachers could handle tensions, but the reforms also provided the teachers with structure, clarity and new meanings in their work. This double-sidedness was evident in a change of attitude among some of the teachers. For example, after having had quite a negative attitude toward grading initially, Mary's attitude gradually became more nuanced. In retrospect, she explained:

I have always been negative toward grades really. But I really think that I can see... that for the first time there is some kind of... well, to some extent it functions like a circle, connecting everything. Before, it was more like, ok... we do this and then there is a mark, and then you do this and there is a mark. It was not any kind of... but now, everything has a function in some way /.../ it becomes a virtuous circle... hopefully. (Mary, Interview 2)

The metaphor of a circle in the excerpt illustrates how the teachers used the new assessment assignments to establish new structures in teaching that, in their most concrete form, revolved around sets of aims and knowledge requirements that commenced and concluded teaching segments. This is illustrated in the following field-note excerpt, in which Meg introduced a final piece of work before grades were to be reported at the end of the semester. When introducing the assignment, descriptions of the knowledge requirements take up an extensive proportion of time:

Meg tells the pupils that this is really what geography and social studies are about, what they will be graded on, what they always have to return to and what they have been working with the entire semester. "You need facts, but you also need to describe why by answering the sub questions [written on the instructions that have been handed out], we know that they have steppe, but what is the significance of that? /.../Why, what, how, not only that things are in a certain way [emphasis on *that*]. (Field notes 131129)

The excerpt shows how the teacher uses the knowledge requirements to delineate social studies ("this is what social studies is") and connect a seemingly separate segment to previous work ("this is what we have been working on the entire semester"). However, the excerpt

also illustrates how the teacher does not structure teaching around issues that concern how the pupils ought to work, nor what to work with in a direct sense. Instead, it is the assessments and the knowledge requirements that are used to create a sense of cohesiveness by recurrent references to the knowledge requirements before, during and after assignments – in matrices, pedagogical plans, tests, posters, instructions etc.

This type of provision of clarity and cohesiveness illustrates a more positively connoted meaning-making process that in a way solved tensions in practice. The solution rests, however, primarily on assessments, which further emphasised social studies' intrinsic dimensions as a (the) structuring principle in teaching.

5.5 Weight

Finally, another aspect of the governance logic will be discussed, which somewhat further explains how the teachers handled the reforms as new and meaningful parts of their teaching practices. Among others, Goodson (1995) has pointed out that high-stake examinations can improve the status of individual subjects. For Pat and Tom, both teachers at the same middle school (in social studies and science), this was certainly the case:

Tom and Pat described how everything feels new and tough, but also that national tests and grading were appreciated as recognition for their work and subjects (social studies/science). The reforms have entailed that social studies/science have reached a "higher level" and gained status in relation to major subjects such as Swedish, English and maths. Nowadays, they can, and need to, put more time, attention and energy into these subjects, and to finally register a grade or to carry out a [national] test in one of the subjects is a recognition of the "long term work" that teaching in social studies is. "Perhaps it is not on a level with maths, Swedish or English, but still...", Pat concludes. (Field notes 130125)

Similar notions that grading and examinations "added weight" to social studies were frequently expressed by several of the teachers, although in somewhat different ways. This, however, did not only concern social studies in relation to other subjects, but also included a perception that pupils tended to consider the subjects in a more serious manner when they were graded:

They are pushed really, they are... motivated really, but it is also stressful, they get nervous and worried. However I notice the difference in the six graders now in comparison with the previous semester, they're sort of: let's do this now..., which definitely means that we need to be there and support them, and not just push them too hard. (Meg, Interview 1)

The addition of "weight" to teaching was most clearly manifested in intermediate moments between segments that were assessed and segments that were not. For example, one of Mary's civics lessons was introduced with a value exercise (a recurrent element in this class), in which the pupils were asked to adopt a position, deliberate and discuss various issues. These exercises

were dialogic, unpredictable and built on the pupils' active participation (Field notes 120924). The approximately 15-minute-long segment neither directly nor explicitly addressed any assessable knowledge requirements, aims or contents. However, the segment was in sharp contrast to the remainder of the lesson (35 minutes), in which the pupils were prepared for the next week's combined history and civics test on democracy. The two segments were symbolically delimited from each other with detailed instructions, accompanied by a set of knowledge requirements from the civics syllabus along with questions to be answered from a booklet on the history of democracy and the Swedish political system. Besides the obvious differences in instruction, the emphasis in the teaching now shifted from the pupils to the teacher, and from active participation to (civics) subject enactment: the pupils now worked individually, with a predetermined topic toward a (more or less) explicit goal, defined by a selection of knowledge requirements. This also altered the teacher's role: rather than facilitating discussions, reflections and comments, the teacher mentored the pupils (toward a test) within the frame of a (more) clearly classified subject (Field notes 120924).

The shift in the lesson above clearly illustrates the difference between a teaching that leans toward social studies' intrinsic dimensions and one that leans toward social studies' extrinsic dimensions. These types of delimitations during lessons, between non-assessed and assessed segments, were quite common among the teachers of this study. Time spent on the latter types of segments did however increasingly exceed the time spent on the former and the assessed segments were the prime vehicle for the "weight" that Pat and Tom talked about above, a state of affairs that most certainly contributed to the teachers' priority on social studies' intrinsic dimensions when tensions arose.

6 Discussion

In this article, I have analysed how social studies teachers experienced and handled tensions that arose in teaching practices as they implemented outcome-focused reforms. The introduction of grading and of national tests in year 6 were new and unavoidable features in practice – the teachers had little or no room to choose not to grade or not to conduct national tests. The teachers thus saw little alternative but to handle the tensions that arose between the general stipulations of standardised knowledge requirements, core content, tests etc. and their established teaching practices, preconditions and individual intentions. If this mediation is unpacked as an expression of practical reason, it appears as a simultaneous meaning-making and constraining process.

On the one hand, the teachers handled tensions by partly embracing the new assignments as significant and meaningful parts of their teaching practices and fundamentally restructured what they regarded as central in social studies. Rather than organising teaching around the subjects' extrinsic dimensions – individual, unpredictable and generic skills that transcend subject

boundaries – teaching now revolved around assessability. Aims, knowledge requirements and core content functioned as scaffolds or frames that provided social studies teaching with a sense of meaning, clearly illustrated in Mary’s analogy of a virtuous circle in teaching. This meaning-making of the reforms entailed a certain degree of predictability in otherwise multifaceted and elusive subjects, without directly or explicitly limiting what the teachers perceived as good social studies teaching. Nevertheless, such notions of clarity and predictability were more congruent with social studies’ intrinsic dimensions than with its extrinsic dimensions, which thus underpinned the development toward more clearly defined subjects, derived from predetermined subject conceptions and assumptions. This meaning-making process can be understood as an act of balance between autonomy and clarity – there might have been less room for elements of “surprise”, but the teaching gained in terms of structure, clarity, “weight” and status. On the other hand, the teachers’ leeway to handle tensions was highly constrained by factors that were beyond their influence: The increased focus on outcomes and transparency interrelated with competitive pressures and limitations of time, which made it more important for the teachers to be able to justify grades and give clear accounts of teaching for external stakeholders. These external pressures influenced aspects of teaching that used to be characterised by (more extensive) teacher autonomy, for example how to work with specific content, how and if that content would be examined (including a variety of oral and written assessments), and whether content from different subjects (social studies as well as others) should be integrated. Hence, although the extrinsic dimensions continue to make some mark on the social studies syllabuses, the shift in practice toward intrinsic dimensions operated through restraints on teacher autonomy. Such a relatively high level of autonomy used to facilitate unpredictable learning processes, discussions and interactions that were all prerequisites for social studies’ extrinsic dimensions.

The tensions discussed here are in a way inherent in the new governance logic. On the one hand, the teachers had considerable discretion to decide on how to teach the core content, but were on the other hand required to be precise about what teaching should lead to. It is crucial here that the new governance logic did not entail any mechanisms that explicitly enabled or prevented certain kinds of teaching. Since the logic works through outputs rather than inputs, policy was in a way “separated from operations” (Olssen & Peters, 2007, p. 323) and did not specify how the teachers should organise their teaching practices. Management of risks appears to be a central reason for why the shift in emphasis in policy still had such great impact on teaching practices. To quite some extent, the new governance logic tries to create certainty in what is inherently uncertain – making complex teaching processes transparent so that they can be evaluated in relation to precise aims and knowledge requirements (Power,

1997). The logic therefore did not only correspond better to the clarity of social studies’ intrinsic dimensions but also coupled the vaguer extrinsic dimensions with an element of risk in teaching: the teachers made their teaching transparent to cover their own backs, organised their teaching to minimise the risk of losing pupils to competitors and chose methods and assessments that satisfied the governance logic within tight timeframes. Management of risk also characterised how the new governance logic provided new meanings to teaching, since it created certainty and direction in otherwise open and uncertain practices.

7 Conclusions

The shifts in teaching practices described above, one can argue, are problematic for several reasons. The Swedish social studies subjects have long had aims that pupils both need to learn *about* and *from* social issues, such as citizenship (Sandahl, 2015), ethics (Osbeck, Franck, Lilja & Lindskog, 2015) and democracy (Rautiainen & Rähkä, 2012). The multifacetedness of social studies is in a way an asset, necessary to tackle such aims, which are inherently complex, by no means self-explanatory, and therefore difficult to pin down in assessable results. It thus seems highly problematic that the new governance logic seems to promote teaching practices that, despite what is stated in syllabuses, prioritise knowledge *about* rather than *from* these issues, attaining clarity at the expense of complexity. As the subjects’ intrinsic dimensions dominate practice to answer to a model of governance based on auditing, there is thus a risk that social studies’ multifacetedness is circumscribed, promoting a teaching that is oriented toward knowledge reproduction and social reproduction rather than critical appraisal. The extent to which such a development is problematic ultimately depends on one’s position on the purpose of education in general. The inevitable ideological nature of the influence of auditing on teaching practices, however, calls for discussions that do not merely look at standardised, result-focused reforms in relation to pupils’ results (which is something of a closed-circle argument), but also in relation to the teaching practices they promote.

Certainly, much research has been conducted on these types of changes in governance logics (see for example Ball, 2003; Beach & Dovemark, 2011; Olssen & Peters, 2007), but research on teaching practices under such altered circumstances has been less common. Further research in this area could focus on specific characteristics of individual subjects (such as here), specific teaching elements (such as classroom assessment), or on social science teaching more generally. Also, a focus on pupils’ experiences could contribute to a deepened understanding of what the changes entail for everyday life in social science classrooms. On a more general level, finally, the neoliberal backdrop of these logics (Lundahl et al., 2013) needs to be further investigated in terms of how social and relational practices in schools (between teachers as well as between teachers and pupils) are reorganised.

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Endnotes

¹ Civics was taught as a part of history until 1962.

² The subject changed from Christian religious education to the broader non-confessional and pluralistic Religious Education in 1969 (Flensner & Larsson, 2014).

³ Due to threats from the (majority) right-wing opposition in parliament to push for grading in even lower years, a settlement was reached to introduce grading on a trial basis from year 4 in 100 schools in 2015. In the same settlement, the social studies (and science) national tests were made optional and later removed in order to reduce teachers' administrative burden (The social democratic party, 2015).

⁴ Years of experience: Pat 16; Mary 7; Sandy 4; Paige 16; Ralph 11; Meg 12; Diana 12; Gillian 24; Karen 17; Patricia 15

⁵ 2012/2013 for all but one teacher for whom data was collected during the following school year.