Skilled teachers’ strategies in the classroom (or gym)
A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF TEACHERS IN PE, MATHS AND ENGLISH IN SWEDEN

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Introduction
According to international comparisons like PISA or reports from OECD there are considerable differences between schools in Sweden regarding goal attainment in several school subjects. Apart from an ambition that all pupils should have the opportunity to learn as much as possible, there is also the question of equal opportunities to education of a certain quality. At the same time there are demands on schools to fulfill the development regarding democratic ways of working and meet a cultural pluralism in society (Skolinspektionen, 2012, Englund, 2012).

At least in Sweden, there is a current political discourse around ideas about ‘good schools’ and ‘skilled teachers’, and these ideas are quite diverse when teachers and schools are evaluated critically concerning what they do and what they in some ways achieve. Recently this widespread critique regarding if teachers actually do their job or not has been strong in the media debate, and teachers are, according to Englund (2012), put under huge pressure economically, politically as well as ideologically. The critical comments in the reports about school results and the debate about the situation in classrooms have been the source of inspiration in my study, and the ambition is to contribute to a piece of the puzzle regarding research on teachers’ daily work in the classroom in school concerning teaching and learning.

The focus of the study is directed towards skilled teachers’ strategies in the classroom or the gym in order to make it possible for the pupils to achieve good results in school. By good results I mean that the pupils obtain the set goals in the national curriculum, and that they also have the opportunity to develop beyond these goals. This entails that the pupils have the possibility to develop their knowledge according to their individual capacity. The focus of the study is teachers in PE, English and Mathematics in Sweden, and my knowledge interest is to
describe skilled teachers’ strategies and how they manage to get the pupils to be successful in the classroom. I also have a comparative interest in comparing similarities and differences in strategies between the school subjects, and to delineate what strategies are about I start by looking at what is described in research as the most important success factors for teachers.

**Teachers’ success factors as the way in to my study**

In order to explore skilled teachers’ strategies a delineation is necessary in order to navigate the research on success factors for teachers, and there is a plethora of literature in which the topic has been treated from different perspectives.

My way of choosing literature focused on research describing success factors for teaching, and using this literature to summarize how teachers act (or should act) according to these factors. To be able to encircle relevant key concepts the delimitation of the study and way of searching for these concepts might be described as searching for information about “teachers success factors”, “strategies” and “classroom” and synonyms with these concepts. The most common concepts identified are instructional effect, teacher success, teacher role, teaching styles, teacher strategies, teacher-thinking and action, educational strategies, pedagogy, teacher skills, classroom techniques, classroom study, a good teacher, a great teacher, teacher effectiveness and teaching method. Based on these concepts I have then explored, either the concepts together or each separately, the most relevant findings for my field of knowledge. Namely findings that could be applied to either successful teaching strategies or the success factors that make the skilled teacher skilled. I have searched in different databases from the last two decades. When there are older references turning up in literature I have thought that it is important to learn more about these references. My searching has mostly been done in the data bases ERIC, SCOPUS and Web of Science. The first mentioned is an international data base in education. (Educational Resource Information Center). This database contains scientific literature such as articles, conference papers and dissertations. The other two are more comprehensive containing scientific articles from many areas.

The search of literature reveals that there is an extensive amount of research about success factors in the classroom internationally as well as in Sweden. Likewise there are concepts synonymous to success factors such as research on teacher competence, pedagogical skillfulness, ‘good’ teaching and education proficiency. What different competences these
concepts comprise would in this study be seen as equivalent in meaning as the primary concept success factors in the classroom. However, the didactical how-question (cf. Quennerstedt & Larsson, 2015) is not described as much in the literature related to different success factors, that is to say how skillful teachers are managing that which educational research assert as the most important success factors in the classroom. In the project, successful strategies in the classroom accordingly concern how skillful teachers manages to use these success factors, and this is something I want to know more about by means of the study.

According to the research on teachers’ success factors there are both similarities and differences regarding what they claim to be most fruitful concerning these factors. Some scholars’ comments upon factors that are similar but the perspectives are a bit different. Others emphasize more factors that are not equally relevant according to other researchers. The differences are accordingly that they use different perspectives and therefore identify other factors that are important for the success compared to if they a start from the essences of the success factors. Other differences between the research results turn out to be depending on the methods used. For example, certain meta-studies (e.g. Hattie, 2009, Moore, 2004) and smaller studies in the classroom (e.g. Munby, Russell & Martin, 2001) are showing that there are differences concerning what the teachers consider as central factors for teaching successfully.

In making a systematical presentation of the perspectives in the literature and later on identifying common success factors from the research area I have chosen to focus on three perspectives on the skilled teacher namely a macro perspective, a critical perspective and a micro perspective. The first one is a zoomed out perspective on the skilled teacher. This perspective is mainly based on larger international surveys and reports which are considering the overarching research from international and national evaluations, meta studies and survey reports. Parts of the PISA-report concerning Sweden and a quite large part of the evaluation from OECD are present in this perspective. In order to get an idea of what actually characterizes and has scientific evidence of qualitatively good teaching, it is important to zoom out to get an overall picture by studying and compiling knowledge of teaching and learning from different sources. This perspective is dominant in classroom research.
However there are researchers who are criticizing this zoomed out research. Among Swedish scholars the critique principally is directed towards the fact that some international research draw too far-reaching conclusions on, and generalize the results in, large international studies without grounding them in national school systems, national curricula or other contextual factors. Critical questions might be; can international research be used directly on different national school practices? Or should we say that all knowledge is local? Therefore I would argue that it is relevant in this study to make a critical perspective visible. In other words I will try to explore the critique against a macro perspective and at the same time find out what common success factors the teachers are using according to both perspectives. By this I want to conclude what success factors there might be which I can transform from the dominating macro perspective that might be used concerning a Swedish school system and national curriculum. This perspective therefore will be delimited to Swedish research and also will be illuminated to how the skilled teacher has been constructed and changed in Sweden over time.

The last perspective I focus on is a micro perspective. In this perspective classroom studies are in focus which is a more practical perspective concerning teaching. This is a zoomed-in perspective on teachers that is mainly based on studies on teachers’ work in the classroom. In other word this perspective concerns research on what skilled teachers are doing in a well functioning classroom and what the demands there are to obtain this. This research starts from empirical studies of the teachers work in the classroom and the perspective includes both international and national qualitative research.

From the reviews of research in the three perspectives, which I am not going into detail in here, I have identified success factors for each perspective. The success factors from the three perspectives then have been compiled into common success factors. The rational for this is that if a success factor can be identified within all three perspectives, then it reasonably should be part of my study on strategies the teachers use to handle the success factors.

**Common success factors in the macro-, the critical- and the micro perspective**

During the review and analysis of the literature I have come to the conclusion that important success factors for skilled teachers can be seen with quite different eyes. All success factors in the three perspectives are not in accordance with each other. Some of them might however be interpreted as common factors, and it is these common factors which I use as a starting point for my empirical study in order to identify the strategies the teachers are using to handle the
success factors. The common success factors can be described through how the skilled teachers:

- Handle pedagogical (didactical) competence and communication.
- Perform pedagogical leadership in the classroom that includes adjusting to the situation, governing of teaching, social relations, handling disturbing behavior and different problems with pupils’ attitudes.
- Have high expectations on all pupils.
- Works with continuous feedback of students’ work and their own way of working.
- Work together with colleagues to develop pedagogical/teaching skills.

**The aim of the study and questions**

The main interest in my thesis concerns teachers’ strategies in the classroom. The study has a comparative ambition that is focused on skilled teachers in PE, English and Mathematics. The aim of the study is thus to identify what strategies the teachers are using and also to identify similarities and differences between subjects and teacher way to handle the common success factors in a macro, a critical and a micro perspective. In order to fulfill the aim I have formulated the following questions:

- What strategies do skilled teachers use in their teaching?
- What are the similarities and differences between teachers from different subject areas, and how are they using these strategies in their teaching within their subject?

**Method**

The study is framed within a comparative, so-called, didactic framework (Almqvist 2016). Almqvist (2016) describe that comparative didactics has grown strongly in northern and continental Europe, where researchers are exploring and comparing teaching and learning within and between different subject areas. According to Ligozat, Amade-Escot & Östman (2015) comparative didactics moves beyond subject specific, and sometimes fragmented, ways to explore teaching and learning, and instead uses the critical potential of comparisons to make the familiar un-familiar through different comparative strategies. By didactics Ligozat et al mean: “research on teaching and learning in relation to contents and subjects featured in the curriculum” (p. 313). Almqvist (2016) in this vein argue that a strength with comparative approaches is that research can handle universal didactical/pedagogical questions.
about teaching, socializing and professional development without dropping the ambition to also focus on the content of the teaching.

In the thesis I have chosen to explore teachers’ strategies by means of comparative didactical design between PE and mathematics because Swedish pupils show low results in mathematics in international comparisons like PISA (OECD, 2015, Skolverket, 2013). The choice of English is the opposite. English is a subject where pupils in Sweden show quite good results in international comparisons (Skolinspektionen, 2012) Because of these differences between the pupils’ knowledge in the theoretical subjects and differences and similarities between the theoretical subjects compared with a more practical subject (PE), a comparative study of the teachers strategies seems to be relevant.

Three teachers in each subject area have been interviewed in-depth. The teachers have been interviewed with help of the identified success factors and are asked to describe what strategies they are using in their daily teaching practices to handle the mentioned factors. The interviews are audio taped and transcribed verbatim. The sample of the skilled teachers from respective subject in the study has been done with the aid of headmasters in schools in a city in Sweden.

The interview data is analyzed firstly according the contents of the strategy described by the teacher. The first step is therefore to examine what all the teachers from any subject are using for type of strategies. After that the similarities and differences are compared according to what strategies the skilled teachers are using in different subjects. The next step is therefore to compare differences and similarities inspired by the comparative didactical approach. Håkansson and Sundberg (2012) assert that teaching and learning is well explored and we know much about the conditions, processes and results of education and learning. However, they also state that it is uncommon to put subject areas up for comparison, and this is also underlined by Ligozat, Amade-Escot and Östman (2015):

*These relationships are made particularly salient when comparing different teaching and learning practices, in different subjects (e.g. mathematics and French language) and/or different educational contexts (various national curricula, primary versus secondary education, etc.) (s. 314).*
Bryman (2014) also assert that comparative studies can offer better understanding of the examined object if we compare two or three cases. Ligozat, Amade-Escot and Östman (2015) agree and are saying that a comparative study raises the potential of the study by relating to different aspects to the classrooms reality regarding the institutional boundary lines, values, habits and that which is taken for granted within each area. In this way a potential for difference rather than sameness can be gained.

By taking all the differences and similarities as well as the wide variety of approaches that originate as a starting point and systematically comparing these complex relationships, the aim is to gain a richer understanding of the knowledge within the field. In my study comparisons between teachers’ strategies potentially create new knowledge about differences and similarities in terms of using the success factors didactically in relation to contents of the subject, planning and performing. It might also be possible to show that different strategies might be used over the subject borders or if the strategy just fit the specific subject.

Preliminary results

The comparative didactic analysis is in its initial stages but preliminary results show that:

Strategies skilled teachers in all three subjects use in their respective classrooms are:

- **Make all pupils feel that they are seen, listened to and liked, through clarity, caring and respect.**
  Used for: Trustworthy relationships, prevent disturbing behavior and different problems with pupils’ attitudes, promote knowledge development, to build a relationship-capital, be well-liked as a teacher.

- **Respond to pupils with attitude problems and disturbing behaviors with calming behavior.**
  Used for: Through a safe, calm and positive response, stress and problem-creating behavior decreases, trustworthy relationships.

- **Build relationship with the pupils outside the subject (e.g. talk and ask about their hobbies, spend some time with the pupils in the cafeteria or in the corridor).**
  Used for: Link the pupils’ interest to the subject knowledge, find out what expectations and demands can be put on the pupil, prevent disturbing behavior and different problems with pupils’ attitudes, trustworthy relationships, to build a relationship-capital.
- **Group-level feed-back in each lesson both backwards and forwards.**  
**Used for:** Promote knowledge development, find out if I, as a teacher, have been clear enough during lesson and previous lessons, find out the pupils knowledge level, prepare the pupils for what awaits them so they have the opportunity to prepare themselves.

- **Early on tell the pupils what “rules” apply in the classroom.**  
**Used for:** Create structure in the classroom, make the pupils feel confident with each other, create a learning environment, as a leader clearly show that it is the teacher's definition of focus on the work and good environment that applies.

- **Contribute to an open climate in collegial learning by being open, recognizing own shortcomings and showing willingness to receive advice to develop teaching.**  
**Used for:** Receive tips and ideas from colleagues but create your own method because it is often your personality that makes you teach the way you do, easier to open up to collaborate with different subject teachers and to facilitate teaching for both teachers and pupils. Create a culture where everyone describes both bad and good examples of their teaching. Everyone gets an assignment based on their experience. Then you feel that you do not need to emphasize yourself.

- **Auscultate colleagues in different subjects.**  
**Used for:** Look at each other's way of working e.g. how to respond to gender in a classroom or how to deal with a specific pupil or methods that may be applied to my own subject.

**Specific strategies used by PE teachers but not usually used by others subject teachers are:**

- **Use pupils to instruct and teach parts or entire lessons.**  
**Used for:** Utilizes the pupils resources and knowledge, stimulate and challenge pupils who are skilled in the subject, a way to make demands on the pupils, a way for the pupils to raise themselves a level as they might not thought they would have from the start.

- **Level adjusts pupils in group exercises based on their different levels of knowledge.**  
**Used for:** For those pupils who are very uncertain if it is a high level, they feel safe, promote knowledge development, to motivate pupils to do their best according to their ability.

- **Teach the pupils that the main expectations are based on rules of conduct, to contribute to a good work environment and value-based issues.**
Used for: The main prerequisite for the pupils development in an exposed and exploited environment.

- Regularly make the pupils aware of the subjects benefit for the future.
  Used for: Motivate the pupils to do their best and work hard, motivate pupils to understand the relevance of the subject, promote knowledge development.

- Give pupils the opportunity to show other pupils that they are skilled.
  Used for: Make pupils dare to show that they are good at something which they are good at, create an environment where it is not wrong to show that you are good without boasting, promote knowledge development.

Specific strategies used by English and Maths teachers, but not usually used by PE teachers are:

- Start each lesson with telling the pupils what is expected of them in terms of what they should know and perform when the lesson is over (strategy in math and English).
  Used for: Promote knowledge development, create structure and focus in the classroom, get the pupils aware of what they should have knowledge about and study more if they do not have the knowledge.

- Let pupils assess different school work and each other’s work (strategy in English).
  Used for: To get the pupils aware of what is required in the different grade steps, promote knowledge development, teach students to work independently.

- Feed-back each lesson with “exit ticket” (strategy in math).
  (Exit ticket: Preparing questions before the lesson as pupils will respond to after the end of the lesson. The teacher will get a quick feedback on how many pupils have understood what the lesson has addressed).
  Used for: Knowledge for me as a teacher to check; my clarity, if the pupils understood the content and if something was particularly difficult and needed to be instructed more.

- Create time in the classroom to teach pupils who need extra guidance (strategy in math and English).
  Used for: Clear instructions and tasks so that many pupils can work independently - so you can create space with students who need extra support, promote knowledge development.

- Early on get the pupils to understand the idea of how to proceed in the subject in terms of grading criteria (strategy in math and English).
  Used for: Have students to understand what I'm looking for in the subject. That there is a main thread throughout the subject. That the pupils more and more can break the code to; "Think like this" and "do I see this?", that the pupils should
become aware and understand the differences between the different grade levels, promote knowledge development.

- **The best collegial learning is two-teacher systems in the classroom (strategy math).**  
  **Used for:** Exchange educational questions and methods with each other on a daily basis, Create space with pupils who need extra support, promote knowledge development, creates a calm in the classroom for both teachers and pupils.

- Use calming teaching methods and environments to allow pupils to calm down when needed (Strategy English).  
  **Used for:** Make the pupils to calm down sometimes and to vary the teaching so it does not get so stereotyped (e.g. Extinguish the light in the classroom, lighting candles and reads a book when the pupils enter the classroom).

- **Simplify the terminology or the language by “breaking down” the language so the pupils more easily understand what is said. (strategy in English and math)**  
  **Used for:** Repeat in both languages to clarify for those pupils who have difficulty understanding, promote knowledge development, In order not to lose the students and that they do not give up because of the terminology.

**In relation to the common success factors – a concluding reflection.**

- **Perform pedagogical leadership in the classroom that includes adjusting to the situation, governing of teaching, social relations, handling disturbing behavior and different problems with pupils’ attitudes.**  
  It’s the success factor seen by all subjects as the essence in order for pupils to succeed in the classroom. The main key seem to be good relations with each pupil.

- **Have high expectations on all pupils.**  
  The expectations is different in the subjects. In PE is the expectations based on value-based issues, rules of conduct and to contribute to a good work environment. In the other subjects, the focus is more on knowledge expectations.

- **Works with continuous feedback of pupils' work and their own way of working.**  
  All subjects work to provide feedback to the pupils, but only the other subjects (evaluation or exit ticket) evaluate their own way of working. Not in PE.

- **Work together with colleagues to develop pedagogical/teaching skills.**  
  All subjects see benefits of collegial learning and to collaborate with other subjects, but the biggest problem is that teachers do not have time to develop together. It is also a challenge to collaborate with colleagues because teachers are used to working and planning independently. This success factor is very subordinate to the teachers except auscultate colleagues in different subjects on a small scale.
- **Handle pedagogical (didactical) competence and communication.**
  What, how and why-questions are considered important in PE and English and to communicate these aspects regularly to the pupils. In math, the why-questions is considered not as relevant here and now in relation to what and how-questions and teachers avoid communicating why unless the pupils ask. PE has more difficulty than the other subjects, based on the didactic questions, to describe what skills the pupils need for different grade levels.

The results accordingly provide some insights into skilled teachers’ daily work in the classroom in order to handle the common success factors identified in a macro, a critical and a micro perspective. The analysis will now continue in the thesis, and more in-depth describe similarities and differences within and between the teachers in different subjects. My expectation is that the results can provide a small piece of the puzzle into the complexities of teaching.
References


