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Conflicting goals of educational action: a study of teacher agency from a transactional realism perspective

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ABSTRACT

This study focuses on the different ways in which teachers relate their situational agency and professional assignment to the national curriculum content and curriculum dilemmas. It builds theoretically on transactional realism and empirically on analyses of interviews with teachers, exploring the nature of teacher agency during the enactment of a new Swedish curriculum reform. To uphold a dual perspective of teachers’ relation to the curriculum as both collectively and individually experienced and as both an ideal and realistic–practical relation, we term the future as ‘projective experiences’, the presence as ‘practical-evaluative experiences’ and the past ‘iterational experiences’ in relation to agency. Especially, we are interested in the ‘what’ in the curriculum – what the teachers find intriguing, important or impossible and what affects how they relate to the curriculum as part of the multidimensional structures influencing their agency. This approach reveals that the crucial issue of teacher agency is related to the policy discourse on knowledge and equity as standards and the uniformity of assessment and its pedagogical consequences.

KEYWORDS

Curriculum; teacher agency; transactional realism; educational reform; Sweden

Introduction

In this article, we explore teacher agency in relation to the new national curriculum. With this focus, we relate our work to a vital field of research on teacher agency, but from a somewhat different angle: we use Dewey’s transactional realism as a theoretical framework. The reason for this is the specific relation between the curriculum and the teacher that Dewey captures at the end of his text *Experience and education* (Dewey, 1938/2008, p. 62), where he writes that we need to find out ‘... what conditions have to be satisfied in order that education may be a reality and not a name or a slogan’. Jackson (2012) argues that with this request, Dewey wants us to think of education as both ideally conceived and as realistically possible to accomplish. This double interpretation of the meaning of education is helpful for understanding the dual role of a state curriculum in a Nordic tradition: as both an ideal and as a form of regulation that should be followed. In the very last sentence of his text, Dewey (1938/2008, p. 62) states ‘[i]t is for this reason alone that I have emphasized the need for a sound philosophy of experience’. As Jackson (2012)
points out, to accommodate both an ideal and a realistic view of education, our conception of education needs to move back and forth along a continuum between the abstract and the concrete.

The dual purpose of this article is to explore teacher agency in relation to curriculum reform and to contribute to the field of curriculum research by taking a transactional perspective of realism based on the theory of pragmatism as the point of departure (Sundström Sjödin & Wahlström, 2017). The focus of the study is captured in the following research question: in what different ways do teachers relate their situational agency and professional assignment to curriculum content and curriculum dilemmas? Our assumption is that teacher agency is not only affected by structural, cultural and autobiographical factors, but that it is also influenced by what might be conflicting goals within curriculum content.

In this study, we explore how teachers relate to the curriculum three years after a curriculum reform for compulsory school in Sweden, Lgr 11, was implemented in 2011 (Curriculum for the compulsory school, preschool class and the recreation centre, Lgr 11). We do this by using a theoretical framework based on Dewey’s theory of experience, especially focusing on the concepts of transactional realism and temporality embedded in his ‘philosophy of experience’. We are not only interested in how teachers relate to curriculum at large, but rather to the ‘what’ in the curriculum that they find intriguing, important or impossible, thus affecting how they relate to curriculum as part of the multidimensional structures influencing their agency. The result of a teacher survey included in the present research project shows that 88% of the teacher informants in the survey (Wahlström & Sundberg, 2015) think that Lgr 11 (launched in 2011) is important for teachers’ perceptions of their mission as teachers. To reach a deeper knowledge about teachers’ experience of having room to manoeuvre in relation to curriculum regulations, we conducted an interview survey, the results of which are the focus of this study.

In the first part of the article, we introduce the theme of teacher agency, outline our theoretical framework and explain the study’s methodological approach. In the second part of the article, the results of the analysis regarding the experienced scope and nature of teacher agency within the most recent Swedish curriculum, known as Lgr 11, is reported. In the third and final part of the article, we discuss teacher agency in relation to curriculum reform in terms of oscillating between the ideal and the realistic as well as being in situations where former experiences have the potential to promote reflectivity and to guide teachers’ visions onward.

**A brief introduction to the concept of teacher agency**

Drawing on Emirbayer and Mische (1998), human agency can be understood as a social engagement with a clear temporal dimension, where the present involves a capacity of learning from the past as well as projecting one’s images of future projects. They argue that all three aspects of time need to be analytically included in order to capture the full complexity of human agency. Two basic assumptions from pragmatism, primarily from George Herbert Mead and John Dewey, are important for the analytical model that Emirbayer and Mische (1998) outline. The first is the notion of time, ‘which requires a continual refocusing of past and future’ (p. 968). The second is the understanding of consciousness as constituted through sociality, including both temporal and relational elements.
As Dewey (1925/2008, p. 233, italics in original) puts it, ‘[c]onsciousness, an idea, is that phase of a system of meanings which at a given time is undergoing re-direction, transitive transformation’ of which follows that ‘[c]onsciousness is the meaning of events in [the] course of remaking’.

Consciousness here is understood as being reflectively involved in an ongoing situation that takes new and unknown directions in which the relations between the past and the future are brought together. With reference to the theoretical concept of teacher agency introduced by Biesta and Tedder (2007), Emirbayer and Mische (1998) develop an understanding of the relationship between agency and learning in the life course in terms of ‘achievement of agency’. By focusing on the temporal interplay between the iterational, the projective and the practical-evaluative dimensions in human actions in relation to the contingency of ‘contexts for action’, they form an ecological understanding for the achievement of agency. From their study of life narratives, it becomes clear that human agency is not only related to how individuals engage with their contexts for action, but that it has to do with an individual’s capacity to shape responsiveness to the different life situations in which people find themselves. A temporal, ecological perspective has been the base for studies on policy and teacher agency (Robinson, 2012), on teacher agency and curriculum making (Priestley, Edwards, Priestley, & Miller, 2012), on teachers’ beliefs in relation to an educational reform (Biesta, Priestley, & Robinson, 2015) and a broader study on teachers’ interaction between capacities and conditions (Priestley, Biesta, & Robinson, 2015). Since these studies focus on agency as learning in relation to the achievement of agency, life narratives and autobiographical notions are seen as important sources of knowledge in the process of such achievement.

In this study, the focus is on teacher agency as experiences in relation to the normative content of a curriculum; that is, on agency in the intersection between the ideal and the realistic in teacher agency. For this reason, our interest is in teachers’ encounters with conflicting norms and regulations in the understanding of curriculum during a period of curriculum reform. More specifically, we are interested in how curriculum, as an explicit part of teachers’ context and structure, constrains and influences teachers’ agency.

Taken from Dewey’s pragmatism (1916/2008), the concept of ‘experience’ is helpful for understanding curriculum as both a shared and an individual experience. The vocabulary of experience should be viewed as part of an ecological understanding of agency. However, whereas the ecological perspective has chosen to emphasise the term ‘achievement’ in relation to agency in a specific context (Biesta & Tedder, 2007), an experience-based perspective emphasises the quality of teacher agency, that is, the content and the degree of complexity and reflection in teacher agency in relation to individual and shared experiences in the encounter with a common external object – the curriculum. In the following section, we describe in more detail how the concept of experience is related to action and time as well as how experience can be understood as both an individual and a shared knowledge of the world.

An understanding of teacher agency based on transactional realism

Within pragmatism – more specifically in the later works of George Herbert Mead and John Dewey – the philosophy of action is a philosophy of time and nature; this approach changes the understanding of intentionality. From the perspective of pragmatism, action
is not the result of ends determined in advance, as in theories of rational action; instead, the setting of goals for action can only be done in an actual context and as a result of reflection on the emerging constraints in the practical world that always precede action. Consciousness is itself a phase of action that becomes operational when there is some sort of restriction in the environment. The selection of a single clear line of action from many possibilities is what gives action its creativity. For both Dewey and Mead, action is not about making intelligence practical, but it is about making praxis intelligent (Joas, 1993). Dewey may not have used the term ‘agency’, although as Popkewitz (2005, p. 17) notes, the notion of the term is ‘embedded in pragmatism’.

In the extensive writings on teacher agency from an ecological perspective (Biesta & Tedder, 2007; Biesta et al., 2015; Biesta, Priestley, & Robinson, 2017; Priestley et al., 2012; Robinson, 2012) the reference to ‘transactional realism’ is not generally highlighted. However, in Biesta and Tedder (2007) and Priestley et al. (2015), transactional realism is referred to as the root of an ecological understanding of teacher agency. In this article, we take our starting point in the notion of transactional realism (Biesta, 2009, 2014, 2016; Biesta & Burbules, 2003) to conceptualise how experience can be understood as a quality of agency, in a broader ecological framework.

Meaning indicates a possible transaction, not a thing in itself. Dewey argues that ‘[m]eanings are objective’ because they are forms of natural interaction – ‘although primarily between organic beings’, interaction also includes ‘things and energies external to living creatures’ (Dewey, 1925/2008, p. 149). It is in this sense that we understand Dewey’s realism: as the interaction between an individual and a ‘real’ world of objects in which the individual is always already situated and with which he or she always transacts, like an organism in its environment. According to Cherryholmes (1992), pragmatists and scientific realists agree that there is an external world independent of our minds. They also agree that scientific research always occurs in a certain social, historical and political context; however, from these common positions, they draw different conclusions. From a pragmatist view, humans are always socially and historically situated and always placed ‘within’ a situation. In contrast, scientific realists think of the world as being ‘outside’; they strive to unravel underlying causes (Cherryholmes, 1992). For Deweyan pragmatists, relations to other things are changed through transaction in inquiry; transaction reconstructs the object by reconstructing its relations. ‘The real world is a changing world, a relational world, not one of fixed potentialities and permanent possibilities’ (Sleeper, 1986/2001, p. 125). For this reason, agency in terms of experience can be understood as a ‘moving force ... that influences in some degree the objective conditions under which further experiences are had’ (Dewey, 1938/2008, p. 20). Different situations succeed one another and carry over inferences and reflections from one situation to another – reflections that either expand or contract the succeeding actions. In this way, every present experience has a forward direction, toward the future, at the same time that it is permeated by past experiences. This line of thinking is closely related to the three phases of the iterational (the past), projective (the future) and practical-evaluative (the present) in the concept of agency presented by Emirbayer and Mische (1998).

In Dewey’s theory of experience, the actual situation is fundamental. According to Dewey, situations are ‘funded with the consequences of past experience and pregnant with new possibilities’ (Bernstein, 1961, p. 8). Each situation can be distinguished as a unit by its own unique pervasive qualities. The situations in which we find ourselves have both
subjective and objective poles. An experience is not solely private, since all experiences are interrelated within a common and objective world (Dewey, 1917/2003), which makes it possible to talk about shared ‘objective’ experiences. ‘Society exists through a process of transmissions quite as much as biological life’ (Dewey, 1916/2008, p. 6). Society both exists and continues to exist in transmissions between individuals and their environments. The way in which transmission, or transaction, occurs is through communication.

Dewey claims that a transaction between the knower and the known where both the knower’s idea and the object to be known is flexible and contingent during the inquiry, is the reflexive phase of a person’s conscious experience. The transactional view implies that objects of knowledge are the outcomes of processes of inquiry, not stable things in a world ‘outside’. Objects are modified and understood through the inquiry, and our knowledge about an object is concerned with its conditions and consequences, from which we can make inferences (Dewey, 1949/1991). This is a temporal concept of knowledge in the sense that knowledge is a relation between actions and consequences and, therefore, has a time dimension to it (Biesta, 2014). Dewey thus regards ‘the object of knowledge as both real and as transformed through the very process by means of which it becomes such an object’ (Biesta, 2016; Sleeper, 1986/2001, p. 120). As Sleeper points out, a genuine transaction is conducted ‘when an object for knowledge is transformed into an object of knowledge’ (Sleeper, 1986/2001, p. 120; emphasis in original). With reference to Sleeper (1986), Westbrook (2005, p. 40) denotes this view of knowing as a ‘piecemeal realism’. It is piecemeal in that realism is situational, ‘an event with temporal meaning’ that only occurs when ‘reference to a continuous relation is possible’; it is possible only ‘because that relation is actual’ (Sleeper, 1986/2001, p. 91). Language and communication pave the way for complexity in inquiry and shared inferences, which implies that language precedes thought and not vice versa (Westbrook, 2005).

Dewey’s pragmatist understanding of human agency advocates the idea of the individual as an agent of change with responsibility for both individual and collective development. Time is inscribed in the concept for social progress as a dimension that projects ‘the future onto the present’ and regulates and stabilises an unknown future (Popkewitz, 2005, p. 22). The concept of experience, with its phases of inquiry, reflection and inference is an expression of how Dewey perceives ‘science’ as a way of thinking, both as knowledge and as moral-political issues, and also in a broader perspective as a way of living a democratic life. Drawing on Popkewitz (2005), agency is expressed in Dewey’s formulation of the value of thinking:

... thinking enables us to direct our activities with foresight and to plan according to ends-in-view, or purposes of which we are aware... By putting the consequences of different ways and lines of action before the mind, it enables us to know what we are about when we act. It converts action that is merely appetitive, blind and impulsive into intelligent action’. (Dewey, 1939/1989, p. 125; italics in original)

Where pure action is ‘blind’, agency represents a conscious way of experiencing. Agency is not, as Popkewitz (2005, p. 4) notes, about ‘total freedom’, but about a human disposition to develop ‘rules and standards of reason through which individuals live in social settings’. Agency is ‘made’, not in a steady line from the past through the present to a foreseeable future, but as ‘produced within a historical set of conditions for acting’ (p. 17). According to Dewey, people’s past experiences and their disposition to act
intelligently through the inquiry of possible consequences in relation to a changing future are the two factors that characterise human choice and, thus, individuality and freedom (Bernstein, 1961).

This understanding of ‘provisional’ realism forms the basis for our examination of human agency in terms of experience because it facilitates an understanding of experience as something that is experienced by individuals in their interactions with a social and material environment. This is how an experience, with its specific qualities, is individually known and simultaneously and temporarily shared with a broader environment, such as the school as an institution or a place. An experience is always experienced by an experiencer in a shared social and material environment. What the teachers in this study have in common is a shared experience of a curriculum introduced three years ago; however, they experience this curriculum from their own unique positions involving temporal qualities.

**The method and model for analysis**

The empirical material, which consists of interviews with 10 teachers, is equally divided between those teaching year six and year nine in the Swedish compulsory school. Both these groups of teachers were chosen because they face major challenges with Lgr 11. This is the first time that teachers of year six have been required to set grades, and for teachers of years six and nine, new regulations have been introduced for the national tests. Also, for the Swedish school system as a whole, accountability structures have been significantly strengthened over the last decade to include stringent regulations on documentation and national inspections (Bergh, 2011, 2015). Selecting teachers working in three different municipalities also means that more varied responses could be collected. The smallest municipality covers a rural area, the second municipality covers a middle-sized town and the third municipality represents one of the largest cities in Sweden.

All the interviews were planned and conducted in the spring of 2014. The interviewees were recruited with the support of a contact person taking part in the project in each municipality. A common criterion was that the interviewed teachers, were regarded by their respective municipalities as having a good ability to implement the new curriculum. The interviewees were contacted individually and asked whether they would be willing to share experiences of Lgr 11. They were also informed about ethical issues, such as that participation was voluntary and how the collected material was to be made anonymous and securely stored. All those who were contacted responded in the affirmative.

The semi-structured interviews were audio-recorded, each one lasting about 40 minutes. In order to answer the article’s overriding research question, the interview guide covered five themes. The first introductory theme focused on how the curriculum influences teachers’ daily work. The following three themes asked questions about the design of the curriculum with regard to content, structure and assessment. The two last themes focused on forms of teaching and the teachers’ experiences of having room to manoeuvre in relation to curriculum regulations.

As a first analytical step, we listened to the interviews one by one and concurrently made notes in order to gain an overview. This overview then formed the starting point for the next step, which was the analysis of the empirical material in the light of the three temporal phases described above. In order to achieve this, all 10 interviews were used in
an early analytical phase. From these 10, seven were chosen as representative samples of the three temporal phases. Of these seven teachers, four taught pupils in year six and three in year nine. Each municipality was represented by at least two teachers.

The model for our analysis is based on the transactional realist understanding of agency outlined above, with its continuous interplay between the ‘iterational’, ‘practical-evaluative’ and ‘projective’ dimensions of agency, and how these dimensions appear in the teachers’ narratives about the introduction of the curriculum for compulsory school, Lgr 11, which was implemented three years earlier. By analysing how experiences of the past have influenced their present situations, and whether and how their visions for the future influence their desire or ability to respond with creativity and reflexivity to the present situation, it becomes clear that the room they have to manoeuvre and the aim and content of action in relation to curriculum are different for each teacher, even for those working at the same school.

**Teacher agency in relation to curriculum content: Acting on a ‘new’ curriculum**

In the first of the three temporal phases, with a focus on the past, the interviewees reflect on how they as teachers, both individually and collectively, have thought about and experienced teaching, in this case in relation to the previous curriculum. In the second phase, focusing on the future, the teachers were asked about how they have adapted to the new curriculum and what possible alternatives of action are open to them. Finally, in the third phase, focusing on the present situation, specific examples are provided of how the interviewed teachers, their schools and municipalities (i.e. in their respective local contexts) deal with the different challenges and alternatives.

**Reflecting on the past: iterational experiences**

This section focuses on the interviewed teachers’ reflections on the new curriculum based on past personal and professional experiences, with specific reference to how the former curriculum, Lpo 94, has shaped and influenced their agency.

While some of the interviewed teachers have up to 25 years of teaching experience, others have only recently completed their teacher education. Due to the mix of less and more experienced teachers in the sample, their reflections on the past vary. As Natasha explains, even though she only started to teach in 2011 (i.e. in the year that Lgr 11 was introduced), she had already developed ideas about teaching in her training at university: ‘I didn’t start from zero’. Generally, Natasha’s impression is that teaching has become more subject-oriented. She has heard from her more experienced colleagues that in the past, they had greater autonomy in planning their teaching and deciding how to adapt it to each student group.

Ernst, another newly qualified teacher, expresses similar thoughts, saying that in the past, teachers seemed to have had much more room for manoeuvring; something that forms the basis for his own pedagogical ideas: ‘When I started working as a teacher, I wanted to work more thematically, but I soon realised that in order to assess what the students have learned, I needed to work with one subject at a time’. Ernst can understand why the new curriculum is constructed in the way it is in terms of equity, namely, that all
of the students have the right to the same knowledge. However, despite this, he would have preferred to work with the previous curriculum, where teachers were given greater autonomy to interpret the national formulated goals in their own way. He feels that teachers are now expected to act more like civil servants – a kind of check link in the system.

Apart from Natasha and Ernst, who both think that the new curriculum encourages certain solutions and restricts others, another relatively newly qualified teacher, Edda, is more optimistic and thinks that the new curriculum is much more enabling than the previous one. She especially appreciates its emphasis on clarity, because in her view, the former curriculum left too many interpretations up to the individual teacher. She is convinced that if her more conservative colleagues accept the curriculum, it will lead to a much better education:

It’s a question of hanging on. But there are those who think “Why did they have to change and why [are there] always new reforms?” But everything else develops, so why not schools? (Edda)

Edda finds it difficult to understand why not all teachers ‘hang on’ the ideas in the new curriculum. She also finds the argument that teachers are afraid that the ‘new’ will take more time up and, therefore, reduce the time for actual teaching is hard to grasp because she regards it as ‘part of our job’.

When the teachers who have been in the profession for 20–25 years reflect on their agency in relation to past experiences, they describe how the new curriculum offers both possibilities and restrictions. In contrast to their younger colleagues, there is no doubt that this group has a broader repertoire of individual and collective experiences, especially in relation to the former curriculum. Marie, who teaches mathematics and handicrafts in year nine, thinks that the most specific ‘new’ aspect is the strong focus on assessment, which has put new demands on working methods, discussions and the information given to students and parents. There is now much more pressure on all students to develop all capabilities. This is in contrast to the earlier curriculum, where students could compensate for certain shortcomings by being stronger in other subjects. Similarly, Mike, who has taught social subjects to students aged 14–16 since the 1980s, thinks that the new curriculum restricts his own teaching ideals due to its emphasis on assessment and equity, interpreted as all students having the right to the same kind of knowledge. Compared to previous curricula during the 1960s and 1980s, both Lpo 94 and Lgr 11 are much more actively used and known by the teachers. Mike explains his experience with several different curricula over the years:

As a child, I attended a school that was influenced by Lgr 69. I did my teacher training at the time of Lgr 80, and after having taught for a while, Lpo 94 was introduced. When I had finally learned to work with Lpo 94, it was replaced by Lgr 11. Even though there are similarities between Lpo 94 and Lgr 11, there are also a lot of differences that will take many years to be settled. While neither Lgr 69 nor Lgr 80 were actively used by teachers, Lpo 94 and now Lgr 11 require such active use. Now we try to do what the National Agency for Education and others tell us to do, which is to develop some kind of backward steering. (Mike)

The interviewees do not talk about the reduction of teachers’ autonomy as just bad or just good. Miranda, another teacher with long experience who teaches Swedish and social subjects mainly in year six, refers to her own childhood and explains that some teachers ‘teach in the same way as when I went to school, with details about facts, while others try
to encourage students’ own thinking and reflection’. The latter is more in line with what was emphasised in the previous curriculum, Lpo 94, and thus a collective experience that many teachers have shared over the past 20 years. However, as is developed further in the next section, both of these positions could be difficult to sustain in the future. Even though the interviewees’ reflections about the new curriculum in relation to their past experiences vary, they all say that they need to adapt to the new requirements and change their teaching to conform to them. There is, therefore, no doubt that simply repeating former social patterns and habits is no longer possible – in this respect, the new curriculum challenges past routines and taken-for-granted patterns. What is important to notice though, is that our data demonstrates how teachers who actively engage with experiences from the former curricula seem to achieve a broader repertoire in contrast to those who more fully, with less historical understanding, concentrate on the present curriculum. A preliminary conclusion so far in the analysis is, thus, that the degree of engagement with a collective past can strengthen or diminish the agency of teachers.

**Prospects for the future: projective experiences**

The key question in this section is how the interviewees express their visions, their hopes and their fears for a future that is different from the present situation.

A general conclusion that can be drawn from the study is that the work with the new curriculum has generated a lot of discussion and increased awareness about its advantages as well as its disadvantages. Marie considers the time it takes for change to take place and the need to critically reflect on habits and relate them to the formulations in the national curriculum: ‘Regardless of whether you think that the curriculum is good or less good, it has led to discussions where you must question what you do’. Several of the interviewed teachers explain that Lgr 11 is more actively used than the former Lpo 94, both individually and among colleagues. However, it also becomes clear from the interviews that the work and cooperation that has accompanied Lgr 11 has been clearly framed by national expectations about clarity and assessment. On the one hand, these requirements have led to an increased awareness about how different subjects can or should cooperate around assessment. On the other hand, the same requirements determine what can and cannot be done and how. From this, it follows that teachers’ experiences that have earlier influenced their agency have now been challenged and restricted to a much greater degree.

Some of the teachers talk about the balance between planning and conducting lessons that they regard as educationally attractive and the need to control each student’s learning and development. Ernst and Natasha talk about the need for control, explaining that this forces teachers to be cautious (i.e. to be sure about what kind of content is dealt with and how each student performs in a specific situation). Although Ernst has adapted to the new requirements, for example by using matrices that help him to monitor and control each student’s development, many of his colleagues have not. Some work more ‘freely’ in line with their own ideals, while others are ‘very traditional, with ready-made textbooks’. Despite these differences, all the teachers seem to experience pressure when it comes to different forms of assessment.

Both the less experienced and more experienced teachers talk about their visions to work differently, although in contrast to the former group, the latter has already
experienced working in ways other than those that are now expected of them. The younger teachers Ernst and Natasha emphasise that they would like to work in ways that help students to develop a more holistic and deeper understanding of the areas studied by using thematic approaches, allowing more time for tasks and exploring questions more in depth to learn the material. Natasha also thinks that it would be possible to work differently and still follow the curriculum, although this would mean the following:

We would have to rethink what we do now because I also see a value in my colleagues and I working in a similar way … So it means that you would have to change a lot of what has already been decided. Studying several subjects simultaneously saves time, but it is then more difficult to assess the knowledge acquired, and [it is more difficult] for the students to understand what is being assessed. (Natasha)

Edda, with her more one-sided optimistic view of the new curriculum, expresses similar ideas about thematic approaches and the inclusion of several subjects. However, in contrast to Natasha’s desire for a different kind of teaching with a more holistic and deeper understanding, Edda wants more time so that all of the content can be covered.

For Mike, the challenge is more complex than simply finding practical solutions to a problem that has to be solved. Even if he feels that it is always good to question what you do and to be self-critical, he thinks that his teaching was better in the past in that it met the different needs of the students to a much greater degree, whereas now he feels that it has become rushed and stressful. Similarly, Marie is ‘… convinced that some of my students would achieve better results if they could work in another way’. Even though Mike shares some of the intentions as those found in the curriculum, such as students developing awareness and critically evaluating historical sources, he thinks that the level is too high and that this conflicts with his own vision of helping students to acquire a broad historical understanding and interest. Despite this, he tries to adapt his teaching to meet the requirements of the National Agency for Education and the national tests and to cover the content stated in the syllabus: ‘It sounds good, but how do you do it? … Learning is communication. But it is a challenge to get students to come together from their different perspectives’.

One way of summarising the challenges that the teachers talked about is that there are clear tensions between the different kinds of professional visions based on individual and collective experiences on the one hand, and the more standardised procedures stated in the curriculum on the other hand. In the next section, we give specific examples of how the teachers we interviewed deal with these challenges.

**How to deal with the present: practical-evaluative experiences**

Here, we focus on whether and how the teachers’ experiences of the past and visions for the future influence their desire or ability to respond creatively to the current teaching situation. As Dewey (1917/2003, p. 10) puts it, an ‘[i]maginative forecast of the future is this forerunning quality of behaviour rendered available for guidance in the present’.

In addition to the challenges accompanying the stronger focus on assessment, the teachers highlight the different dilemmas that result from the greater emphasis on ‘clarity’, which has been a strong motive for the new curriculum (cf. Official Report,
Paradoxically, despite this emphasis, the teachers have found that the curriculum lacks clarity.

In an attempt to deal with the ambiguity in the national curriculum, Inda, an experienced year six teacher, and her colleagues have had many lengthy discussions about how to interpret the different grading levels. After the national tests, they noted that their locally concretised levels were actually higher than the national standards. Despite this, Inda wants to continue to live up to her own high expectations. Due to her hard work, Inda now feels comfortable about the construction of the curriculum, although she is concerned about the consequences that might result if all of the teachers do not engage with it in the same way. In her view, this is a critical matter of equity.

Also Edda talks about the need to cooperate in order to achieve equity: ‘To establish equity, I think you have to come together and talk’. However, even though Inda and Edda talk about the same school year and the same national tests, they have completely different ideas about how well they correspond with the curriculum. In contrast to Inda, who thinks that the requirements relating to the national tests are lower than those formulated in the curriculum, Edda view them as being well aligned. These two examples illustrate the differences that follow for teacher agency, where Inda’s understanding is enhanced by rich past experiences in contrast to Edda, whose action is instead guided by a search for practical solutions that meet the national standards.

The interviewed teachers are mostly positive about the way in which the national tests have helped them to develop a common understanding; however, they regard the fact that the national tests are too time consuming and have too high of a status to be problematic. As Marie expresses it, ‘there is a risk that the demands that are set in the tests also become the norm for which working methods can be used in the daily work, which as a consequence might lead to it being harder to meet each individual’s needs’. Natasha states that ‘whether it is intended or not, the national tests will become some kind of yardstick for teaching ... what else could they be?’

For Inda, the question ‘What does “relatively well” mean – How “well” is that?’ is important because she wants to give her students and parents good answers to what is required to get a certain grade. This is also the case for Ernst, who explains that he has a positive attitude toward the idea of helping the students to visualise what the requirements are. He uses matrices to do this as a way of concretising the requirements stated in the curriculum:

I want to teach the students to assess themselves, so I give them matrices and try to make the curriculum understandable to them. I don’t use them when I first introduce a new study section, that’s not very interesting, but I introduce goals relating to what they are supposed to learn ... and after a while, I show them the matrices with concrete information about the different levels ... My intention is to clarify to the students, it’s hard to target a goal if you don’t know what it is. So I want to be clear at the same time that it can make the teaching boxed, structured and less spontaneous. (Ernst)

The teachers have also discussed their worry that the quest for clarity risks making their teaching more structured and less spontaneous. On the one hand, Miranda argues that a teacher can always choose whether to start with the knowledge requirement and content that is formulated in the national curriculum or with the knowledge that each individual has. She does not think that the conditions for this choice have changed with the new
curriculum. On the other hand, she has found that the strong emphasis on clarity and assessment puts more pressure on both the students and the teachers, which she does not like:

I don’t like grades ... I do different exercises where we discuss knowledge demands with the students ... But the purpose then is not primarily to initiate a good pedagogical process but more to inform the students about what they have the right to know – which then becomes a way to serve the grade system. (Miranda)

Although Miranda is critical of the greater emphasis on assessment, she appreciates the stronger focus on analytical capabilities expressed in the new curriculum. It is no longer enough to simply teach and learn facts; instead, students have to communicate and reflect together with others. However, moving the focus from grades to the learning process is a challenge, especially as students and parents ask a lot of questions about grades. In addition to students’ and parents’ expectations, Natasha explains that there is also pressure from school leaders to give clear information about the requirements for the different grades, which puts the teachers in a difficult position:

But it is really hard. How do you explain the differences between developed, well-developed and very well developed reasoning to a 13–14 year old? I sometimes joke with them and say that they want a recipe, but there are no secret recipes other than trying to learn. I would like to work in a more inspiring way. It’s pretty boring when students begin with the question of what they have to do to get a certain grade. (Natasha)

The study thus shows that the stronger focus on clarity and assessment in Lgr 11 has not simply become a way of visualising learning for the professionals themselves, but that it has also become the norm for good teaching – a norm that is supposed to be communicated to the students before the learning process has begun.

Mike reflects that nowadays, teachers are expected to solve all manner of things, where his 25 years of teaching experience have not equipped him with all of the answers. In order to achieve the goals formulated in the curriculum, he and other teachers need different kinds of support both at the national and local level. An example of the latter is how the municipality in which Mike works has invested in a new web platform. Although he is generally positive about this, he emphasises that it is not enough to change the teaching to fit the intentions expressed in the new curriculum. As there is still a lot of old material around, such as textbooks and a lack of resources in general, he thinks that it will take several years before it becomes an everyday school reality: ‘There is too much rubbish in many schools at the same time as there are great expectations that teachers as a collective and individuals will solve everything’ (Mike).

This section, with its focus on practical-evaluative dimensions of teacher agency, illustrate that an experience is always experienced by an experiencer in a shared social and material environment. This means that teacher agency takes shape in encounters with educational environments and that this is both restricted and enhanced by specific actors’ understandings of future expectations and how these are interpreted in relation to their individual and collective pasts. Even in situations where past experiences do not provide concrete solutions, they help teachers to promote reflectivity and to guide their agency forward. While some teachers see themselves as inspirers who try to stimulate creative and reflective processes, others emphasise their role as helping students to understand their learning and assess their own development.
Analysing teacher agency through transactional realism

In this article, we suggest that Dewey’s understanding of experience and transactional realism is a fruitful way of exploring how teachers encounter curriculum content, in this case, in a recent national curriculum reform. It adds to a theoretical understanding of teacher agency in the following aspects: i) teacher agency is dependent upon the qualities of the situation, ii) the temporal aspect emphasises the need to take the shared qualities in the experiences of the past and in the vision of the future into consideration in order to understand the individual teacher agency in a present situation, iii) a transactional realism perspective on teacher agency includes both individual and shared experiences in the encounter with a common curriculum and iv) transactional realism understands teacher agency as both forming and being formed by encounters with a real, ‘objective’ world.

We have demonstrated how teachers’ different ways to approach the new Swedish curriculum Lgr 11 accommodates both ideal and practical views of education, something that often leads to challenges and to conflicting goals of educational action. The qualities of each situation of agency are permeated by both the collective and individual experiences of the past and the teachers’ own visions of what is educationally desirable and practically feasible. Our study shows that an individual teacher’s repertoire of agency is not just a question of individual experiences, but that it is also a question of individual teachers’ access to the profession’s collective experience base. This means that former experiences, in a Deweyan sense, have a great potential to promote reflection and to guide teachers’ visions onwards (cf. Dewey, 1938/2008). One conclusion that can be drawn from this study is that the interviewed teachers, to different degrees, have access to this collective experience base, where those who reflect on collective experiences with former curricula seem to be better equipped to move between the abstract and the concrete and thus more easily accommodate both ideal and practical views of education (cf. Jackson, 2012).

When teachers are faced with the task of incorporating a discursive view of education expressed in a new curriculum into their actual teaching practice, they do this in a situation that is influenced by reflections of the past and imbued with a vision of a future. By understanding this encounter as an active, reflexive inquiry into the educational environment by the teacher, not only the determination of the actual room for manoeuvring but also the purpose and content of the teachers’ actions become central. It is clear from this study that the interviewed teachers find themselves in a situation where they feel that they have to adapt their teaching to the requirements stated in the curriculum (the practical-evaluative experience), and that they need to reflect on some of their earlier assumptions of good teaching and adapt to a partly new discourse on teaching ideals. The cornerstones of the curriculum reform and the driving force for this change are the requirements for detailed, predefned and clear knowledge objectives and a continuous individual assessment of each student’s knowledge development in accordance with a standards-based curriculum and a striving for equity in terms of ‘the right to reach the knowledge goals’ (Sundberg & Wahlström, 2012; Wahlström, 2014). According to the findings of this study, these policy tools significantly restrict the individual teacher’s room for manoeuvring by simultaneously reducing the importance of the conclusions drawn from the collective reflections in the past and limiting the visionary elements of teaching, striving toward an imagined future.
Although the teachers in this study are willing to adapt to the new standards-based curriculum approach, they also see the disadvantages of turning a standardised form of equity into a main objective. They point to the situational dilemma of beginning with the content and knowledge requirements stated in the curriculum as a practical limitation or the knowledge possessed by each individual student as an ideal vision. They also draw attention to the dilemma of creating a practical system for knowledge checks and controls on the one hand and shaping their teaching in terms of transdisciplinary themes emphasising an ideal holistic view and overall understanding on the other. In addition, the interviews elucidate the dilemma of whether they should focus on solving the problems encountered with the new curriculum as a knowledge problem or regarding them as a matter of a more principled character, where the role of education in a democratic society should serve as an ultimate landmark.

Finally, our study illustrates the meaning of experience as a transactional phenomenon. In general, teachers’ reflections and visions of education as well as their present situation are formed in communication with others (colleagues, students, parents, school leaders, local and national school authorities, etc.). In a similar way, teachers’ more specific understanding of the curriculum and their visions of how the curriculum should be transformed into actual teaching practice take shape through communication with others in the educational arena. However, this does not mean that every teacher will arrive at the same conclusion; instead, it means that each teacher’s actions are based on a communication with texts, narratives and conversations. In this sense, teacher agency needs to be understood as a consequence of a temporal and shared experience through communication.

Our main conclusion is that transactional realism can contribute to analyses of teacher agency through a lens of both collective and individual temporal experiences. Furthermore, such an approach allows the content of the dilemmas and complex considerations that form the basis for teachers’ actions to be described. Moreover, this approach reveals that the crucial issue of teacher agency in this study is related to the policy discourse on knowledge and equity as standards and the uniformity of assessment and its pedagogical consequences. Identifying the key issues related to teachers’ conflicting goals and room for manoeuvring also makes it possible to point at potential changes and alternative opportunities.

**Note**

1. The survey in the form of a web-based questionnaire was sent to 2,963 teachers of years six and nine in compulsory schools (municipal) in 21 Swedish municipalities. The survey was conducted during October and November of 2013. The response rate was 64%, or 1,887 respondents.

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