Tenacious Documents

Exploring the Allure of Documentation in Swedish Compulsory Schools

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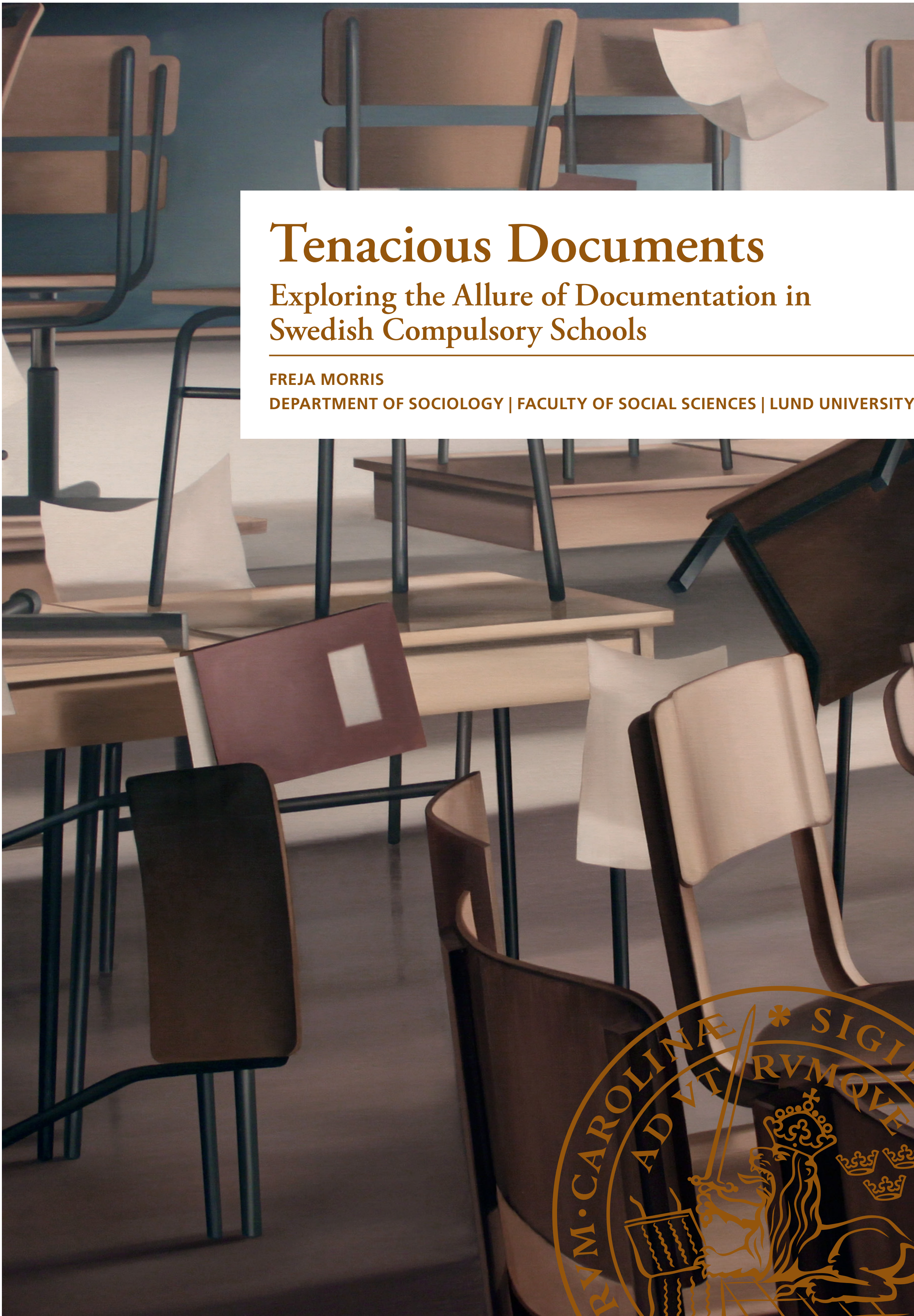

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Exploring the Allure of Documentation in Swedish Compulsory Schools

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Tenacious Documents grapples with a familiar yet perplexing problem: that of the prolific demands for documentation placed on professionals in public institutions. Swedish education authorities have sought, and failed, to remedy this problem for years, making Swedish compulsory schools particularly compelling sites for examining the issue. What is the allure of documentation in these settings? Through an ethnographic exploration of the everyday settings within the walls of the school, which is where complaints about a 'burden of documentation' often arise, this thesis seeks to understand the processes through which documents come to be simultaneously constituted as coveted and detested.

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Exploring the Allure of Documentation in Swedish Compulsory Schools

Freja Morris

DOCTORAL DISSERTATION

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Abstract: The Swedish education authorities are up against a tenacious problem. Teachers have for years expressed dissatisfaction over increasingly prolific and pervasive demands for documentation that hijacks time that could have been invested in pupils' learning. Over the past 15 years different Swedish governments have sought to remedy this problem but to no avail. The 'burden of documentation', as it is commonly referred to in Sweden, persists. The Swedish education system is not unique in facing this problem, but offers a particularly germane case for the study of it due to the concerted efforts, and joint failure, by actors from across the chain of governance to solve the problem. This thesis sets out, then, to understand the tenacity of documents through exploring the allure of documentation in Swedish compulsory schools. It asks how documents and the work of documentation alternately, and at times simultaneously, come to be understood as solutions to problems and as problems in and of themselves.

Methodologically and theoretically, the problem is approached by foregrounding the documents as material semiotic artefacts. Through ethnographic fieldwork at schools, semi-structured interviews with school staff and document analysis, the thesis employs a performative understanding of documents, where documents and the practices that go with them are conceptualised as multifaceted, unpredictable and constitutive of the social relations that they enable and enact. The arguments that emerge draw on Science and Technology Studies, Institutional Ethnography and ethnographic, or practice-oriented, approaches to documents.

The analytical chapters demonstrate how documents tend to have multiple purposes, both intended and unintended. These multiple purposes often appear as self-evidently co-existing in the manner they are outlined by various key actors who define teachers' document demands, such as governing educational agencies and digital learning platforms. In practice, however, they are frequently in considerable tension and conflict with one another. What is more, despite being deeply concerned with the everyday ongoings at schools, the teachers experience that the documents tend to become detached from the very processes that they are meant to be implicated in, such as quality work or counteracting degrading behaviour. This thesis examines how this detachment and distancing happens in the everyday ongoings of schools.

The thesis concludes that we must understand these tenacious documents as existing in an unresolvable tension between realising democratic ideals and perpetuating domination. It is argued that this tension does not primarily exist on an ideological or ideational level but is socio-materially produced in the everyday activities of school staff.

Key words: Documentation practices, education, ethnography, governance, Science and Technology Studies, sociology of quantification and statistics, knowledge production

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I belong to that category of people who have never really minded being confined to a classroom. From the beginning, I found most subjects tolerable, some enjoyable, and a few truly fascinating. During high school, three teachers would be especially important for how my life would unfold. Social anthropology teacher Sigrun Brustad Nilsen took on the daunting task of explaining French structuralism to a group of 17-year-olds. My fascination for the social was further sparked by our charismatic Psychology teacher Kristine Bringa. Their classes challenged and inspired my thinking in ways that still reverberate in these pages. My English teacher, the late Elizabeth Smith Lerfald, in her own very unassuming way taught me to read anew. No social scientific study can ever tell us as much about the human condition as a novel can.

Now, back to the present. The process of writing a thesis is fraught with debilitating *I*'s: insecurity, indecision, imposter syndrome, introspection and isolation. My supervisors, Malin Åkerström and Axel Fredholm, have been nothing if not my main allies in the battle against all these things. Through countless meetings, discussions, reflections and readings, I have received untiring – and incredibly prompt – support and encouragement. From some early unsuccessful attempts at gaining access to the field to the very last edits of this manuscript, you have generously shared your own experiences and offered ways forward. Thank you.

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English Translations of Swedish School Terms

Action programme – Åtgärdsprogram

Additional adjustment – Extra anpassning

Advanced teacher - Förstelärare

Degrading treatment – Kränkande behandling

Digital learning platform – Lärplattform

Education Act – Skollagen

Headteacher - Rektor

Incident report – Anmälan om kränkande behandling

Independent school – Friskola

Individual Education Plan – Individuell utvecklingsplan

Leisure time activities teacher – Fritidspedagog

Leisure time centre - Fritidshemmet

School Ordinance – Skolförordning

School organiser - Huvudman

(municipal school organiser –kommunal huvudman)

Special support – Särskilt stöd

Swedish National Agency for Education – Skolverket

Swedish Schools Inspection – Skolinspektionen

Systematic Quality Assurance – Systematiskt kvalitetsarbete

Teaching assistant – Elevassistent

1. Tenacious Documents

‘Reduced Demands for Documentation in Schools’[1]
(Government Bill 2012)

‘A Reduced Administrative Burden for Preschool Teachers and Teachers’[2]
(Committee Directive 2023)

The titles of these government documents, published eleven years apart, allow us to make a few observations that can serve as teasers for this ethnographic account of documentation in Swedish compulsory schools. We learn of a perceived problem within the Swedish education system related to (administrative) documentation for school staff: documentation is prolific, to a burdensome degree, and ought to be reduced. It is worth noting that this is the perception of the Swedish state (although we will soon find out that Swedish teachers are of the same opinion) and that different Swedish governments have sought to remedy the problem. Of course, we may also infer that the measures taken as a result of the 2012 Government Bill have had limited effect with regards to the problem at hand. This verdict is supported if we direct our attention to other actors who partake in the framing and monitoring of school issues. There has been both professional and public vigilance towards the issue of documentation. Teachers’ unions have initiated surveys to be conducted on the topic, with gloomy reports as a result (see especially Lärarförbundet, 2019; 2021, see also Bergling 2024b), submitted a public petition to review teachers’ document work (Sveriges Riksdag, 2020) and are in negotiations with municipalities concerning teachers’ documentation practices (cf. Hjalmarsson, 2022; Leijnse, 2019a). Teachers’ ‘burden of documentation’ is also a recurring topic in Swedish newspapers at the national and local level, investigated and debated by journalists as well as union representatives (cf. Henricson, 2016; Kulneff, 2023; Leijnse, 2019b).

Meanwhile, the lack of progress in the matter can by no means be attributed to inattention to the problem by Swedish authorities in the interim years. ‘The administrative workload’ was one of the central concerns in a committee directive from 2016 that aimed to propose ways to improve conditions for school staff (Regeringen, 2016:76) and its resulting government report (SOU, 2018:17). In

[1] ’Minskade krav på dokumentation i skolan’

[2] ‘En minskad administrativ börda för förskollärare och lärare’

2018, the Swedish National Agency for Education ('Skolverket') published General Recommendations[3] that stated that teachers should be given considerable professional discretion in how and what to document (Skolverket, 2018b). The Swedish Agency for Public Management ('Statskontoret') has also been mobilised in the efforts to monitor and alleviate the burden of documentation for school staff (cf. Statskontoret, 2021, 2022). What is more, it has not been lost on the Swedish authorities that this issue is not particular to the education sector but features across the public sector (cf. Castillo & Ivarsson Westerberg, 2019; Forssell & Ivarsson Westerberg, 2014; Jacobsson & Martinell Barfoed, 2019). Consequently, since 2017, the Agency for Public Management has also 'had the task, in accordance with its instruction, to promote and coordinate efforts to improve administrative culture' across all Swedish public institutions (Statskontoret, 2024). One can hardly accuse the Swedish authorities, then, of idleness. Rather, it might seem as if documents are impervious to efforts to eliminate them.

Documents are, however, not exclusively the target of blame and vilification. They are also essential components of an infrastructure (Bowker & Leigh Star, 2000) that allows information to travel and be communicated across time and space, enabling action, meaning-making and organisation across distances. Through these capacities, documents become essential tools for achieving some of the most defining goals of public institutions in democratic societies. As 'little tools of democracy' (Asdal, 2008), documents facilitate such things as rule of law, transparency, impartiality, equal opportunity and participation. The Swedish National Agency for Education states that documentation is required to achieve equivalence and legal certainty[4] for pupils who are need of special support in order to reach the academic targets set by the curriculum (Skolverket, 2022e) and for assessment more generally (Skolverket, 2022f). Documentation is also part and parcel of every phase of the mandatory Systematic Quality Assurance. Here documents are presented as key tools to know, follow or see (terms that are frequently used interchangeably) the school organisation, which in turn provides a basis for fiscal prioritisations and organisational courses of action (Skolverket, 2015b). The Discrimination Act (Diskrimineringslag, 2008:56) states that documentation is required to fulfil several of the legal responsibilities schools have to ensure non-discrimination (see also The Equality Ombudsman, 2023).

Teachers, meanwhile, are no less contradictory in their verdict on the role of documents in their everyday work life. As a collective, they contributed to the 32 485 signatures on the public petition from 2020 and the disheartening results

[3] General Recommendations ('allmänna råd') are supposed to guide schools and municipalities in how to meet the national legal requirements for running schools.

[4] 'Rättssäkerhets- och likvärdighetsperspektiv' in Swedish

from the teachers' union Lärarförbundet's[5] surveys. The first report, from 2019, is titled 'The Burden of Documentation: A Work Environment Issue'. In this report, where there was a particular focus on assessment documentation, the results show that a vast majority of teachers experienced stress and reduced job satisfaction as a result of the demands for documentation. A majority of teachers also stated that reduced demands for documentation would be the single most effective measure to reduce their workload. This report was followed up on and expanded upon in a report in 2021 titled 'The Burden of Documentation: a Threat to Teachers' Core Task' (Lärarförbundet, 2021). This report showed no improvement. In fact, in the areas of stress and job satisfaction, the results were worse (in 2021, 91% experienced reduced job satisfaction and 92% experienced stress due to the demands for documentation, compared to 77% and 82%, respectively, in 2019).

The teachers that I met during the course of this research were usually ready to confirm the omnipresence of the burden of documentation. By far the most common response I got when I introduced my research topic to teachers in the field was some variation of 'then you have work to do!'[6] or 'that's needed!', suggesting that documentation is a central concern for their everyday work. However, while doing fieldwork, it sometimes seemed to me that the second most common complaint about documentation among teachers – after its being burdensome and unnecessary – was that it was not done or handled correctly or properly (by someone else): 'can you believe they don't know where that file is?', 'it's really bad that they didn't care to document this', 'if I had seen the document, I would have known how to handle it' are some examples of teachers expressing exasperation at other people's poor handling of documents. Furthermore, it was not unusual to hear documents being raised as solutions to problems: guidelines, notices, printed codes of conduct, document systems for correspondences and digital solutions could all be raised as suggestions for new routines or ways of solving problems. The dissatisfaction with document work was alternated by an attraction to the very same practices (see Åkerström et al., 2021).

These observations in my material of the varying status of documents led me to ask why documents, often even the same documents, are so susceptible to praise and blame. In this thesis I wish to take as my point of departure the confusion, contradiction and ambiguity that give documentation work its strange position as both coveted and detested at all levels within the education system. The framing question for this thesis, then, is:

[5] Starting from January 1st 2023, the two largest unions for teachers in Sweden – Lärarförbundet and Lärarnas Riksförbund – ceased to exist separately and merged under a new union, Sveriges Lärare ('Sweden's Teachers').

[6] 'Då har du att göra!'.

How are documents and documentation work alternately, and at times simultaneously, understood as solutions to a problem and understood as a problem in and of themselves?

By investigating this question, we might come closer to understanding the tenacity of documents that the Swedish educational authorities and teachers are up against. I suggest that a fruitful way of addressing this question is to foreground the documents themselves. In this thesis, foregrounding the documents means understanding documents as material semiotic artefacts – in short, taking seriously their material properties as well as their content – that enable, constrain, transform and define actions and relations within the education system (cf. Asdal & Reinertsen, 2022). Documents, within this framework, are not seen as 'neutral purveyors of discourse' (Hull, 2012b, p. 13) or 'inert extra-temporal blobs of meaning' (Smith, 2005 [1990], p. 3). Moreover, foregrounding documents does not mean extracting them from the institutional setting that they inhabit and studying them in an isolated environment, but rather the opposite: to consider how documents make possible, coordinate and shape many of the interactions and structures that constitute the institutional setting in the first place.

Lastly, this thesis seeks to investigate the overarching question posed above by highlighting the multiple purposes of documents. Given the efforts of the Swedish educational authorities to reduce the amount of documentation for teachers, it seems unlikely that the issue is simply one of sorting out 'bad' document practices from 'good' ones. One of the primary reasons for this, I argue, is that documents and document practices tend to have multiple purposes and that these purposes are not always compatible with each other or the teachers' daily activities in which the documents seek to intervene (see also Jacobsson & Martinell Barfoed, 2019). More concretely, I explore this issue through these four research questions:

1. How do document practices that in principle align very well with the needs and goals of teachers often become experienced as detached from, or irrelevant to, the everyday ongoings of the school?
2. How can the same document become constituted as necessary and obstructive for the same institutional purpose?
3. How, and to what effect, are the multiple purposes built into the materiality of the documents or document systems?
4. How are documents used for the purpose of evidence in settings beyond the site of their production?

These questions broadly correspond to the analytical chapters of this thesis, but there are echoes of all research questions in all the chapters.

At this point, a few words on the origin of this project are in order. While writing my master's degree in anthropology, I started working part-time as a teaching assistant ('elevassistent') at a high school in Malmö. This was a job that I could continue doing fulltime for a while after I had finished my degree and subsequently I held different positions within the municipal school system. At one elementary school I was asked to stay on for half a year and substitute as the main teacher ('mentor' or 'klasslärare') for a Year 2. It was this experience that directed me to the issue of documentation as I spent many office hours and meeting hours navigating an array of document demands that to varying degrees corresponded to my needs and the needs of my pupils. At first, I considered myself lucky that I was working close with a teacher in the other Year 2 class who had just finished her teacher's degree and I felt confident that she would be able to help me with this work. My curiosity was piqued, however, when she proved (almost) as unprepared as I was when it came to navigating the different systems, knowing which documents were due when and how to fill them out. This substantial area of teachers' work seemed to be given almost no attention during their education (this, I would later realise, is in part due to the immense variation in the document systems schools use and the varying practices of local education authorities in implementing document demands). After this working experience, I found myself working in the administration of the same high school where I had previously worked as a teaching assistant. Not only did I get to spend a lot of time with a new group of school staff, namely administrators, that I had previously only been in contact with when I needed something, I also got to witness and interact with teachers from a new position. Particularly during the weeks that I coordinated the school's work with national tests[7] ('nationella prov') I got to see many teachers go into a mode of hyperfocus as they came in to check that everything was in order, that I had the right lists, the right tests, the right room numbers, the right staff lists, the right list of pupils who needed special support and so on. I entered the same mode of hyperfocus and thought of little else than how to organise and coordinate these tests for the more than 1,000 students who attended the school (a process that culminated with some tests being leaked to the public the evening before and the morning being spent printing up copies of old tests that the pupils would sit instead).

Taken together, these experiences oriented me towards the omnipresence of documents in nearly all school activities and that the documentation usually persisted quite regardless of whether or not the resulting document had a future as more than a 'shelf warmer'. When my administrative position ended, I was ready to take on the task of writing a dissertation about teachers and their documents. It was a considerable surprise, then, to find out that those I had initially blamed for the excessive documentation – which were various education authorities, from where the documents seem to both emanate and disappear to – shared my concern over the same issue.

[7] Sweden does not have externally assessed final exams like many other countries do. The only nationally standardised and externally assessed tests that pupils do is therefore the national tests. There are several tests that run over a few weeks.

Documents and Documentation: A Practice-Oriented Approach

It was mentioned in the previous section that I aim to address the purpose and research questions presented above by foregrounding the documents themselves. A more detailed account of what this means will be presented in chapter three, but we will pause briefly here to consider what such an approach might consist of and how we can think of documents within such a framework.

This thesis takes an approach to documents that highlights the ways in which documents are entangled in the everyday workings of social life, in formal as well as informal procedure. Such an approach can be contrasted to one where documents are extracted from wherever they can be found and looked at as closed systems of information or discourse (this is an approach that might have many advantages, of course but not, I argue, for addressing the issues presented in this thesis). Rather, I am partial to an approach that considers documents as constitutive of, not merely functions of, the social relations in which they are embedded. This kind of approach has been called a 'practice-oriented approach' (Asdal & Reinertsen, 2022), an 'ethnographic approach' (Jacobsson, 2022) and was outlined in Lindsay Prior's book *Using Documents in Social Research* (2003).

Methodologically, conceptually and theoretically, this thesis is particularly informed by the practice-oriented approach outlined by Kristin Asdal and Hilde Reinertsen in their book *Doing Document Analysis: A Practice-Oriented Method* (2022, see also Asdal, 2015; Asdal & Jordheim, 2018). A qualitative, practice-oriented approach to documents, as Asdal and Reinertsen formulate it, combines methods for studying texts (what does the text say? How does it say it? What does the text look like?) with methods for studying practice (what does the document do? What actions does it enable or inhibit? Where does it go and how? With whom does it interact?) (2022). In doing so, three aspects of documents are highlighted as particularly important:

> Documents do something. They entail **action**. Documents are simultaneously the result of concrete work and do important work themselves.
>
> Documents are **relational**, they 'attach on to something outside itself'. This 'something' can be another document, but it can also be a person, a concept or a phenomenon.
>
> Documents are **material**. The material properties of documents – digital or physical – affects what one can do with a document, who can do something with them, their content and so on.
>
> (Asdal & Reinertsen, 2022, pp. 2-3)

This expansive understanding of documents – as things and text, as embedded in social relations and as instigators of action – opens the door to a complex, multifaceted understanding of documents wherein their purpose, effect and use should be explored as empirical questions rather than pre-given. Issues, information, ideas, orders and more very often move between different sites and actors through documents (cf. Asdal, 2015). As the documents move between sites and actors, so does the information and the meaning they convey. Tracing, then, how documents move, merge with other documents, get discarded, are subject to change and so on, also allows us to see how the issues, information, ideas, orders and so on also change. For instance, a pupil is asked to summarise their knowledge and understanding of a topic in a document – say, a test. This test is then evaluated – perhaps graded – with reference to another set of documents (the grading criteria in the national curriculum) and the evaluation is then compared both to the pupil's previous performance and the performance of their peers. The evaluation in turn becomes one of the bases for analysing not only the pupil's performance, but perhaps even the teacher's performance (for instance, as a part of the Systematic Quality Assurance) and, through statistical analysis, the performance of the entire school compared to other schools. All the while, the issue changes as the documents move, becoming integrated with other documents or are used as the basis for action. Importantly, the material properties of the documents also change as information is moved around and introduced in new settings. What once was an essay is now an evaluation matrix, a grade, merged into numerical representations and statistical models of performance, framing issues and solutions and information along the way. The issue moves, for instance, from being about the pupil's knowledge, to the teacher's performance to the school's performance compared to other schools in the area. Of course, the issue is not as schematically divided as this and the teacher's performance can easily be framed as an issue concerning the pupil's knowledge production. The point is that perspectives, aims and information move and change with documents.

Finally, what is a document? The truth is that having a definition of documents ready at hand has been peculiarly peripheral to my research on documents. There is no definition or conceptualisation of a 'document' that has by itself been particularly instrumental in my collection or analysis of data on documents. Lindsay Prior elaborates on this in his book *Using Documents in Social Research* (2003). He compares the problem of defining documents to the problem of defining art – that is, futile – and concludes that documents' 'status as documents depends not so much on features intrinsic to their existence, nor on the intentions of their makers, but on factors and processes that lay beyond their boundaries. […] the status of things as "documents" depends precisely on the ways in which such objects are integrated into fields of action, and documents can only be defined in terms of such fields' (2003, p. 2). To better grasp what our object of study is, then, we must look to the field of its occurrence and tease out what kinds of documents merit attention in our exploration of the dual status of documents as both problem and solution within the context of Swedish compulsory schools.

Teachers and Their Documents

So, what do teachers document? The short answer is "just about everything". Documents are everywhere in the Swedish education system. When asked to give examples, most people (myself included) tend to think about formal guidelines, legally binding contracts and administrative documents. These are also the kinds of documents that teachers generally refer to when they are asked to discuss documentation and they are the documents that will be analysed in this thesis. Before we look closer at these documents, however, it is worth considering all the other kinds of documents that teachers use and encounter during a day. Walking into a classroom, or even walking with a teacher to a classroom, will reveal documents that abound but that are rarely mentioned overtly in any discussions I have listened to at schools or in interviews that I have done. They are the documents that teachers print, distribute, hang up on walls, put in students' folders, use to monitor pupils' learning development or that get left in heaps in teachers' bookshelves or desks. These documents are (most of the time) aimed at the pupils, for their learning and development. Walking into a classroom in a primary school, particularly in the lower years, one will often find the alphabet, the numbers 1-10, codes of conduct, work that the pupils have done and other information on the walls. At an upper secondary school, the walls might be decorated with a timeline displaying the years of important historical events (in a classroom used for history) or with images and information about famous authors (in a classroom used for language classes). Meanwhile, teachers go back and forth between the classroom and their office or the printer with work sheets, tests, texts and other pedagogical documents aimed at improving and assessing the pupils' learning. These documents almost never came up during interviews with teachers, yet their presence in schools is striking and – not seldom – a source of a lot of mess, both for the teacher's day-to-day work ('have you printed this document?' 'Where did I put the template for this test?' 'What are these old papers doing lying around?') but also in terms of material disorder, papers lying around in various piles, some papers covering other papers and so on.

An illustrative example was one teacher's desk at a school that I visited a few times over the course of a semester. This teacher had two desks. One where she sat and worked and one behind her that was home to various documents – pupils' work, homework sheets, tests, information sheets to pupils and so on. Because a few weeks would pass between each time I visited her at her school, I noticed that as the semester progressed, the table behind her became increasingly messier and when I visited the last time, in December, there was no table to be seen at all under the array of papers there. Where there had in September been neat piles of documents sorted and easily retrievable, it now looked more as if someone had taken that September table and swirled the documents around, adding a substantial amount more papers in the process. This is not a demonstration of this teacher's sloppiness. Many – if not most – teachers have this table or something equivalent (in my case it was a bookshelf next to my desk). These kinds of documents, used in and for teaching purposes, require a fair amount of work – I frequently observed teachers looking for these documents, both physically and trying to locate them on their desktop or retrieve them from a digital learning platform, printing (or failing to print) them, bringing the wrong document to class, bringing the wrong number of documents to class and having various other troubles with these documents. Yet, they were never mentioned during interviews with teachers or during fieldwork. If a teacher addressed me directly with a document concern, it was rarely about these documents. There can be various reasons for this. One can perhaps be my own bias – I might have seemed more interested in the other documents, the kind that came from the municipality or national government agencies (although my early fieldnotes contain very many details about all kinds of documents). Another reason could be that the pedagogical documents that teachers use as aids in their classroom teaching in a much more straightforward way seem pertinent to what teachers see as their core task – that is, teaching. Yet a third reason, of course, is that the focus on the 'administrative burden' tends to highlight document demands 'from above', i.e. that are defined and issued by actors higher up the chain of command than teachers. If we recall the title of Lärarförbundet's 2021 report, it read 'The Burden of Documentation: A Threat to Teachers' Core Task'. The notion of document work as a threat to the core task of the profession is a common concern for many professionals who experience an increased level of administrative work as part of their duties (see Forssell & Ivarsson Westerberg, 2014; Jacobsson & Martinell Barfoed, 2019). It is a common conception that these documents steal time from planning and teaching.

However, a significant point has been made by Swedish education scholar Åsa Hirsh: documentation has *always* been an integral part of the teaching profession (Hirsh, 2016). Planning a course, teaching, evaluating pupils' performance and other parts of the 'core' activities of teachers necessitate documentation. There is thus no 'core' teaching task which does not involve documentation. I am not trying here to build a strawman as I doubt anyone is making strong claims about the abolishment of documentation for teachers (least of all teachers themselves), but to bring attention to an empirical observation I made relatively early in my project, namely that despite the strong rhetoric against burdensome or superfluous documentation demands and the political call for 'teachers to teach, not do administration' (for instance in Regeringskansliet, 2023b), it is nearly impossible in my material to identify exactly which these parasitic documents are. Åsa Hirsh describes in her book *School Documentation from a pedagogical and juridical* *perspective*[8] (2016) how she at a workshop once had asked 50 teachers to do an inventory of their documentation practices. This inventory, meant to provide the basis for discussions rather than exhaustively account for teachers' documentation, resulted in 67 different types of documentation that Hirsh divides into six different fields of documentation. During the following discussion with the teachers Hirsh took note of something interesting, namely that it was striking how nearly all documentation was considered necessary by the teachers and that the vast majority of the documentation could not be outsourced to other school staff (Hirsh, 2016, p. 17). This echoes one of the early observations I made when I started this study, which was that it was extremely difficult to – in a definitive way – categorise the documents as 'good' or 'bad', 'useful' or 'useless', 'burdensome' or 'helpful', 'necessary' or 'unnecessary' and so on. Indeed, it was in part this observation that drew my attention to the current framing of the thesis and to the multifaceted and performative understanding of documents that I described earlier. The status of a document as 'good' or 'bad', rather than being something we can know beforehand, is treated as a question to be investigated empirically and to which there may not always be a satisfactory dichotomous answer.

Document Requirements

Despite the myriad of documents that circulate at schools, this thesis is predominantly concerned with the documentation that is at some level regulated at the national or local level of education. This is partly an effect of how the crux of the documentation issue was framed in the introduction – of the concerted (and largely unsuccessful) efforts by different actors across the governing chain to reduce the amount of documentation for teachers. It is also an effect of the orientation towards these documents by my informants, both during interviews and in the field.

Demands for documentation are very loosely regulated on a national level in Sweden. National school authorities and regulations, such as the Swedish National Agency for Education, the Education Act and the School Ordinance, might state that something should be documented, but often leave how to and to what extent up to the local school organisers ('huvudmän').[9] The effect of this is that the same national document demands can be structured and implemented very differently in different municipalities and even at different schools within a municipality.

Because so many of the document demands for teachers are decided at the level of the local education authorities and even the individual schools, it becomes futile to try to compile a definitive list of what teachers document. Due to the frequent changes in regulations and policies in the Swedish education system, there is also a

[8] *Skolans dokumentation ur ett pedagogiskt och juridiskt perspektiv*

[9] The majority of schools in Sweden are public schools and these are governed on a municipal level, by municipal school organisers. Aside from these, there are also independent school organisers.

risk that such a list would quickly pass its expiry date. As an example, one headteacher gave me access to a document from the municipality that stated new routines for how schools should use their digital learning platform (‘lärplattform’). For instance, the demand to create and fill in a template for the pedagogical planning had been removed. Assessment matrices (four different ones) should never be published (many schools had previously required that they *be* published but this, to my knowledge, differed between schools within the municipality). These changes seem like responses to some of the complaints that I had heard from teachers. Many teachers complained that they were required to publish detailed pedagogical plans in standardised forms (usually on a digital learning platform) with meticulous reference to the learning outcomes of the curriculum. Teachers complained that this activity led to superfluous work on two accounts. Firstly, because teachers’ pedagogical plans need to be flexible (and the standardised forms were not) due to the inevitability of unforeseen circumstances interfering with those plans. The consequence was that teachers had to constantly update their plan in the digital platform, including the referencing to the curriculum. Secondly, teachers felt that the meticulous referencing was demanded as a way to ‘prove’ to external actors that the pedagogical plans were properly grounded in the national curriculum whereas many teachers felt that they should be trusted that their teaching complied with the national guidelines. It is my impression that fewer teachers feel as controlled in this regard now than was the case a few years ago (a similar sentiment was shared by a teacher in an interview by Bergling, 2024b). In relation to making the assessment matrices invisible to anyone but the teacher, one teacher that I spoke to saw this as an opportunity to stop using her idiosyncratic document system for assessment and rather only use the assessment forms in the digital learning platforms (when I last spoke to her, she had almost been successful in this but had not been able to let go of one type of idiosyncratic assessment documentation). The point is that small changes such as these can greatly impact how teachers use and feel about a documentation practice.

Rather than attempting to compile a document requirement list, then, I have created a list of the most prominent working areas that require documentation according to the Education Act (SFS, 2010:800). These are direct document demands regulated by national education authorities.

- **Documenting and reporting on pupils’ knowledge advancement and keeping pupil, guardians and headteacher informed about this progress.** The demands are partly determined by which years you are teaching. In the lower years, teachers use *assessment support* (‘bedömningsstöd’) and *Individual Education Plans* (‘individuella utvecklingsplaner’) to monitor and communicate these things. In the higher years pupils receive *grades* that teachers, on request, are required to provide motivation for. These practices are regulated in chapters 3 and 10 of the Education Act as well as chapters 6 and 9 in the School Ordinance. National tests are also regulated in the ninth chapter of the School Ordinance.

- **Documentation relating to pupils who run a risk of not reaching the minimum requirements for the grading criteria.** When such a risk is detected, teachers are obliged to make *additional adjustments* ('extra anpassningar') for the pupil. In the years 1-5, these should be documented in the pupil's Individual Education Plan. For the years 6-9 there are no document requirements (but it is not uncommon that there are document demands at the local school level). If a pupil still runs a risk of not reaching the minimum requirements for the grading criteria after the additional adjustments have been implemented, the pupil is entitled to *special support* ('särskilt stöd') and an *action programme* ('åtgärdsprogram'). The special support that a pupil is entitled to must be documented in an action programme. These need to be continuously evaluated and updated. These practices are regulated in chapters 3 and 10 of the Education Act. The documentation related to this area is even given its own name within the Swedish education discourse: F-bureaucracy ('F-byråkrati'), alluding to the copious documentation attached to each pupil who is failing a subject (F is the failing grade in Sweden) (Bergling, 2023).
- **Systematic Quality Assurance** ('systematiskt kvalitetsarbete'). The work with planning, following up, analysing and developing the education that the school provides needs to be documented. This is regulated in chapter 4 of the Education Act. Systematic Quality Assurance needs to be carried out at the national level through inspection and quality review, at the level of the school organiser and at the level of the individual school. Pupils and their guardians should be given the opportunity to be involved.
- **Counteracting Degrading Treatment** ('åtgärder mot kränkande behandling'). School staff are obliged to report when it comes to their attention that a pupil might have been the victim of degrading treatment by a fellow pupil or an employee. Schools are required to have a Plan Against Degrading Treatment and this needs to be evaluated and updated yearly. Schools are also required to actively work with counteracting degrading treatment (most schools interpret this 'active work' ('målinriktat arbete') as involving some kind of documentation). This is regulated in chapter 6 in the Education Act.

These are broad working areas regulated in the Education Act. They can include a number of different documentation practices and vary tremendously between schools and school organisers. Many other document demands sneak in here and there, however, and some of these are worth mentioning. There is the legal obligation to secure 'safety and calm learning environment' ('trygghet och studiero', chapter 5 in the Education Act) which often results in various document demands, some of which we will encounter later in the thesis. There are the 'pedagogical fads' (as a couple of teachers have described them) that pop up at meetings and teachers' development days – new methods for working and collaborating that are often given acronyms and presented as general solutions to various problems and that not seldom require some sort of documentation (see for instance Hall, 2012). Another quite frequent document demand is when a pupil is undergoing a psychiatric evaluation (if it is suspected that a pupil has neuropsychiatric diagnosis, for instance) and teachers are asked to write statements or fill out forms about pupils' social and academic performance, skills and difficulties. These can take several hours for a teacher to fill out. Then there can be evaluations forms before staff appraisal meetings, formalised requirements for pedagogical planning, risk assessments before school trips (these are regulated by health and safety legislations) and occupational health and safety surveys. Probably, any teacher or headteacher reading this will be thinking about further examples.

Ultimately, teachers' documentation practices are so loosely regulated at the national level that it becomes equally important to highlight *how* document demands are shaped as to what they contain. Many researchers emphasise that the governing structure of the Swedish education system, which will be introduced in the next section and discussed in more detail in chapter two, greatly affects the extent to which teachers document and how they document (see especially Castillo & Ivarsson Westerberg, 2019; Forssell & Ivarsson Westerberg, 2014). Some researchers point towards how parents or legal guardians of pupils are significant actors on this scene. Horton et al. (2023) describe what they call a strategy of 'parental adjustment of documentation' that teachers use when reporting incidents of degrading treatment amongst pupils: they 'use their experience of the expectations of parents to guide which incidents they report' (p. 9). I have several examples of this in my material. Early on in my fieldwork I met a teacher who had her own archival system for email correspondences between her and parents that she flagged as likely to challenge her professional decision-making. Teachers and headteachers that I have met, however, describe this as a problem primarily pertaining to pupils whose parents have a high level of educational background. Another factor, that will be discussed further in chapter two, is how the use of digital learning platforms and other digital solutions also greatly affect what and how teachers document (see for example Ledin & Machin, 2021; Samuelsson et al., 2016; Sandén, 2021).

In chapter five of this thesis, I introduce a different way of thinking about how the document demands are shaped, which is to consider the very model for documentation that nearly all document demands are meant to be aligned with. Hirsh has described how nearly all documentation within Swedish schools follows a 'cyclical thinking', wherein these four points of inquiry follow a looped trajectory: 'where are we?' → 'where are we going?' → 'what should we do?' → 'how did it turn out?'. I will suggest that this model, as it is realised in the socio-material context of the school, is significant for understanding how document practices are carried out in the everyday setting of the school institutions.

Swedish School Governance: An Overview

Documents are central components of how school governance is exercised. For this reason, the following chapters will contain many references to the governing bodies and jurisdictions that provide the basis for what teachers and schools can, should and must do (or not do) as part of their professional duty. Here, I provide a brief introduction to how Swedish school governance is structured. This model, its historical and political underpinnings and its effects on teachers' documentation practices, will be developed and scrutinised in the following chapters of the thesis but suffice here to present an overview of how Swedish schools are governed.

Image 1.1
Simplified illustration of how Swedish schools are governed.

The education sector is politically governed. The **parliament** and **government** are in charge of outlining the purpose, focus and guidelines for the schools as well as the jurisdiction pertaining to the education institutions. To aid them in their work, they have three **national school authorities** that develop material and implement the decisions by the parliament and government. There is the **Swedish National Agency for Education** ('skolverket'), whose tasks include formulating the national curriculum, developing general recommendations, and producing statistics and evaluations of various areas of the education system. There is the **Swedish Schools Inspectorate** ('skolinspektionen'), whose primary purpose is to ensure that schools comply with legislations and regulations. Most teachers come in contact with the Schools Inspectorate through the inspections they carry out or the yearly school survey they conduct. Schools can be chosen for inspection randomly or by reports of mismanagement. The Swedish Schools Inspectorate carry out inspections of private as well as public schools. Lastly, there is the **National Agency for Special Needs Education and Schools** ('specialpedagogiska skolmyndigheten'), whose 'task is to ensure that children, young people and adults – regardless of functional ability – have adequate conditions to fulfil their educational goals' (SPSM, 2023).

Whereas the purpose of the Swedish National Agency for Education is to develop overarching goals and guidelines for the schools to follow, the work of implementing and providing more detailed rules in relation to these goals and guidelines is the responsibility of the **school organiser** ('huvudman'). School organisers are also fiscally responsible for running the schools under their charge.[10] In the national compulsory school (‘grundskolan’), school organisers are either municipal or independent (‘kommunal’ or ‘fristående’). Independent school organisers can be for-profit or non-profit, and they can have specialised pedagogic strategies or be religious. All independent school organisers are under the same jurisdiction and obligation to follow the same national curriculums and guidelines as public schools. Despite an increase in the number of independent school organisers over the past decades, most schools in Sweden are under a municipal school organiser. To aid municipal school organisers, they appoint an **administrative unit** (‘förvaltning’) and a **school director** (‘skolchef’) to help them fulfil the national goals of the education system according to the legal requirements. The positions at the municipal educational boards are occupied by politicians while the administrative units employ civil servants. The role of the school director is not regulated in the governing texts for the education system (Rapp & Skoglund, 2017). Depending on how many schools a municipality governs, both the municipal educational boards and educational administrative units have varying degrees of specialisation and differentiation. In this thesis, I refer to this level of actors as the **local education authority**.

At the level of the individual school, the **headteacher** (‘rektor’) is responsible for making sure that their school complies with all the rules, regulations and guidelines set by the governing bodies above them. This position is regulated in the governing texts of the Swedish education system. Headteachers are also responsible for distributing the resources allocated to their school in a way that their schools comply with the requirements set for them.

Some of the directives given by the state are given to the municipalities and others are given directly to the school leaders. This has been referred to as a ‘**dual control by the state**’ ('statens dubbla styrning’, Skolverket, 2023b).

The governance of the Swedish schools is very complex (Castillo & Ivarsson Westerberg, 2019) and the above provides only a brief overview of how this governance is structured. Importantly for our purpose here, the education system’s governing structure does not determine documentation practices but interacts with them in a multitude of different site-specific ways. Moving away from a deterministic understanding of what documents do and how they act is, I argue, essential if we wish to understand the struggle that the Swedish authorities are experiencing in their efforts to reduce the ‘burden of documentation’. A more performative understanding of documents allows us to consider how documents perform multiple purposes and engage with multiple actors across and beyond the education system. In order to understand these engagements, however, the reader should have some familiarity with the Swedish education system and the role of documentation within it, which will be the topic of the next chapter.

[10] It is, however, the municipalities who are responsible for making sure that both independent and municipal schools receive the funding they need to run their schools.

2. The Swedish Education System and the Role of Documentation

Education is generally understood as essential to the building of a just, healthy and productive society. Especially in contemporary democracies, education is framed as something that the state is obliged to provide and that all citizens have the right (and to varying degrees the duty) to partake in. In these countries, compulsory education tends to be widely implemented and rarely contested as such. In Sweden, moreover, the duty of a citizen to attend school, what in Swedish is termed 'skolplikten', has a particularly strong position; school attendance is required by law (SFS, 2010:800) and home schooling is illegal in most forms. The vast majority of children therefore attend public or independent school institutions. The pivotal role of education in society and the state-building project also means that the education system invariably enrols all citizens of the state at some point in their lives. Given this position of the education system, there is no wonder that education is a central area of concern, attention and debate amongst politicians, researchers, journalists and school practitioners. In this chapter, I aim to present and frame the aspects of the Swedish education system that are relevant in order for the reader to understand its governance and how this affects document practices and demands.

As was briefly stated in the introduction, the documentation demands of teachers are shaped by the various governing bodies and legal requirements that make up the Swedish education system. These governing bodies, their mandates and objectives, in turn, are fitted into a broader political landscape of Swedish welfare politics and ideologies. In this chapter we take a closer look at how the Swedish education system is structured and governed as well as the recent historical underpinnings of these structures. There is a broad consensus among researchers that the major education reforms of the 1990s have significantly impacted how the Swedish education system is governed today (Blomqvist & Rothstein, 2000; Dahlstedt, 2007; SOU, 2014:5). It is during this period that Sweden moved the main responsibility for running the schools from the state to the municipalities and simultaneously went from having one of the most uniform and public education systems in the world to one of the most market-oriented systems in the world (see Lundström, 2018; Ringarp, 2013). As we will see shortly, the decentralisation reforms of the early 1990s were countered by later reforms that sought to increase state insight and control over how schools are run, sometimes referred to as recentralisation reforms (Castillo & Ivarsson Westerberg, 2019; Nihlfors, 2012). However, the Swedish school system is still strongly decentralised today, to the effect that municipalities and independent school organisers exercise much discretion in the governing of their schools (Liljenberg et al. 2023). In the following, I give the reader an overview of the most significant education reforms of the past decades. I then go on to discuss how this new system of school governance and the effect it has had for documentation practices has been analysed by social scientists.

The Restructuring of the Swedish Education System since the 1990s

During the second half of the 20th century, dismay grew over what was perceived as inertia in the state-governed education system in Sweden (SOU, 2014:5). In particular, a cost-draining and bloated bureaucracy was perceived as an obstacle for both the quality and the efficiency of the education system. Arguments were made that control over the schools should move closer to its stakeholders – pupils, parents and teachers (SOU, 2014:5). This led in the first round to decentralisation reforms around the year 1990, relocating the main responsibility of running the schools from the state to the municipalities. These were then followed by a number of recentralisation reforms when decision-makers saw that the state only had marginal control over how the municipalities carried out their responsibility to run the schools. These recentralisation reforms, rather than bringing the schools back under state-control, brought with them a series of evaluation, audit and control measures, for instance through more national testing and the reintroduction of the Swedish Schools Inspectorate in 2008 (cf. Castillo & Ivarsson Westerberg, 2019). In what follows, I have described the 1990s as being characterised by decentralisation reforms and the first decade of the 2000s as being characterised by recentralisation reforms. This division works for the broad purpose of explaining the major changes in Swedish education governance. The division can, of course, be challenged at the level of detail (for instance, the controlling function of the Swedish National Agency for Education was sharpened and changed several times before we saw the establishment of the Swedish Schools Inspectorate in 2008, and the decentralisation trend began earlier than 1990). What is more, this is not an exhaustive list of educational reforms over the past thirty-odd years. There has also been the establishment of new career trajectories for teachers, who can now hold the position of ‘advanced teacher’ (‘förstelärare’), a certification system for teachers and significant changes in the national teaching education programme, to name a few. For our purpose, however, the list below and the division into decentralising and recentralising reforms should be sufficient.

A Decade of Decentralisation Reforms: 1990-2000

The Relocation of Power from State to Municipality[11]

To begin, Swedish municipalities are run by democratically elected politicians who serve on a city council ('kommunfullmäktige'). The city council, in turn, is by law required to appoint committees ('nämnder') for running the various areas under municipal control, for instance education. The people in the committees are policies, appointed by the city council. Each committee has an administrative unit ('förvaltning') that is responsible for the day-to-day-work of implementing the policies developed by the committees. The diversification of the committees often depends on the size of the municipalities. Some larger municipalities have different committees for different 'levels' within the education system: one committee for preschool, one for compulsory school and one for high school and adult education. Many smaller municipalities only have one committee that is responsible for all levels of education. A few municipalities do not have separate committees that are responsible for education. The area of education then falls directly under the municipal board.

To a degree, there has always been a dual, or shared, governing of Swedish schools between the state and municipalities (SOU, 2014:5). However, before the decentralisation reforms, the state had a much larger responsibility when it came to school governance. With the decentralisation reforms, the main responsibility of running the schools shifted to the municipalities. The decentralisation of school governance, commonly referred to as 'kommunaliseringen' ('the municipalisation') in Swedish, is usually taken to be the outcome of three government bills: the first on the schools' development and governing, which suggested that municipalities should have an increased responsibility for running the schools, a change from rule-based to goal-based governance, better evaluation, more effective supervision, better information on school objectives and a strengthened local school management (Prop., 1988/89:4). The second proposed moving the employer's responsibility for teachers and school leaders entirely over to the municipalities (Prop., 1989/90:41) and the third bill that further explicated the relationship between state and municipality in school governance (Prop., 1990/91:18). The latter stated that the state would have an overarching responsibility for the schools in regard to the development of national goals, curriculum and guidelines that schools had to follow. The municipalities were given much freedom to decide how the schools should be organised and they became responsible for making sure that the schools had the financial support and other resources they needed to operate according to the

[11] The educational decentralisation reforms were followed by a number of other, more general reforms concerning Swedish state and municipal governance that in turn affected how the educational decentralisation reforms were implemented (such as changes in how government funding was allocated and greater freedom for municipalities in decisions concerning their own organisation). Here, we consider only the educational decentralisation reforms.

national guidelines and regulations. The bill also suggested a change in fiscal governance of schools, giving the municipalities much greater freedom in how they distribute and spend government funding. It also suggested changes to how the state government agencies should be organised so as to fulfil the state's new responsibility for monitoring the results of the schools.

The supporters of the decentralisation reforms argued that – besides slimming the bureaucracy and thus cutting costs – the reforms were also a way to bring the control of the schools closer to its stakeholders: pupils, parents and teachers (SOU, 2014:5, p. 37). This would lead to more civic engagement, the argument went, which would in turn improve the quality of the education (ibid.). Integral to the critique of the excessively convoluted and inefficient state-run education bureaucracy was a critique of what was understood as the micromanagement of schools with a strong focus on regulatory control ('detaljstyrning' and 'regelstyrning', respectively). The decentralisation reforms can therefore also be described with reference to a change in management style where there became a stronger focus on result- and goal-oriented management of the schools (SOU, 2014:5). In practice, this meant that instead of stating exactly what and how teachers should teach their subjects, the government would formulate national goals and let the schools and the teachers decide *how* to reach these goals. The government's responsibility would then be to measure and monitor the extent to which the goals were achieved. The school organisers, in turn, are obliged to report to the Swedish National Agency for Education and evaluate their activities (SOU, 2014:5, p. 44).

Liberalisation Reforms

Two reforms, the 'independent schools reform' ('friskolereformen' in Swedish) (prop. 1991/92:95) and the 'free school choice reform' ('valfrihetsreformen' in Swedish) (prop. 1992/93:230), are considered pivotal for Sweden's education system going from being one of the most uniform and public education systems in the world to one of the most market-oriented systems in the world. In short, the independent schools reform opened up for the establishment of government-subsidised, for-profit independent schools, and the free school choice reform gave parents the opportunity to choose freely between the schools – independent and public – within the municipality where they lived. Before these reforms, Sweden had very few independent schools and the vast majority of children were placed in the school that was the closest to their registered address. The overarching aim of these reforms was to create a school market with internal competition. It was believed that this would enhance the quality of the schools because the schools with the best quality would recruit the most pupils, making it profitable to strive for high quality. Another goal with these reforms was to bring the power over the schools closer to the people. In part by giving the parents and pupils the opportunity to choose which school to attend and in part by forcing the schools to take into consideration the needs of the parents and pupils when developing and running the schools.

What makes the Swedish system unique is that the independent schools are publicly funded. The funding has been organised differently over the years, but since 2010 the school fee is paid equally to municipal and independent schools (Kommittédirektiv, 2022, p. 2). There are no regulations that control how the municipal reimbursement is spent by the independent school organisers and the majority of the independent schools are run for-profit (ibid.:4). Independent schools are not allowed to take tuition fees for enrolment at their school on account of the Education Act stating that education in Sweden should be free of charge (SFS, 2010:800 Ch. 9, act 8). Establishment of new independent schools is subject to application to the Swedish Schools Inspectorate and independent schools are obliged to follow the national guidelines set by the Swedish National Agency for Education and the legal rulings of the Education Act from 2010 and the School Ordinance (SFS, 2011:185).

The Swedish National Agency for Education

Through the decentralisation reforms, there was not only a shift to an increased municipal school governance but also a shift in how the state organised its part of the governing chain. Basically, all existing government agencies were dismantled: the two principal governing agencies, named 'Skolöverstyrelsen' and 'länsskolnämnderna', as well as the National Agency for Learning Materials ('Statens institut för läromedelsinformation') that controlled the quality of the education system's learning material. Instead, the Swedish National Agency for Education was established as the administrative government authority for the Swedish education system. To meet the new style of management-by-results, the Swedish National Agency for Education were to be in charge of monitoring and evaluating the schools' compliancy with the national goals and guidelines. The first years of the Swedish National Agency for Education were characterised by a strict hands-off approach (SOU, 2014:5). The municipalities were given very little, if any, guidance as to how they should organise the education for their pupils. According to a government investigation on the effects of the municipalisation reforms, 'by following up and evaluating the schools and then creating and compiling knowledge reviews and disseminating these, the thought was that the individual municipalities and schools, without micro-management by the state would be inspired to work actively with school development on a local level' (SOU, 2014:5, p. 74).

However, the implementation of the new organisation of Swedish schools did not go as smoothly as planned. According to same government investigation, the staff at the Swedish National Agency for Education did not get any training in how to handle their new role as a government agency managing by results. Furthermore, the municipalities were given little time and received inadequate training and preparation to take over the large task of planning, structuring and funding schools. Finally, the information that the municipalities and teachers did get from the central authorities was considered vague and difficult to apply in any meaningful way (SOU, 2014:5). This critique grew during the late 1990s and early 2000s, especially as Swedish pupils' results in international tests dipped. The first decade of the 21st century then saw government bills and restructurings of the Swedish education system that aimed to regain some of the state control of the schools that had been lost as a result of the decentralisation reforms of the early 1990s. One way in which this was done was through expanding the role of the Swedish National Agency for Education. Today, they formulate much clearer guidelines and frameworks for schools and teachers to depart from, provide support for schools in their work to improve their teaching and organisation and provide further training for already qualified school staff on a number of topics. This is in addition to their original tasks of conducting studies, compiling statistics, analysing results and outcomes, and developing curricula (Skolverket, 2022c). Below, we will take a closer look at some of the other significant recentralisation efforts of the past decades.

The Recentralisation Efforts of the 21st Century

Recentralisation Effort 1: The Swedish Schools Inspectorate

Throughout the history of the Swedish state-run education system, the Swedish Schools Inspectorate has been dismantled and reborn under different forms more than once. With the decentralisation reform of 1991, the aim was to deregulate and decentralise the governance of Swedish schools. The role of inspecting and evaluating schools fell under the responsibility of the newly established Swedish National Agency for Education. However, for the first few years of the 1990s, the inspecting and controlling function of the Swedish National Agency for Education was at a bare minimum. In practice, schools were only inspected as a response to complaints (Skolinspektionen, 2020). Towards the end of the 1990s and early 2000s, however, there was a push for more control over schools and in 2003, the Swedish National Agency for Education expanded its monitoring and inspecting tasks, effectively reinstating a Schools Inspectorate, but under the mandate of the Swedish National Agency for Education (Segerholm et al., 2022). Partly as a response to Swedish pupils' dwindling results in international tests and partly as a response to concerns regarding the disparity between and within municipalities, the demand for stronger state control of schools persisted and in 2008, the Swedish Schools Inspectorate was established as a government agency independent from the Swedish National Agency for Education (Skolinspektionen, 2020).

The Swedish Schools Inspectorate conducts regular controls of school organisers and individual schools, have the authority to impose fines on, or in worst case scenarios shut down, schools that do not follow the regulations of the Education Act or meet the national education goals. They also handle complaints from students and parents. Their controlling function can be divided into two tasks: inspection ('tillsyn' in Swedish) and quality review ('kvalitetsgranskning' in Swedish)

(Alvesson & Strannegård, 2021). Of these two, it is the former that has been most prominent and, according to Alvesson and Strannegård, has had the most profound effect on Swedish schools, not least as far as documentation demands are concerned (2021, p. 19).

Recentralisation Effort 2: The Education Act 2010

Throughout the restructuring of the Swedish education system during the 1990s, the legal framework from 1985 remained the primary jurisdiction for schools to follow (although with multiple revisions). In 2011, a new Education Act came into force. The new act was much more comprehensive than its predecessor, but the most significant shift lay in the emphasis it put not only on the duties and obligations of schools, but on the *individual rights* of the pupil (Hult & Lindgren, 2016; Novak, 2019). The establishment of the Education Act (SFS, 2010:800) would also give substance to and legal mandate to the practices of the Swedish Schools Inspectorate. Failure to comply with the regulations in the Education Act could make one accountable to the Swedish Schools Inspectorate or another government body such as the Teachers Disciplinary Board ('Lärarnas ansvarsnämnd' in Swedish) (Novak, 2019, p. 1267).

The Education Act regulates many things, but some of the most central to teachers' work are:

- It guarantees equal access to education and that this education should itself be equal ('likvärdig') (ch. 1).
- It regulates school governance (ch. 2).
- It regulates the pupil's right to special support if they struggle to meet the educational requirements (ch. 3).
- It demands that schools work systematically and continuously to improve the quality of their organisation (ch. 4).
- It regulates how schools should work with creating safety and a calm learning environement for the pupils and their work with counteracting degrading treatment (ch. 5 and 6, respectively)
- It contains regulations concerning inspection and evaluation (ch. 26).

As we will see throughout this thesis, many of the teachers' document practices can directly or indirectly be traced back to the regulations of the Education Act. The Education Act only specifies document demands on a few occasions in its text, such as in relation to Systematic Quality Assurance or the Individual Education Plan. Many of the document demands derived from the Education Act, however, can be described as *indirect* in their relationship to the legal text. For example, in chapter 7 of this thesis, we will see how certain formulations concerning the school organiser's duty to make sure that schools conduct preventive work in order to ensure safety and peace to study (SFS, 2010:800 ch 5 act 3) can result in particular document practices. Significantly, the Education Act does not specify *how* anything should be documented, merely that some things should. This means that local education authorities or headteachers are often tasked with the responsibility to outline how and to what extent things should be documented.

Recentralisation Effort 3: Changing National Curricula: Lpo94, LGR11 and LGR22

One of the ways in which the decentralisation reforms of the early 1990s were implemented was through the changing of the national curricula. Whereas the curricula before the 1990s gave detailed accounts of what pupils should know – and to some extent also the method for how they should know (Lundgren et al., 2009) – the curriculum that came in 1994, Lpo94, was a major shift in the way knowledge and demands were relayed. The micromanagement of what and how the pupils should know (which had varied in intensity prior to 1994 as well, see for instance Lundgren et al., 2009) was completely removed and replaced by a goals- and results-oriented framing of knowledge. This meant that the objectives of the courses were phrased in terms of outcomes rather than processes, that teachers were given freedom in terms of ways to achieve the objectives, as well as with regards to how to monitor and evaluate outcomes (Skolverket, 2015a, p. 34). It also meant that details regarding content and methods for achieving the outcomes were largely left out and instead it is up to each teacher and their pupils to develop these (ibid.). Lpo94 even lacked syllabi for the subjects and consisted of only 17 pages (Skolverket, 1994). Furthermore, teachers did not receive any nationally guided training in how to work within this new school-based curriculum (SOU, 2014:5, p. 76). The thought had been that management of schools should be entirely placed on the school organiser (usually a municipality) and that the role of the state should be to manage-by-results, that is, to make sure that the schools fulfilled their duty by controlling their results.

In time it became clear, however, that the radical changes of the Lpo 94 made it very difficult to assess how schools performed their duty and, importantly, very difficult to take measures against schools that did not perform adequately. The model received critique for lowering the equality between schools due to the lack of consensus on how and what to teach and test pupils on. The new curriculum that came in 2011 (LGR11) contained major revisions from Lpo94 that sought to rectify these issues. LGR11 was the relevant curriculum for the first years of my research for this thesis. It contained syllabi for each subject and a stronger steering on what pupils should know. The Swedish National Agency for Education also developed general advice regarding documentation, assessment and planning in relation to the new curriculum. The curriculum still, however, emphasises *abilities* ('förmågor') that the pupils should achieve rather than focus on particular factual knowledge. 2022 saw a new, revised curriculum (LGR22). The revisions were minor compared to the revisions in the past two curricula, but there was a yet stronger focus on factual knowledge in LGR22 compared to LGR11. Although neither of these revisions have created as significant systemic changes as the revisions of the early 1990s, both reforms have aimed to regain some control over what and how courses are taught, making course plans clearer (LGR11) and emphasising the importance of factual knowledge (LGR22) (Wahlström, 2023).

In 2023, the Swedish school minister, Lotta Edholm, announced in a press release that one of the tasks of the Swedish National Agency for Education would be to develop a new curriculum where there is a ‘new view of knowledge’ that will permeate the curriculum (Regeringskansliet, 2023a). In her analysis, the curricula since 1994 have been based on a postmodern view of knowledge (at a later press conference she changed terms and called it a constructivist view on knowledge, see Regeringskansliet 2024) where knowledge has been seen as relative and departs from pupils’ independent learning strategies. The new view on knowledge that the new curriculum will depart from goes back to a focus on facts and subject knowledge (Regeringskansliet, 2023a). Abilities for reflection, analysis and critical thinking will be introduced in the later years. Edholm’s criticism builds on critique that has been voiced by politicians, particularly by conservative liberal politicians, for two decades that Swedish schools need ‘order and discipline’ (‘ordning och reda’) and a focus on factual knowledge. The changes in the two previous revisions of the curriculum, LGR11 and LGR22, reflected this critique. Edholm’s conclusion is that these changes were not far-reaching enough and that a completely new curriculum is needed.

Framing the Reforms

These reforms, including the change in management style of Swedish schools (from central micromanagement to decentralised management-by-results), have been analysed by social scientists for their effects on schools, school staff and pupils. These effects will be discussed shortly. It is important to note that the recentralisation efforts described above have not involved a formal reorganisation of the division of responsibility between state and municipalities; rather, the state governing has increased through *indirect* control mechanisms, such as auditing, evaluation and standardised testing.

To continue with the division between decentralising reforms and recentralising reforms, there is a tendency to explain the former as a reflection of a general neoliberalisation of Swedish society at the time, with the introduction of marketisation ideologies, individualisation and New Public Management as governing strategy (see for instance Blomqvist & Rothstein, 2000; Lindblad & Popkewitz, 2004; Lundström, 2018; SOU, 2014:5). The notion of the self-regulating market with free, healthy competition as a driving force for quality optimisation was central when the independent schools reform and school choice reform were launched in the early 1990s. Similarly, the rationalisations for the decentralisation reforms were, apart from economic efficiency and bureaucratic slimming, concerned with bringing the school governing closer to the individual stakeholders of the schools – understood as pupils and their guardians as well as school staff. Particularly pupils and their guardians, rhetorically conceived of as customers, would have more power over the schools, and the individuals' needs would have a stronger position in relation to school organisation and operation.

The recentralisation efforts, on the other hand, are commonly understood in relation to processes such as audit, accountability, evaluation and investigation. Naturally, these processes in no way stand in contrast to the one's described above. Indeed, to quote Michael Power, 'as the state has become increasingly and explicitly committed to an indirect supervisory role, audit and accounting practices have assumed a decisive function' (Power, 1997, p. 11). The division of labour in the governing of the Swedish education sector, where the government formulate broad national goals and then measure and monitor to what extent these goals are reached rather than micromanage how the goals should be reached is at the very core of New Public Management. The school organisers (municipal or independent) and the school leaders are variously accountable to the national school authorities for school results, quality improvement, safety and other aspects of the school organisation. These chains of accountability and audit trails are to a large degree accomplished through documents and document practices (see for instance Hirsh, 2014). While we will look more closely at documents in the next chapter, we now turn to a discussion about how these reforms have been analysed by Swedish social scientists. As far as the interests of this thesis go, there are three strands of research that are particularly relevant.

A Renewed Focus on Administration and Bureaucracy

There is an ill-concealed irony in the fact that reforms that originally sought to deflate what was perceived as a bloated bureaucracy have led to an 'administration society' (Forssell & Ivarsson Westerberg, 2014), 'anxious bureaucrats' (Castillo & Ivarsson Westerberg, 2019) and a 'managerial bureaucracy' (Hall, 2012). These three concepts are taken from three prominent books that have sought to understand and explain the new role of administration and bureaucracy in the governing of Swedish (mainly public) society: Patrik Hall's *Managementbyråkrati [Managerial Bureaucracy]* (2012), Anders Forssell and Anders Ivarsson Westerberg's *Administrationssamhället [The Administration Society]* (2014) and Daniel Castillo and Anders Ivarsson Westerberg's *Ängsliga byråkrater eller professionella pragmatiker: administrativa effekter av statens indirekta styrning av kommunerna [Anxious Bureaucrats or Professional Pragmatics: Administrative Effects of the State's Indirect Management of the Municipalities]* (2019). With the introduction of a New Public Management style of governing and the decentralisation of the Swedish public sector as the prime suspects, all three books critically explore the effects of the changes in governing structure on the role of administration and bureaucracy in the public sector.

The authors agree that within this new, decentralised and New Public Management-driven form of government, administration and bureaucracy have a significant position. In addition, they emphasise other cultural ideals concerning proper conduct and decision-making that are conducive to the dissemination of administrative tasks across organisations. Concretely, they emphasise that underlying many processes in the public sector there are culturally specific understandings of decision-making as ideally being based on rationality, evidence and logical deductions (on this topic, see also Bohlin & Sager, 2011).

Hall (2012) argues that public sector bureaucracy, rather than having been replaced, has shifted shape and entered a new stage, a stage that he refers to as 'managerial bureaucracy'. In this kind of bureaucracy, modern business management ideas are appropriated for governing. Business management strategies have in common that they are vague in their formulation and general in their goals; the same management model can therefore be transferred not only between different organisations but also completely different sectors. Within New Public Management, this kind of appropriation makes sense: if public sector organisations should be run according to the same principles as corporations, the goals should also be the same, i.e. efficiency, quality optimisation and customer satisfaction. What is obfuscated with these models, Hall argues, is partly that 'quality optimisation' might mean radically different things for different organisations and partly the taken-for-grantedness of these goals themselves.

Forssell and Ivarsson Westerberg (2014) emphasise the diffusion of administrative tasks to professional groups whose primary concern is originally *not* administration, such as teachers, health care workers and police officers (a phenomenon famously described by Lipsky, 2010 [1980]). For these workers, Forssell and Ivarsson Westerberg argue, the administrative tasks are frequently more connected to the maintenance, legitimation and controlling purpose of the organisation rather than the day-to-day work of exercising their professions (Forssell & Ivarsson Westerberg, 2014, p. 43). Furthermore, Forssell and Ivarsson emphasise the role of documents in achieving 'administration society'. Documents are the medium (and work) through which we audit, report, measure and evaluate. Forsell and Ivarsson Westerberg highlight how the exceedingly complex governance structure of the education sector, with reference to all the reforms discussed above, contributes to the increased administrative workload for teachers. They observe that much documentation is carried out so that one has one's back covered in case of an external inspection and that the document's value for the school, teachers and pupils comes in second hand (Forssell & Ivarsson Westerberg, 2014, p. 152). They conclude that the 'administration society' in schools is primarily expressed through increased documentation, numerous meetings and digital systems that make work more difficult rather aid teachers in their work. These were in fact three issues that often came up in conversation with teachers and that I have extensive fieldnotes about.

Castillo and Ivarsson Westerberg (2019) ask specifically how the Swedish state's governing structure in relation to the municipalities lead to an increased administrative apparatus within health care and education. Within the education system, they cite the complex governing structure – where legal rulings, state agencies (both the Swedish National Agency for Education and the Swedish Schools Inspectorate), school organisers, digital platforms and other, external systems all operate in a way that directly and indirectly affects the administrative work of school staff. In addition to the control, audit and inspection that has been discussed, Castillo and Ivarsson Westerberg bring our attention to the increased focus on comparison that has been the result of the independent schools reform and the free school choice reform. Schools are increasingly being compared to one another, municipalities provide citizens with key performance indicators of their schools and schools market themselves towards prospective pupils and their guardians. These comparisons are made possible through the commensuration of information, qualities and data from different schools, a process which requires document work from the production of data on the classroom level to the production of statistics and key indicators on the level of the national or local education authorities. One key insight of Castillo and Ivarsson Westerberg is that it is often difficult to point a finger at exactly where governance is emanating from or who is behind it. Using the example of Systematic Quality Assurance ('systematiskt kvalitetsarbete'), they describe how the immediate point of departure for understanding the governance of this work is the Education Act, since this is the legal body that regulates this work. By looking at a concrete example of how Systematic Quality Assurance is carried out in a large municipality, however, they see how several actors become involved in the process of structuring the Systematic Quality Assurance. Aside from the national education agencies, there is the municipality's administrative unit ('förvaltning'), that is responsible for carrying out the work (at the level of the school organisers, at the level of individual schools the headteachers are responsible for this work). The local education authorities, in turn, enrol several other actors in their work, most notably an external auditing firm and a digital system. All of these different actors affect how, what and to what extent work is carried out.

In sum, this strand of literature emphasises how the kind of governing structure that has grown out of the past decades of educational reform in Sweden has led to administration and bureaucratic practices having a prominent position in the exercise of control and establishment of organisational relationships. They emphasise that much of this administrative work is done in a manner that is often experienced by the workers as far-removed from their 'real' working tasks, such as teaching.

Juridification

One of the ways through which scholars have examined the past decades of educational reforms in Sweden, and particularly the recentralisation efforts following the decentralisation of the early 1990s, is through the concept of juridification. The concept of juridification has manifold meanings and bearings in legal studies as well as the social sciences (Fransson, 2016; Novak, 2019; Rosén et al., 2020) but here we will confine our discussion to the literature on the juridification of the Swedish education system. Within this strand of literature, juridification can be defined as 'a process whereby judicial means become dominant in contexts that previously relied on informal procedures or where intuitive forms of everyday communication, action, norms and values become reified by legal logic' (Horton et al., 2023 citing Lindgren et al. (2021)). In particular, it is the Swedish entry into the European Union in 1995, the reinstatement of the Swedish School Inspectorate in 2008 and the new Education Act from 2010 that are given attention as the primary policy changes that drive this development. In addition to this, there has been an increase in regulations, general recommendations and guidelines by national education authorities such as the Swedish National Agency for Education. Lastly, we can mention that Swedish schools must operate under a number of other legal frameworks as well, such as the Local Government Act ('kommunallagen'), the Administrative Procedure Act ('förvaltningslagen'), Work Environment Act ('arbetsmiljölagen') and more.

A primary purpose of strengthening the legal regulations of the education system has been to secure the rights of individuals to the education that the state has deemed necessary for citizens to attain (Novak, 2019; Rapp & Skoglund, 2017). Likewise, the aim has been to emphasise the duty of the schooling institutions and education authorities to provide good and equal education opportunities to all pupils. In this sense, juridification has been espoused as a key driving force for democratisation processes (Rosén, 2023). Within the social sciences, and particularly the Educational Sciences that have dealt with this topic the most, the tendency has been to look at juridification as an empirical phenomenon, meaning that the extent and effects of juridification are not taken for granted, but are rather the subject of investigation. Juridification has effects for teachers' work and their professional lives. Colnerud (2015) directs her gaze towards teachers' experience of moral and ethical dimensions of their work and explores how these, in part, are affected by, and sometimes in conflict with, external regulations and legal demands. Other literature focuses on particular aspects of teachers' work and how it is affected by juridification, such as teachers' work with educational knowledge and values (Bergh & Arneback, 2016), degrading treatment (Horton et al., 2023; Hult & Lindgren, 2016) or equal treatment (Rosén, 2023; Rosén et al., 2020). Through these studies it becomes clear that juridification both enables and restricts teachers in their professional lives. For instance, in a case study on teachers' work against degrading treatment, Hult and Lindgren (2016) reported that teachers felt more insecure and uncertain in their work with counteracting degrading treatment as a result of the juridification, despite guidelines, forms and other specifications of the work process having been put in place. In Hult and Lindgren's analysis, this was in part due to these formalised work processes taking precedence over the experience-based and embodied knowledge that teachers usually used when dealing with incidents of degrading treatment amongst their pupils. Similar observations of school professionals' struggles between acting based on experience and embodied knowledge on the one hand and acting on a formalised, legal framework of action on the other has been made by other scholars as well (Horton et al., 2023; Novak, 2019; Segerholm & Hult, 2016).

Juridification also has effects for teachers' documentation practices. Due to the mandate of the state's controlling bodies to hold schools and teachers accountable to the rules and regulations of the Education Act (SFS, 2010:800) and other legal texts, there is a tendency at some schools to document more than is required by law as a safeguard in case their practice should be inspected (cf. Hult & Lindgren, 2016). The tendency to manage and conduct one's work as if one were being subject to legal scrutiny has been referred to as litigation mentality or legalistic mindset by Bies and Sitkin (1993). In the Swedish context, the notion of 'att hålla ryggen fri' is frequently raised when documentation in school settings is discussed (Andersson, 2022; Hult & Lindgren, 2016). 'Att hålla ryggen fri' is an expression that can be translated to 'covering one's back' in English. The expression has a rather sinister twist to it. The image that comes to mind is of an awareness of something threatening behind you and the risk that this threat will sneak up on you and catch you by surprise. By documenting your practices, if we keep with the metaphor of keeping your back clear, the understanding is that you pre-empt potential future threats so that nothing can sneak up on you unguarded. This mindset must, of course, also be put in relation to processes of accountability and audit (Horton et al., 2023; Novak, 2019), which will be the subject for the next section.

Regimes of Audit, Evaluation and Accountability

There has been a strand of research that has looked specifically at the role of audit, evaluation and accountability within the Swedish education system. This research is related to, and in some ways integrated in, the discussions and observations made by the authors above. Many of the administrative and bureaucratic tasks that the books above discuss are more specifically concerned with processes of audit or evaluation as strategies for making public institutions accountable. As in the literature above, this strand of research identifies a shift as a result of the restructurings of the Swedish education system (and general state governance) in the 1990s and 2000s. The institutionalisation of auditing, evaluation and accountability practices was a response to the perceived lack of control that the Swedish state had over the nation's schools following the decentralisation reforms. It was considered pivotal that taxpayers had insight into the public institutions' performance, services and spending of money. It must, however, also be seen in light of the marketisation reforms that increasingly put public institutions in competition with each other and with private institutions (Forsberg & Wallin, 2006; Lindgren, 2014).

A common argument within this strand of literature is that the trust in auditing practices as certifications of proper conduct has replaced trust in professional judgment and interpersonal relationships – or at least pushed it to the margins (an observation famously elaborated on by Power, 1997). Lena Lindgren argues, along this vein, that evaluation has become a social norm in Swedish public institutions – an activity whose purpose and use is taken for granted in the everyday planning and managing of public institutions (2014). This is evident in the collective trust that we as a society place in processes of evaluation and audit as governing strategies and as methods for bringing about institutional changes. The establishment of the Swedish Schools Inspection as a separate government agency in 2008 can be seen as an expression of this belief in evaluation and audit as good governance along with this same agency's increased mandate to sanction schools that do not comply with national rules and regulations.

Lena Lindgren, in the second edition for her book *The Evaluation Monster: On Performance Measurement in the Public Sector*[12] (2014), problematises some of the assumptions that go into developing, producing and implementing evaluations as verifications of quality and performance. For instance, she directs our attention to the scientific and industrial roots of evaluation processes – in experimental research design and industrial production of material goods – and argues that the immaterial and complex services that public institutions provide cannot be treated in an isomorphic way to, say, car production. Another problem is the assumption that the things that characterise high quality are measurable in the first place (in 2018, Swedish philosopher Jonna Bornemark published a book on this topic, titled *The Renaissance of the Immeasurable*, that reached the best-seller lists in Sweden). According to Lindgren, the difficulties of operationalising fuzzy political goals often result in a disproportionate focus on those aspects of quality that can be quantified.

Another book that challenges the norm of evaluation and audit within the education system, albeit from a slightly different perspective, is Mats Alvesson and Maria Strannegård's *Check, Check, Check: The Schools Inspection and the Tribulations of Audit*[13] (2021) where they take on the case of the Swedish Schools Inspectorate. In this book, they argue that a significant part of the daily operation of the Swedish Schools Inspectorate runs on what they refer to as a 'functional stupidity', that is, a tendency to 'follow established frameworks and guidelines without questioning them' and without critical reflection (pp.17-18). While the authors acknowledge that this is to some degree necessary and positive for an institution functioning, they focus on the negative outcomes of this kind of mindset. These can be summarised as a risk of losing sight of the *purposes* of the frameworks

[12] *Utvärderingsmonstret: om kvalitetsmätning i den offentliga sektorn.* The book title contains the Swedish word 'utvärdering', which can refer to audit, evaluation, performance measurement or assessment.

[13] *Check, Check, Check: Skolinspektionen och granskandets vedermödor*

and guidelines and instead seeing the apparent fulfilment of the requirements – check, check, check – as a purpose in and of itself, regardless how detached it is from the actual realities of the schools.

To describe evaluation activities in the public sector as a social norm (Lindgren 2014) or as practiced with 'functional stupidity' (Alvesson and Strannegård 2021) is to emphasise similar things with this practice. Namely that there is a tendency to integrate these practices uncritically and without reflection over the need for these practices themselves or the extent to which they should be applied. These assumptions are destabilised in the kind of critical literature that has been discussed in this section and have reached debates and discussions outside academia. Jonna Bornemark's book on the *The Renaissance of the Immeasurable [Det omätbaras renässans]* (2018) is a good example of this. This was heralded in public media, read by civil servants in some of Sweden's biggest municipalities and Bornemark herself has been a guest lecturer at the national education for headteachers at the Swedish National Agency for Education.

A Nod to the Critics? State Efforts to Tame the Advance of Administration

> 'The municipalisation reform, Independent Schools reform and New Public Management have gone too far.'[14]
>
> *(newly instated Minister of Education Johan Pehrson in Olsson, 2024d)*

Clearly, not only academic scholars have a bone to pick with the past 35 years of education reforms. As I mentioned in the introduction and as the above quote illustrates, this concern is shared by politicians and governmental education agencies. Indeed, it is telling that in 2012, the Swedish government of the time released a proposition titled *Reduced Demands for Documentation in School*[15] (Regeringen, 2012/13:195) and in 2023 the current government is conducting a new investigation titled *A Reduced Administrative Burden for Preschool Teachers and Teachers*[16] (Regeringen, 2023:72). In 2012, the concern was that teachers were the group of workers who experienced most strongly that their workload had increased and that 'many teachers now feel that they do not have enough time to devote to their core task, namely teaching' (Regeringen, 2012/13:195, p. 9). Most significantly, the proposition made changes to the documentation demands connected to the Individual Education Plan, stating that they should only be used in the years where pupils are not given grades. We do not yet know the outcome of the

[14] 'Kommunalisering, friskolereform och New Public Management har gått överstyr'

[15] 'Minskade krav på dokumentation i skolan'

[16] 'En minskad administrative börda för förskollärare och lärare'

ongoing investigation into teachers' administrative burden, but the problem is still framed as one of administrative tasks stealing time from teachers' core task, again understood as teaching. In addition to documentation specifically related to teaching, the directive mentions a number of other areas where school regulations either directly or indirectly affect teachers' documentation practices. Interestingly, the government is suggesting that the committee of inquiry investigate which of the administrative and extraneous tasks are created at the level of the state, the level of the school organiser and the level of the individual school. Amongst other things, the government is asking the committee to investigate the use of digital learning platforms in school, the use of pupil-centered ('elevnära') documentation and the regulations on degrading treatment. These are all working areas that will be treated in the analytical chapters of this thesis and that have been raised in the academic literature that has been discussed throughout this chapter.

In between these inquiries there have been a series of other government initiatives to explore the effects of the above-mentioned reforms. An interesting progression to consider is a series of reports on state inspection and governance published by The Swedish Agency for Public Management between 2012 and 2020. In 2012, they had the schools and the Swedish Schools Inspectorate as one of their focus areas in their publication *Considering Inspection: On the Design of Government Inspection*[17] (Statskontoret, 2012). Here they highlighted how the decentralisation and marketisation reforms have caused government inspection to become simultaneously more central to governance and more difficult to execute (Statskontoret, 2012, p. 77). The report emphasised the importance of having inspection agencies that were separate from other tasks, such as promotional tasks, counselling and awarding grants. The primary reason for this was understood to be the inspection agencies' role as an impartial actor in their inspections and results. The role of inspection was further elaborated on in 2016, when the Swedish Agency for Public Management published a report on *Developed Governance: On Cohesion and Trust In Government Management*[18] (Statskontoret, 2016). Here they investigated how governance could be accomplished in a way that both satisfied the need for control, and trust in workers' knowledge and experience. In relation to inspection specifically, they highlight how social care and education are sectors where employees experience a lack of trust and excessive control from the government. Inspections tend to require significant administration and 'rarely focuses on the quality of the organisation' (Statskontoret, 2016, p. 99). The report suggests that the government should investigate further 'how government inspection can be designed to be perceived as more meaningful and legitimate' (p. 100). This plea was realised and in 2020, the Swedish Agency for Public Management published yet another report that dealt with the issue of inspection: *Towards a Better*

[17] 'Tänk till om tillsynen: om utformning av statlig tillsyn'

[18] 'Utvecklad styrning: om sammanhållning och tillit i förvaltning'

Inspection? A Study of the Evolution of State Inspection[19] (Statskontoret, 2020). This report, rather than focus on the importance of separating inspection from other tasks as in the 2012 report, focuses on how inspection can be a learning tool for the organisations they are mandated to investigate. There is a focus on the administrative burden of state inspections and one of the suggestions in the report is to ‘prioritise dialogue and oral communication before written documentation’ in the inspections (Statskontoret, 2020, p. 6). There is also a call to ‘be realistic’ with regards to what can actually be accomplished through inspection: it is an instrument for control firstly and foremostly, not a solution to fundamental problems in the organisation (ibid., 7). The shifting focus in these reports reflects academic and political discussions about the role of inspection and control in public institutions and the role of documentation within this regime.

One more government initiative ought to be mentioned and that is the ‘Trust Delegation’ (‘Tillitsdelegationen’) that was active 2016-2020 and sought to support state governed agencies in implementing a more trust-based leadership style (SOU, 2019:43). The ‘Trust Delegation’ is more or less a direct response to the critiques against New Public Management and audit society (Power, 1997) and the perceived lack of trust in professional and interpersonal relations within these management forms. The purpose of the ‘Trust Delegation’ is to ‘balance the need for control with confidence in professionals’ frontline knowledge and experience’ (SOU, 2019:43, p. 27, my translation). The Trust Delegation primarily focuses on the work of the state-run agencies that govern the Swedish public sector, since the demands for control are assumed to primarily emanate from there. The problems are outlined as being a lack of citizen focus, absence of a holistic perspective, short-term and erratic management, monitoring and evaluation that can lead to unnecessary administration and a lack of leadership and support for employees (p. 33). The results of the work of the Trust Delegation suggest that the public sector needs continuous support in implementing a trust-based governance strategy through information and knowledge, platforms for exchange of experiences and collaboration and development of skills. It also suggests that the government establish a committee that can create an arena for considering and identifying possible solutions to complex societal challenges (p. 15).

Digitalisation of the Education System and Teachers’ Work

Alongside the government reforms discussed earlier in this chapter, the rapid development of digital tools and systems has greatly affected how governing can be

[19] ‘På väg mot bättre tillsyn? En studie av den statliga tillsynens utveckling’

accomplished in the education sector. Just as the education reforms of the 1990s and onwards reflected broader, international trends in public governance, so do the digitalisation strategies employed by Swedish school authorities. Digital governance, or e-governance, is frequently used to describe the use of digital technologies and platforms by governments to enhance the delivery of public services, streamline administrative processes, and increase citizen engagement and transparency, with the European Union's Digital Decade policy programme being one prime example (European Commission, n.d.). The point here is not to assess the implementation of digital governance, but rather to consider digitalisation in the public sector as both a political motive and an ongoing practice, affecting the work routines and conditions for workers within the public sector. Plesner et al. (2018) argue that digitalisation within the public sector merits special attention due to the role that the digital technologies have in upholding and realising the political goals that underpin the institutions within this sector. Specifically, the authors call for a more systematic focus on how digitisation affects work practices within the public sector.

In the Swedish education sector, the use of digital platforms, as infrastructures for communication, storing and circulating information abound and one should consider how the digital capacity for mass storage, distribution, communication, generation of analysis and so on structures the work of teachers and other welfare professionals (all the while, of course, keeping in mind that researchers noted the proliferation of documents for welfare workers well before any digital explosion (see for instance Lipsky, 2010 [1980])).

As digitalisation is a political motive and objective in itself, the term is both emic and etic. As an 'emic' term, digitalisation in the Swedish public sector refers to active strategies of implementing digital tools and solutions in order to streamline, specialise, rationalise or otherwise contribute to the working environment and outcomes of public institutions. In the Swedish education sector, the government developed a 'national digitalisation strategy for the school sector' that was launched in 2017 (Regeringen, 2017). The vision was to put the Swedish education sector at the forefront when it comes to digital competency and utilising digitalisation opportunities in order to support learning and equity (Regeringen, 2017, p. 4). The Swedish National Agency for Education developed a digitalisation strategy plan that was supposed to span from 2023-2027. The plan, however, was never to be realised. By 2023, Sweden had a new government and a new school minister who 'tore up' (Olsson, 2024c) this plan on the grounds that it was not deemed sufficiently based on scientific evidence and that enough consideration had not been taken with regards to children's cognitive development. The critique levelled by the school minister and some cognitive scientists is mainly focused on the use of digital tools and learning devices for children and not the digitalisation of teachers' work. The Swedish National Agency for Education, however, has for a few years been concerned with the digitalisation of teachers' work for assessment, communication, evaluation, planning and administrative tasks (Skolverket, 2017, 2018a, 2022b).

They have warned against an unreflective appropriation of digital systems which, they argue, risk having the exact opposite effect from what was intended: teachers risk doing the same work twice but in different digital systems, they end up doing more documentation work than necessary and the digital systems can be time consuming to handle (this critique is reflected in the task description for the current investigation on teachers' administrative workload, as we saw in the previous section). It is this digitalisation – of everyday work – that will be our focus here.

In their book *Social Work and Paper Action: Between Client and Digital Documents [Socialt arbete och pappersgöra: mellan klient och digitala document]* (2019), Jacobsson and Martinell Barfoed investigate the production and role of documents in an increasingly digitalised Swedish social work sector. In the book's first paragraph a number of purposes of the multitude of documents are listed: to communicate within and beyond the organisation, to make decisions, to motivate decisions, to make appeals and conduct Systematic Quality Assurance. There are demands for equity, quality assurance, comparison, transparency and standardisation (2019, 13). Although Jacobsson and Martinell Barfoed focus on the sector of social work, these purposes and demands resonate well with what we have learned about the education sector in this chapter. The authors frame their analysis in terms of digitalisation and how it affects not only the documentation practices of social workers, but the way that we know and understand the world. They use the term 'welfare digitalisation' ('välfärdsdigitalisering') to describe how welfare institutions are employing digital technologies and tools to carry out their work (Jacobsson & Martinell Barfoed, 2019, p. 29).

Digital technologies have enabled production, collection, aggregation and dissemination of data on a much larger scale than before. In fact, it would be practically impossible to accomplish many of the tasks that documents do in schools without digitalisation. The information collected through these technologies are frequently described as data. This data is considered important to the development and improvement of education due to the data's role as the basis for analyses and initiatives for change. This will be a recurring motif in the analytical chapters of this thesis. Jacobsson and Martinell Barfoed describe how the possibilities for control are expanded with the use of these digital infrastructures. Indeed, the same mechanisms that seek to collect data in order to improve the quality of the organisations can be applied to control that work has been done and has been done in a particular way (at least as far as the documents show). The authors also emphasise the connection between this digitalisation and standardisation. As will be elaborated upon in the upcoming chapter, this connection to standardisation is an important one to make. For instance, the digital systems that schools purchase to enable data collection, communication with guardians, carry out organisational analysis and evaluation, and so on are standardised products. This standardisation is what enables many of the large-scale processes described above, such as communication between different levels of the education system's governing chain and analyses of measured results and outcomes. Standardisation is also one of the things that the Swedish National Agency for Education raises some concerns over when they warn against unreflectively implementing digital tools and infrastructures in schools. The Swedish National Agency for Education especially warns against relying excessively on digital learning platforms due to the potential difficulties with adjusting the document systems to local needs and the risk of creating double work for teachers by documenting the same thing in different systems (Skolverket, 2022b). This will be explored in detail in chapter seven of this thesis.

A common observation made in literature on digitalisation is how it affects the relation we have to time and space (Jacobsson & Martinell Barfoed, 2019; van Dijck et al., 2018; Will-Zocholl & Roth-Ebner, 2021). On the most basic level, time and space are compressed through digital tools. The fact that information can travel at incredible speed over vast geographical spaces has had significant implications for schools and teachers' work. Particularly the relation between digitalisation and time is a central motif in a recent study on the effects of digitalisation on teachers' work. Public management and organisation scholar Johan Sandén published a thesis titled *Street-Level Bureaucracy and Digitalisations: How Teachers' Work Is Shaped by Temporality*[20] in 2019. In his thesis, Sandén is concerned with what digitalisation means for teachers and how it affects them. Through interviews with teachers Sandén explores teachers' own reflection of what digitalisation is constituted as and how it affects them. He identifies four main types of digitalisation: social media use, Learning Management Systems (what I refer to in this thesis as Digital Learning Platforms), digitalisation of teaching and digitalisation as management tools at organisational and political level. Of these four, it is the digital learning platforms that are most closely connected to teachers' day-to-day administrative work and the one that I encountered the most frequently in my fieldwork and in my interviews. Sandén emphasises two effects of digital learning platforms: standardisation and informatisation (2021, p. 46). These two effects, in turn, enable these digital tools to be used for governing purposes. They also, however, enable (at a managerial level) analyses to made of school performance that in turn aim at making improvements of this performance (see also Gorur & Dey, 2021).

Sandén, who frames his analysis in terms of temporality and specifically Hartmut Rosa's theories on social acceleration, argues that the promises of time efficiency espoused by the digital learning platforms are seldom realised as far as teachers are concerned (Sandén, 2021, p. 131). In fact, the teachers that Sandén interviewed stressed that documentation in the digital learning platforms takes an unnecessary amount of time. This can partly be explained, Sandén argues, by new norms of communication that are established through the digital learning platforms. Because it is possible, it is considered necessary for teachers to communicate more frequently and with more detail with the pupils and their guardians. Another element is what Sandén refers to as 'insufficient functionality', by which he means the sometimes cumbersome 'clicking' it takes to perform simple tasks. These observations reflect

[20] *Närbyråkrater och digitaliseringar: Hur lärares arbete formas av tidsstrukturer*

well my interviews with teachers. Teachers frequently questioned the amount of information and the level of detail they needed to share in relation to their teaching, course planning and communication.

Sandén described an interesting paradox in relation to the purported time saving capacities of the digital learning platforms, namely that the idea of time saving in practice seems to work in reverse:

> ‘As communication increases, teachers' time for other activities decreases and they become stressed. Similarly, teachers experience more stress in relation to administrative tasks even though the speed of each individual administrative task increases. This appears to be a paradox, but even though both communication and administrative tasks are inherently faster, they occur more frequently and without teachers having control over when they occur, leading to a perception of increased time pressure.’ (Sandén, 2021, p. 135)

Communication through the digital learning platforms is not only time costly due to heightened expectations created through digital availability and parents and pupils’ expectations, it is also made time costly due to the standardised layout of the platforms. Information with pupils and guardians is often relayed through standardised forms on the digital learning platforms, leaving teachers with little room for deciding how to communicate with these actors. The effect of this is that teachers sometimes have to explain to pupils and guardians – orally or through another channel than the digital learning platform – what the information in the digital learning platforms means (Sandén, 2021).

Concluding Remarks

In this chapter we have seen how the Swedish education system has gone through major restructurings since the 1990s. These restructurings have been divided into a series of decentralisation reforms, giving local education authorities and other local stakeholders a stronger hold on school governance, and that these reforms were followed by recentralisation reforms that sought to give the state more insight and control over local school matters, primarily through auditing, evaluating and monitoring results. Swedish social scientists have analysed the effects of these reforms and concluded that the reforms have entailed a change in the forms of administration and bureaucracy that teachers engage in, how legal governance is carried out in schools and the roles of evaluation and audit. In addition to this, we have considered the effects of the rapid development and application of digital systems within schools. All of these factors, in turn, have had a significant impact on teachers’ documentation practices. Indeed, Swedish government reports that address the issue of documentation largely align with the arguments and observations put forward by the social scientists. Despite this agreement, however, it has proven difficult to implement measures to counter the acceleration of documentation demands. The purpose of this thesis is not to suggest such measures. The purpose, rather, is to explore why it is so difficult to effect change in this area in the first place. In doing this, I have suggested that we foreground the documents themselves and in the next chapter, we will take a closer look at what such an approach implies.

3. Foregrounding Documents: Theoretical Underpinnings and Empirical Precedents

So far, our attention has been brought to a problem, namely the persistence of a 'documentation burden' for teachers despite concerted efforts to curb this development from actors across the chain of governance. In the previous chapter we looked at some of the political restructurings of the education system that have contributed to the prominence of documentation as teachers' work and some social scientific efforts to explain these processes. In this chapter, attention will be drawn to what I outlined in the introduction as the principal approach that this thesis will have in exploring this conundrum: that of foregrounding documents. Documents are, in fact, the tools through which the de- and recentralised kinds of governing described in the previous chapter are accomplished. But what does it mean to foreground documents in one's analysis of a social phenomenon? What theoretical underpinnings does such an approach build on? And what empirical precedents are there in doing so? These are the questions that the first part of this chapter explores. For pedagogical purposes, I have decided to address these questions by outlining the project of 'foregrounding documents' as two-fold: in part seeing documents as *material semiotic artefacts* and in part concerned with taking seriously documentation as a *practice* constitutive of the social and organisational relations that teachers engage in (I draw extensively on Asdal & Reinertsen, 2022 in doing so).

The second part of this chapter goes into more detail concerning the other framing of this thesis, namely that of emphasising the multiple purposes of documents. Producing documents is rarely an end in itself, despite my informants sometimes being left with a feeling that it is. Documents are produced, stored and circulated for various purposes. To know a document's *intended* purpose, procedure for handling, and trajectory only takes us so far within the framework that will be presented in this chapter. I have not found it productive to try to explicate, define and summarise in detail what all the intended purposes of teachers' documents are, where they are evident and how they are expressed. While we can to an extent look for and identify purposes of a document or document system by looking at the document itself, extracted from the social setting of its application, there will always be the fact that these purposes can become – in practice – thwarted, redefined, failed, distorted, misapplied, transformed and so on. It is exactly these things that will concern us in the chapters to come. Rather than identifying an exhaustive list of document purposes, then, I have decided to outline some of the processes and effects that documents have a central role in producing and that are important to the everyday workings of the education system. To this end, the second part of the chapter deals with the sociology of standardisation and classification and the sociology of quantification and statistics. These areas are in various ways related to many of the purposes of document practices that will be discussed throughout this thesis, such as communication, learning, knowledge production and comparison.

Documents as Material Semiotic Artefacts

To understand documents as material semiotic artefacts is a central component to the analyses that will be presented later in the thesis. Simply put, it matters that documents are both objects with specific material properties and carriers of meaning. It matters for where and how documents can travel or hide, for how and by whom meaning can be interpreted, contested and reframed, and for what can – or cannot – be accomplished through documents.

This foregrounding of material artefacts and technologies in understanding social relations, accountabilities and other social phenomena owes much to the interdisciplinary field of Science and Technology Studies (STS). It was during the 1980s and the early development of what would later become known as Actor-Network Theory that scholars within this field brought attention to material artefacts and technologies as imbued in and constitutive of phenomena, relations and actions that had previously been framed as belonging to the realm of the social, effectively breaking down the distinction between the social and technological (Callon, 1986; Latour & Woolgar, 1986; Law, 1987). Indeed, documents were very much at the centre of things when Bruno Latour and Steve Woolgar made the radical claim that the scientific facts that scientists, more specifically neuroendocrinologists, engage with are not things, ideas or objects that lie around 'out there' but are created in collaboration with– or 'thoroughly constituted by' – the material environment of the laboratory (Latour & Woolgar, 1986). Indeed, 'without the material environment of the laboratory none of the objects could be said to exist', the authors claimed in *Laboratory Life: The Construction of Scientific Facts* (1986, p. 69). And in the material environment of the laboratory, documents proliferate. To describe the collections of material tools – documents, computers and other machines – that the scientists use to 'transform a material substance into a figure or a diagram' (that is, a scientific fact) Latour and Woolgar use the term 'inscription device'. This concept has been influential for many studies of documents since (see for instance Hirsh, 2014; Prior, 2003; Reinertsen, 2016) due to Latour and Woolgar's convincing demonstration of some very profound effects that documents as inscription devices have in the environments where they circulate. Primarily, these effects are manifested in their relationship to the 'thing' in the world that they refer back to: 'inscriptions are regarded as having a direct relationship to the "original substance"'(Latour & Woolgar, 1986, p. 51). Documents, then, are usually taken to represent something that can be found in the world rather than taken as a mechanism through which something comes into being in the first place. This feature, of taking the inscription as a mode of access to the thing it refers back to, has two further consequences. One is that the material intervention and creation that went into producing the final product is bracketed, 'relegated to the realm of the merely technical' (p. 63). Central to the task of foregrounding documents as material semiotic artefacts, then, is to remove these brackets and give analytical attention to these material interventions. A second consequence is that the inscription is often taken as evidence (or counterevidence) of a thought, an idea or an observation. The way in which a document relates to the thing it refers to is, however, an empirical issue rather than something that should be taken at face value.

In the following decades, a number of significant works have contributed to the development of studying documents as material semiotic artefacts and there has been a steady increase in focus on both the material aspects of documents and documents as constitutive of – not merely a reflection of – the social order (making one reconsider the position of documents as 'the most despised of all ethnographic subjects', as famously claimed by Latour (1986)). One seminal book that approaches documents as material semiotic artefacts is anthropologist Annelise Riles' *The Network Inside Out* (2000). Here, Riles accounts for her ethnographic research with a group of Fijian activists and bureaucrats during the planning and execution of the 1995 Beijing Conference, a United Nations global conference on Women. Riles' preoccupation is with documents insofar as they encompass 'the character and aesthetics of information, the manner in which information is elucidated and appreciated, its uses and its effects' (2000, p. 2). Throughout the book, she refers to the material properties of documents as the 'aesthetics of information'. This aesthetics of information plays a crucial role for understanding the planning and execution of the UN women's conference. In fact, she describes the accomplishment of the UN women's conference in Fiji as an '*effect* of a certain aesthetic of information' (2000, p. 2, emphasis in original). In the book's third chapter, Riles beautifully describes the meticulous attention that the negotiators at the conference pay to the aesthetic qualities of their work. Often during the production of the document, the *form* of the document would be of greater concern than the semantic meaning of its *content*:

> Emphasis lay not on the innovative details but on the success of replication of a given pattern from one artifact to the next. […] The skill of the exercise lay in the detail, the degree of familiarity with the aesthetic conventions, and the patience this extremely labour-intensive task demanded, not in the invention of new designs or in the transformation of one form into another. […] The objective was not so much to

> achieve transparent meaning as to satisfy the aesthetic of logic and language (Riles, 2000, p. 79).

The purpose of the document, then, is achieved as much through its form as its content. Or, in Riles' case, even *more* through form – or 'aesthetics' – than content.

In an innovative exploration of state governance, Matthew Hull demonstrates how the materiality of what he calls 'graphic artefacts' is central to the governance, planning and structure of the city of Islamabad (Hull, 2012b). Graphic artefacts are the material things used for documentation and communication involved in state governing. They are, Hull argues, semiotic technologies, meaning that they are '*material* means for producing, interpreting and regulating significance for particular ends' (Hull, 2012b, p. 27, italics added). By focusing on how people, places and papers intersect and interact to create governance, Hull goes beyond a one-directional understanding of papers as tools to achieve power, control or governance. He demonstrates, for instance, how the material properties and infrastructure of the file allows for a diffusion of responsibility that often does not serve the people in positions of power but actually also constrains these people and make control difficult to implement. So, whilst graphic artefacts, such as the file, can be used to exert power, they can also be enrolled by people who wish to contest, thwart or mislead attempts at governance. Papers are, in fact, constitutive of the associations that make up the state and not merely an expression of the state (2012b, p. 21).

A similar insight is developed by Kristin Asdal, who has in a number of articles and books contributed to the value of understanding documents as material semiotic artefacts (Asdal, 2008, 2015; Asdal & Reinertsen, 2022). In her article 'On Politics and the Little Tools of Democracy' (2008) she brings our attention to documents as 'tools for public involvement, for democratization or deliberation' as well as for domination (p. 13). To make her case, Asdal looks at the trajectory of a power company's application to build a new power plant in Norway in the late 1960s. The application was first received as 'business-as-usual' by the Norwegian government and there was little to suggest that this was a contentious matter in any other way than the exact conditions under which the power plant would be built. A few years later, however, the issue had been radically transformed. It was no longer an issue of how to build the power plant, but an issue of whether to build it all and it had become subject to considerable public controversy. Such a reframing of an issue – from a mundane bureaucratic procedure to the target of a public outcry – can easily be analysed as an example of the public *versus* the state, where the latter in some capacity is understood as 'failing' in keeping the matter of the power plant away from public scrutiny. However, in contrast to such an analysis, Asdal demonstrates how the reframing of the issue of the power plant was enabled through these mundane bureaucratic procedures in the first place. Indeed, the reframing of the power plant issue started within the Smoke Damage Board that was handling the application. Within the Board, however, this reframing of the power plant as an issue in and of itself had little effect; it is when these reports and documents that contained incipient traces of this reframing reached outside the board – and eventually to the public – that things really started happening and the power plant was eventually framed as a risky object, both in itself and to handle politically. Asdal's point is that this trajectory cannot be explained by ways of understanding the public and political as separate, that is, by either seeing the public as successfully subverting politics or by the political as failing at keeping the issue at a distance from the public. In fact, the issue became what it became through the political system engaging the public in the first place, and the public matters of concern 'returned to the offices of public administration' (p. 23). Political technologies, Asdal concludes, are 'not to be understood in a context of the microphysics of power, as techniques of domination exclusively, but also as tools for public involvement, for democratization' (p. 24).

Approaching Materiality Through Affordances

The multiple purposes of documents are, always but not only, material accomplishments. This is particularly evident in chapter seven of this thesis where I explore how and to what effect multiple purposes are built into the material properties of the documents. In demonstrating this, I have found it helpful to draw on the concept of *affordances.* The way that the material properties of technical objects shape people's interactions with the objects is referred as the *affordances* of the technological objects. The concept of affordances was originally coined by psychologist James Gibson in the 1960s and has since then been developed and applied in several different disciplines, such as design, linguistics and semiotics, sociology and anthropology. Broadly, it seeks to elucidate the way that certain properties of material objects make them more likely to be used for some things rather than others and that the use of material artefacts are always an interplay between the user's aim, abilities and perception and the affordances of the artefact. With the concept of affordances, scholars aim to get away from technical determinism – of claiming that technologies *do* this or *make* people act in certain ways – while still acknowledging that the material properties of a technical object shape the interactions we have with them. In 2020, sociologist Jenny Davis offered an insightful theoretical reconsideration of the concept in her book *How Artifacts Afford: The Power and Politics of Everyday Things*. Affordances 'mediate between a technology's features and its outcomes' (Davis, 2020, p. 4) but, according to Davis, the concept has not been put under sufficient theoretical scrutiny. She explains that a risk with the concept of affordances is that one gets stuck in a world of either-or (i.e., either a technology allows this or it does not, either it forces an action or it forbids). Establishing *what* technologies enable, constrain, forbid, force, push or pull easily pulls us back towards technological determinism. Davis offers a way of thinking past this by urging researchers to ask three alternative questions to 'what' artefacts afford. The first question is *how* objects afford (Davis, 2020, p. 5).

‘How’ opens up for analyses that are processual and allows for variations compared to asking ‘what’, which risks becoming static. The next questions are *for whom*, which serves to emphasise that affordances are relational, and *under what circumstances*, which serves to highlight that engagement with artefacts does not happen in a vacuum nor in a manner that is stable and predictable.

Davis elaborates on the above questions by framing them as being concerned with the mechanisms and conditions of affordances. *Mechanisms* of affordance cover the ‘how’-question; how human-technology relations are established and carried out through things such as request, demand, encouragement, discouragement, refusal and allowing (p. 11). These are, Davis stresses, not prescriptive, exhaustive or mutually exclusive categories but should be seen as ‘analytical stopping points that help describe the intensity with which technological objects facilitate or impede particular lines of action and social dynamics’ (Davis, 2020, p. 65).

Conditions of affordance cover the contextual, relational questions of ‘for whom’ and ‘under what circumstances’ and are related to variations in perception, dexterity and cultural and institutional legitimacy. The conditions of affordance emphasise that the mechanisms – the how – of affordance is ‘necessarily entangled with social and structural conditions’ (Davis, 2020, p. 89). It is the definitive move away from technological determinism by considering the conditions, or the context, under which human-technological relationships unfold. Furthermore, and importantly to Davis, it opens up for a consideration of the political as imbued in human-technological relations. We might also note that these questions inevitably make Davis’ understanding of affordances an empirical issue rather than something we can assume to know about an artefact beforehand. As we will consider further in the next section, this emphasis is in line with the general framework of this thesis.

Documentation as Organisational Practice

Documents thrive in organisational and institutional settings. They are complicit in accomplishing almost everything in these settings but are easily relegated to the periphery when we summarise these accomplishments. This is demonstrated with finesse and acute attention to detail in Annelise Riles’ aforementioned book *The Network Inside Out* (2000). Here, she describes documents as artefacts of institutional life. They are what makes the networks that Riles studies at all possible. Documents provide the ‘concrete form in which collectivities (whether groups of clans, persons, or organizations) were “taken to” another environment’ (p. 73). What Riles articulates and demonstrates, then, is the insight that documents are intrinsic elements of accomplishing institutional life. Documents in this way of looking at them are not merely objects through which we can understand and know organisations and institutions, they are part of what these institutions *are*.

One scholar who has devoted a substantial part of her career to demonstrating the significance of texts and documents for co-ordinating and constituting the very relations that define institutions is Dorothy Smith (2001, 2005, 2005 [1990]). Smith, in turn, accredits this 'discovery' (Smith, 2005 [1990], p. 211) to Harold Garfinkel and the ethnomethodological school. Indeed, Garfinkel's legacy of grounding sociological analysis in the everyday activities of people rather than abstract theory and seeing objects, knowledge and phenomena as the result of ongoing accomplishments rather than reflections of a stable, pre-existing order of things (Garfinkel, 1984 [1967]) is echoed in much of the work that I engage with while writing this thesis (Asdal & Reinertsen, 2022; Jacobsson & Martinell Barfoed, 2019; Latour & Woolgar, 1986). Although the various literature that I draw upon diverge in significant ways, there is a shared effort to pay attention to the everyday practice or accomplishment of making things – ideas, objects, organisations – what they are or appear to be at any given moment. In doing this, I am sympathetic towards Dorothy Smith's strive to produce 'a knowledge of the social that is not reified and does not posit the social as existing over and above people' (Smith, 2005, p. 2).

Over the years, Smith developed an 'institutional ethnography' through which she sought to understand the ways that institutions and practices, and what she calls the 'ruling relations', shape the lives and experiences of individuals but in a way that 'begins in the local actualities of the everyday world' (Smith, 2005, p. 35). Smith tackles the distinctively difficult task of accounting for the centrality of people's everyday doings and experiences for understanding the world that they live in whilst simultaneously acknowledging that this world extends beyond what is directly visible from the standpoint of any one individual while also existing at a different 'level' than the individual doings and experiences of people. The main conceptual tool for accomplishing this she calls the 'ruling relations', which denote a kind of complex of objectified relations that structure and coordinate the everyday lives of all people and with which all individuals engage in different ways and to different effects (Smith, 2005 [1990]). Smith considers it key to analyse and explore these relations as *textually mediated*. By foregrounding the role of documents in making relations of ruling possible, Smith opens up for an analysis of power, discourse and institutions that sees these as objective and reified processes that are *accomplished* through documents rather than existing above and beyond the daily activities of people. This, in turn, opens up for her interpretation of organisations and institutions as being ontologically constituted through texts and documents (Smith, 2001). Texts have certain material properties without which the existence of large-scale organisation would not be possible, Smith argues. Documents are replicable, can coordinate activities across space and time, stabilise and reify ideas and appear the same in multiple different contexts and time. Moreover, 'it is not enough to use texts as sources of information about organizations. […] They must be examined as they co-ordinate people's activities' (Smith, 2001, p. 160).

To draw one's attention to practice is also to avoid the risk of technical determinism when foregrounding documents (Smith, 2001, 2005). The question of how texts coordinate people's activities can never be removed from the setting where this coordinated activity takes place. The question of what a text does – how it 'occurs' – is always an empirical one (Smith, 2001). This also has the effect that it becomes particularly evident that the distinction between a theory of the role of documents and a method for studying documents collapses once we take on such an approach. This is a central point for Dorothy Smith, but also for Annelise Riles in her aforementioned book *The Network Inside Out* (2000). Riles clearly states that hers is a mission of challenging what she refers to as 'the armchair approach' to global institutional knowledge (2000, p. 4). By this she means to challenge what she sees as an ethnographic void when it comes to dealing with globalism in the social sciences. Much like the late 19th century anthropologists, Riles suggests that these issues are observed at a distance and then theorised. The difficulty, she describes, lies in using ethnographic tools to analyse that which is already known and already ingrained in the ethnographer's own practices. With her book, she wishes to illustrate how an ethnographic approach to modern institutional knowledge might look. This will be reiterated in the next chapter on methodology, where I discuss the meaning of a practice-oriented or ethnographic approach to documents (Asdal & Reinertsen, 2022; Jacobsson, 2022).

So far, we have considered what it means to approach documents as material semiotic artefacts and to see them as constitutive of the social situations where they operate. It is an approach that enables analysis to take multiple directions as it is firmly grounded in practice and in the empirical setting where documents exist.

Engaging With the Multiple Purposes of Documents

Documents are crucial to producing certain desirable effects. For instance, it is indeed ideal that our tax-funded public institutions are run in a manner that is transparent and accountable (that is, under control). In order to achieve this, we strive attain knowledge about the organisation. This knowledge can then be used to make visible aspects of the organisation and communicate about the organisation beyond the context where the knowledge is produced (as Dorothy Smith emphasised, this communication needs to be textually mediated). Furthermore, in order to accomplish this, the knowledge needs to be comparable and legible to someone without direct experience of the specific place where the knowledge was produced. These practices are frequently aided by processes of standardisation, quantification and statistical representation. Standardisation, quantification and statistical representations are processes that are often required to accomplish many of the purported purposes of document practices, such as communication and comparison. Furthermore, these processes are largely accomplished through documents, the raw data of which are usually produced by teachers in schools. It is therefore relevant to bring in social scientific theories on these processes in order to frame our analysis of the multiple purposes of documents. Before we conclude the chapter, we briefly take a look how these process are caught up in producing and enabling a much-desired organisational effect: visibility.

Standardisation, categorisation and classification

Standardisation has been intrinsic to the education system since its inception. Indeed, the state's efforts to create a nationally uniform education system in the mid-19th century relied on standardising knowledge requirements, teaching education, school semesters, educational duties and rights, and so on. Stefan Timmerman and Steven Epstein observe that standardisation can be analysed from two extreme outcomes (and anywhere in between), one that sees standardisation as resulting in a 'dark dehumanisation' and one that sees it as enabling a 'glorified globalisation' (2010, p. 83). Analogously, the development of a national (standardised) education system has been analysed as derived from a need for the state to discipline one's citizens, in particular to control the lower classes, prevent uprisings (Edgren, 2011; Landahl, 2011) and as derived from a need for a population that could navigate and prosper in a new monetary economy (Evertsson, 2012). Although standardisation is not a central explicit motif in this literature, it figures as a prerequisite for the kinds of developments described (see also Timmermans & Epstein, 2010). Indeed, one of the characteristics of standards and categories (as we will soon see, the two are intimately connected) is that – when successful – they become naturalised and disappear into the background (Bowker & Leigh Star, 2000; Lampland & Leigh Star, 2009; Timmermans & Epstein, 2010). This is, of course, part of what imbues these processes with their power to define and govern what we know about the world and how we know it (Timmermans and Epstein 2010 point out the link between processes of standardisation and Foucault's notion of normalisation in this regard).

A prerequisite for the audit and evaluation practices that govern or structure an organisation is comprehensive standardisation and classification – of knowledge, of people, of information and of rules. We have to somehow decide what *it* is that we compare or evaluate and then figure out how to define *it* in a way that makes it comparable to other examples of *it* out there. In short, we need to categorise and standardise. This view, that highlights standardisation as a form of regulation and control, was elaborated upon in an anthology edited by Nils Brunsson and Bengt Jacobsson (2002 [2000]). This perspective highlights standardisation as a homogenising force as it draws together and makes possible global markets and a global order. Other perspectives, particularly from the tradition of science studies, emphasise that such a homogenising effect should not be taken at face value or be assumed a priori (Timmermans & Epstein, 2010), demonstrating how global economic, social and cultural processes even rely on fragmentation, flexibility and local contingencies (for a persuasive demonstration of this see Tsing, 2015).

Standardisation continues to be an inherent property of how schools are run *and* how teachers run a classroom. This means that teachers are working in an organisation with a high level of standardisation, where everything from the distribution of people to the design and utilisation of space to the division of time is standardised and regulated so as to make the concerted action of national public education at all possible. It also means that teachers are doing much standardising work themselves, for instance while evaluating and monitoring pupils' academic progression. The documents that teachers engage with and produce are very often rigidly standardised – such as the Individual Education Plans – and present numerous classification schemes – such as grading scales and other devices for measuring pupils' skills and knowledge. Our main concern here will be to explore the social scientific literature on processes of standardisation, categorisation and classification that can help us understand the practices of documentation that teachers engage in.

Again, the aim and scope of this study requires us to look towards literature that takes seriously the empirical setting where concepts, tools and processes play out. Standardisation, for our purposes, is best seen as something that must be locally enacted and consequently the effect of standardisation may differ greatly in its meetings with different users, places and technologies (as Lampland and Leigh Star noted, one person's well-fitting standard may be another's impossible nightmare (2009, p. 5)). Timmermans and Epstein have, drawing on Bowker and Star (2000), defined standardisation as 'a process of constructing uniformities across time and space, through the generation of agreed-upon rules' (2010, p. 71). In their seminal book *Sorting Things Out: Classifications and Their Consequences* (2000), Geoffrey Bowker and Susan Leigh Star remind us that the process of standardising is a human endeavour and that standards are subsequently invariably human accomplishments. This social dimension of standards is easily forgotten whenever we encounter them; unless you happen to encounter an incident or object that does not 'fit' a standard the way it should, standards tend to just appear to be natural reflections of the way things are or logical inferences about the social world. Inherently connected to the process of standardisation is the process of classification or categorisation. Just as standardisation is a social accomplishment, so are classification and categorisation. Bowker and Star outline three properties of classification: firstly, they adhere to some consistent and unique classificatory principle (for instance, school children are classified in relation to a temporal order that is based on year of birth). Secondly, the categories are mutually exclusive and thirdly, the system is complete and the 'ideal classification system provides a total coverage of the world it describes' (Bowker & Leigh Star, 2000, p. 11). These three conditions are never in their purest form all met at once (consider for instance the ubiquitous use of the residual categories (Lampland and Leigh Star 2009) 'other', 'none' or 'not applicable' in surveys). Categories are like standards, then, in that they are 'always already incomplete and inadequate compared to some ideal character' (Lampland & Leigh Star, 2009, p. 14). All standards require some degree of classification – of agreement of what things are and what sets some things apart from other things. And just as with standardisation, the process of classification is one that is usually invisible in the meeting with the final product – a category. However, all classifications are not standardised. As Bowker and Star point out, we humans do much ad hoc classification in our daily lives. Teachers, for instance, may organise their teaching material based on level of difficulty (often naming levels, such as A-, B- and C-level).

Bowker and Star go on to suggest a methodological move that they call 'infrastructural inversion' that aims to make visible the work of standards, categories, technical systems, ecologies and people that often operate smoothly and invisibly in the background. It 'means recognising the depths of interdependence of technical networks and standards, on the one hand, and the real work of politics and knowledge production on the other' (2000, p. 34). The first methodological departure point to infrastructural inversion is taking seriously the ubiquity of classification and standardisation as well as their interdependence – systems for standardisation and classification are usually interdependent and followingly difficult to extricate from one another (elsewhere Leigh Star has together with Martha Lampland described how standards are nested within each other, 2009). The second is that classification and standards are *material* as well as symbolic (echoing the notion presented earlier of documents as material semiotic artefacts). They are built into the material world around us, in the way that things are or are not accessible to us, the way that they are expected to work, their aesthetic features and so on. The third point of departure concerns the indeterminacy of the past, which is another way of saying that our narratives about the past are constructed and that the categories we use to describe the past are sometimes anachronistic (especially in the more distant past) and simply might have been otherwise. There is a multivocality embedded in the past that is evident not only in constructivist analysis of narratives of the past, but also in the way that the past is constantly being revised in light of new knowledge. The fourth theme concerns the practical politics of classifying and standardising. This is described as twofold: it partly concerns the work of arriving at categories and standards, and then 'deciding what will be visible or invisible within the system' (Bowker & Leigh Star, 2000, p. 44).

In the previous chapter it was mentioned that Jacobsson and Martinell Barfoed's book about digitalisation and paperwork in the sector of social work in Sweden emphasised the role of standardisation in their analysis (Jacobsson & Martinell Barfoed, 2019). Due to the book's topical and methodological affinity with this project, their analysis provides some insights about the particular role of standardisation for the way that document demands and document work manifest in the Swedish education sector. Jacobsson and Martinell Barfoed argue that the demands for equality and equity, quality and control within the sector of social work are driving forces behind the far-reaching processes of standardisation in this sector. This standardisation, in turn, requires that social work becomes *measurable* (we will deal with this in more detail in the next section) and uses a *common language* (2019, p. 61). In material terms (recall Bowker and Star's insight that standards are also material), the strive for standardisation is intimately connected to the expanding digitalisation of social work (2019, 63). The digital infrastructures and systems used within the sector of social work usually have broad aims and are able to turn a single piece of data into measurements for a wide variety of purposes, some intended and some not (we will see how this is true for digital systems within the education systems also). The authors demonstrate the considerable work that goes into making the messy reality that the social workers encounter fit into the neatly standardised grids and forms of the digital systems. They note that despite the documents being standardised, the work with filling out the document is much less so, leading them to describe the documentation work with these documents as *situated* rather than standardised (2019, p. 92). Furthermore, there is a risk that form steals time from content when filling out the documents, spending considerable time dealing with technical issues, semantic weighing of clients' needs on a numeric scale and other administrative concerns (2019, 66).

Importantly, Jacobsson and Martinell Barfoed also note that the development towards 'increased standardisation within social work is surrounded and guided by an optimistic expectation to fulfil *multiple purposes*' (Jacobsson & Martinell Barfoed, 2019, p. 66, my translation). In their conclusion, Jacobsson and Martinell Barfoed argue that this optimistic expectation is frequently not met and that the use of the same 'instrument' (a common term to refer to these standardised digital tools) for multiple purposes risk rendering each of the purposes largely redundant (2019, p. 85). The multiple purposes of digital systems within social sector work – individual assessments, organisational planning, national and international comparisons as well as research – are strikingly similar to those we see in the education system.

Statistics and Quantification

The topics of statistics and quantification are closely related to the topics of standardisation and classification (to illustrate, Lampland and Leigh Star's aforementioned book was titled *Standards and Their Stories: How Quantifying, Classifying, and Formalizing Practices Shape Everyday Lif*e (2009)). These processes implicate and enable each other and all have important consequences for how and what we can know about the world around us, which will be a recurring theme throughout this thesis. Quantification has been defined as 'the production and communication of numbers' (Espeland & Steven, 2008, p. 402) and as 'the representation of some action, being or model through numbers' (Lampland & Leigh Star, 2009, p. 9). Statistics play a crucial part in contemporary knowledge production. Some scholars even argue that statistics and society are mutually constructed (see for instance Desrosières, 1998; Porter, 2020 [1995]; Rudinow Sætnan et al., 2011). The kind of knowledge that society generates about itself (their number of people, what people to count and not, their resources, their comparative standing vis-à-vis other societies and so on) is central to a society's understanding of itself, its boundaries, purpose and policies. Analogously, attempts within the education system to know and learn about schools are almost invariably based on statistics about these schools. This goes beyond the internal mechanisms of the education system, however, as numbers and statistics are frequently used by journalists, parents and other actors when they seek to know about and make truth-claims about schools.

Along these lines it is also easy to make the connection to governmentality; statistics as a tool for the production of knowledge-claims also becomes a 'tool for governance' (Rudinow Sætnan et al., 2011, p. 9) as it is used as a way to hold people or organisations accountable. Svein Hammer and Sigrunn Tvedten (2011) explore one such instance when the Norwegian government launched 'Skoleportalen' ('The School Portal'), a web-based quality assessment tool that collected statistics on various performance indicators from all Norwegian schools, thereby making the schools accountable for the results that were presented on the website. Hammer and Tvedten described this process as 'governing schools by numbers' (2011). There is no doubt that numbers play a significant role in how schools are governed, how resources are allocated and how accountability and transparency are achieved. They are also important in how schools self-present to attract pupils. However, there are several examples, not least in my empirical data that will be discussed later, of numbers *not* having the desired effect and being used for entirely different purposes than intended. We can briefly consider two examples not from my own empirical data that illustrate this. The first is from a newspaper article that will be discussed more in-depth in chapter six. Here the topic is the number of incident reports – reports that school staff file when it comes to their knowledge that a pupil has been subject to degrading treatment – at various schools in Malmö municipality. When asked how they think that the number of incident reports affects the parents' school choice for their children, the headteacher interviewed says: 'Not very much. A school often has a firmly rooted reputation in the city and that is difficult to break' (Persson, 2019, my translation). Apparently, there might other things at work that govern parents' school choice than numbers – reputation, it seems, is neither built nor demolished by numbers alone. The other example illustrates how the 'governing by numbers' can also be appropriated by workers as a way to strategically make visible a problem at their workplace so as to force decision-makers to act upon a situation. In their book *Hidden Attractions of Administration* (2021), Åkerström et al. discuss the use of the incident report but from the perspective of social workers. The fact that incident reports become statistics that are taken as truths about the organisation is used by the workers through a strategy that the authors call 'reporting *en masse*'. By reporting every single incident meticulously (and sometimes exaggeratedly), the aim is to make visible a problem so as to make clear that the organisation is struggling, that it affects the clients and by extension to put pressure on management and politicians (2021, 117).

The strategy of governing by numbers, then, can fail, be thwarted or simply amount to nothing. What is interesting, however, is how quantification and statistical representation is by default taken as the optimal mode through which we can know and make decisions about school matters even though it is clearly the case that these representations sometimes openly fail at providing clarity or ways forward. This appeal of quantification is the main conundrum in Theodore Porter's influential book *Trust in Numbers: The Pursuit of Objectivity in Science and Public Life* (2020 [1995]). In this book, Porter theorises about the allure of quantification in social science research, policy making, business development and other domains outside of the natural sciences. Courses of action that are decided from numbers have 'at least the appearance of being fair and impersonal' (Porter, 2020 [1995], p. 8), a quality they gain in part from their association with scientific objectivity.

Objectivity, moreover, is a protean concept, variously a metaphysical, a methodological and a moral concern (Daston, 1992). The kind of objectivity that Porter bases his analysis upon is one that he has borrowed from Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison and their work on the history of objectivity (cf. Daston, 1992; Daston & Galison, 1992), namely that of *mechanical objectivity*.[21] Mechanical objectivity is that kind of objectivity that is defined by its striving to eliminate human interference in the production of knowledge about a thing (an object, a phenomenon, an idea etc). This ideal of objective knowledge is the result of rigorous adherence to rules and formalised procedure, with the happy consequence that the resulting knowledge is uncontaminated by human expectations, experiences, desires, interests or any other type of bias. It 'lets nature speak for itself' (Daston & Galison, 1992, p. 81). Importantly, Daston and Galison argued, the rise of mechanical objectivity in the mid-19th century also entailed a moralisation of objectivity. Daston and Galison are mainly preoccupied with this process of moralisation as attached to the development of a specific kind of scientific persona, characterised by self-restraint and asceticism.

Porter draws on this conceptualisation of mechanical objectivity but explains how the moral dimensions of mechanical objectivity can aid us in understanding the pivotal position of numbers (as deducted from scientific reasoning based on mechanical objectivity) in areas *outside* the scientific communities and especially in public life. Indeed, in his book he reverses the idea that demands for scientific rigour and objectivity spilled over into the public sphere and argues that it was as much the case that social and political demands put pressure on all kinds of expert

[21] Although Porter borrows the concept of mechanical objectivity from Daston and Galison and makes particular use of the moral dimensions of this concept, the authors diverge on a number of analytical conclusions drawn from the concept, which became especially clear in Daston and Galison's book on the history of objectivity from 2007. Their main concern is the emergence of objectivity as a scientific ideal in the mid-19th century that is intrinsically connected to the production of a scientific subject. The dominance of mechanical objectivity is described as spanning from the mid-19th to mid-20th century and they place emphasis on mechanical objectivity's preoccupation with uniqueness, particularity and individuality of its object as well as the focus on rules and formal – mechanical procedure. Porter's elaboration of the role of mechanical objectivity in public life deals mainly with the moral and rule-driven aspects of mechanical objectivity and in this area, he sees no evidence of mechanical objectivity losing ground.

and scientific knowledge to pursue the route of mechanical objectivity. The ideal of objectivity, Porter argues, is both political and scientific (p. 74). Here, objectivity becomes simultaneously an ideal of knowing, in the sense of being a conveyor of truth or what is real, and a moral value, in the sense of being a way of making impersonal and just decisions. It is a kind of objectivity that lays claim to truths that are established beyond the social processes through which they are demarcated, established and presented, a feat that Porter deems impossible. Regardless of the degree to which scientific investigation can produce or extract truths about the world – and on this topic Porter refrains from taking a position – it must do so through social processes (Porter, 2020 [1995], p. 11). Objectivity to Porter, then, is an achievement and the ideal of mechanical objectivity never fully attainable. He also argues that this in itself is not a controversial position to take and that there is a wide consensus that scientific knowledge requires expert judgment and tacit knowledge and collaboration to be established. He observes, however, that this inherent messiness (or social achievement) is generally ignored when the knowledge is presented in public life. Here, the knowledge is usually plain and simple the outcome of that 'mythical, unitary "scientific method"' (p. 7).

Porter argues that objectivity has a particularly strong hold in political democracy, and more in public than in private affairs, because our system of authority privileges rules by law and disinterested knowledge. Porter claims that

> 'in public affairs, reliance on nothing more than seasoned judgment seems undemocratic, unless that judgment comes from a distinguished commission that can be interpreted as giving representation to the various interests. Ideally, expertise […] should be grounded in specific techniques sanctioned by a body of specialists. Then mere judgment, with all its haps and idiosyncrasies, seems almost to disappear.' (2020 [1995], p. 7).

Scientific objectivity, then, 'provides an answer to a moral demand for impartiality and fairness' (ibid.:8).

Quantification has been further discussed in Wendy Nelson Espeland and Mitchell L. Steven's article 'A Sociology of Quantification' (2008). Here, in order to emphasise the need to foreground practice and not take the use of numbers for granted, they bring in Austin's speech act theory and compare numbers to words:

> 'like words, numbers also can be evaluated in terms other than their accuracy as representations, although accuracy is a common criterion for evaluating numbers' (Espeland & Steven, 2008, p. 403).

Espeland and Stevens describe a distinction between two different common uses of quantification: marking and commensuration. Marking refers to numbers that are used to identify people, locations and object but not measure them (like a school's class list). Commensuration refers to quantification that creates a metrical relationship between the objects, turning difference into quantity (2008, p. 408).

Most statistics that aim to provide some kind of knowledge about schools are positioned at the commensuration end of this spectrum. And commensuration, Espeland and Stevens remind us, always require 'considerable social and intellectual investments' (ibid.). The authors emphasise that measuring on a large scale requires a considerable infrastructure of financial and material investment, trained personnel, time, discipline, coordination, and political muscle (this observation is not unlike Bowker and Star's focus on the infrastructure behind large-scale standardisation efforts).

Measuring as a practice, especially on a large and coordinated scale, has various effects. Measures are reactive insofar as they affect how people think and act. They structure relations of power by 'affecting how resources, status, knowledge and opportunities are distributed' (Espeland & Steven, 2008, p. 412). Measures also obfuscate grey zones and variations through presenting clear distinctions between the things that they measure. Drawing on Porter, Espeland and Stevens also argue that the 'enduring appeal and utility of quantification is that it facilitates the production of knowledge that transcends and integrates particularities of place, language and custom' (p. 432). It is in this sense that statistics become important tools as they aim to produce knowledge that is 'independent of the particular people who made it' (Porter, 2020 [1995], p. ix).

The relationship between statistics and that which it seeks to measure has been theorised extensively by French scholar Alain Desrosières (Desrosières, 1991, 1998, 2001, 2015). In his book *The Politics of Large Numbers: A History of Statistical Reasoning* (1998), he outlines the problem like this:

> 'As references, [the objects of statistical analysis] must be perceived as indisputable […] How then should we conceive a debate that turns on precisely these objects? […] The controversies can be placed into two categories, depending on whether they concern only the measurement, or the object itself. In the first case, the reality of the thing being measured is independent of the measuring process. It is not called into question. The discussion hinges on the way in which the measurement is made, on the "reliability" of the statistical process, according to models provided by the physical sciences or by industry. In the second case, however, the existence and definition of the object are seen as conventions, subject to debate. […] it is difficult to think *simultaneously* that the objects being measured really do exist, and that this is only a convention.' (Desrosières, 1998, p. 1, italics in original)

The 'things' of statistical analysis, Desrosières argues, are paradoxically simultaneously real and conventions. While the authors described above refrain from taking a position on the issue of realism, Desrosières sees it as necessary to take *both* a realist and nonrealist position vis-à-vis statistics. He elaborates upon this by arguing that statistics are situated firmly in a position where they both have a descriptive and prescriptive viewpoint in that they both seek to provide objective knowledge and explanation, *and* be the basis for action (Desrosières is particularly concerned with the state as the site for this action) (1998). This puts statistics in a particular tension between 'the claim to objectivity and universality, on the one hand, and the powerful conjunction with the world of action, on the other' (p. 7). Echoing the point by Porter above, Desrosières states that the rationality of a decision 'is linked to its ability to derive support from things that have a stable meaning, allowing comparisons to be made and equivalences to be established' (p. 6). The critical point, which will be evident in the analytical chapters to come, is that this support is dependent on how embedded the meaning of 'the thing' is in systems of reports and alliances of networks between humans and things[22] (the more embedded, the more real, according to Desrosières). Relatedly, the thing's success (or the reality of the thing being measured) is also, as Desrosières argues in a later text, dependent on the user's trust in the data-production phase of the statistical argument (Desrosières, 2001). The statistics that teachers are often presented with at meetings, working groups and in emails from the management are often about the school organisation. Furthermore, the data that underlies these numbers or figures is often collected by the teachers – collated from their documentation. For teachers, then, it is not unusual that dissonance arises when they are confronted *both* with the indisputable objects of statistical analysis *and* the 'chaos of countless singular observations' (Desrosières, 1998, p. 323) that these indisputable objects are based on but never reducible to.

The Omnipotence of Seeing

Visibility has a particular ontological status in contemporary organisations and institutions: that which we can *see* is commonly equated with that which we can *know.* In my empirical material, the usefulness of documents was frequently framed as related to the vision they enabled. Documents were described as awarding people both within and beyond the school building with the ability to 'see' the various parts of the organisation, such as performances, pupils, behavioural trends, anomalies and so on. Quantity often mattered here: it was commonly assumed that the *more* documents one could 'see' with, the more, or the more accurately, one would know. Just as often as this ocular potential of documents was heralded, however, it was subject to scrutiny and mistrust: can we trust what we see? What use do we have of this overview? Might there be more to what the documents show us? As will be evident in the chapters to come, these questions about visibility cannot be disentangled from the processes of standardisation and quantification described above. Indeed, the issue of visibility is latent in most of the academic work described above. For instance, Daston and Galison described the strive for objectivity as tantamount to a strive for 'blind sight', a position from where one could see (and therefore know) the world without the interference of the idiosyncrasies of the seer

[22] This notion of what makes a social fact, or what makes things that hold, has its origin in actor-network theory, and particularly the work of Bruno Latour.

(Daston & Galison, 2007). Visibility is intrinsically entangled with quantification, statistics and standardisation. In fact, Bowker and Leigh Star described it as their job to 'find tools for seeing the invisible' (2000, 5). In developing these tools, they described one central element in their method of infrastructural inversion as being concerned with *visibility issues* (2000, p. 44). That is, of asking what and who becomes visible or invisible through the mechanisms of standardisation and classification. Furthermore, who has the mandate to delineate, negotiate and make decisions about this in/visbility and who are the decisions being made for? Moreover, these authors highlighted how the *work* of standardising itself becomes invisible, making its outcome seem all the more durable. Correspondingly, Jacobsson and Martinell Barfoed noted the invisibility of the authors of standardised forms and that the texts appear as authorless (Jacobsson & Martinell Barfoed, 2019). Quite contrary to being authorless, Jacobsson and Martinell Barfoed demonstrate how standardised forms are in fact usually 'crowded places' (a concept borrowed from McLean and Hoskin 1998) where several different actors have been involved in the development and fine-tuning of the forms.

Quantification and statistics, too, are concerned with making visible relationships, people, objects, change over time and other phenomena (Espeland & Lom, 2015; Espeland & Steven, 2008). Espeland and Lom even argue that visibility *in itself* is often a motive for quantification (2015, p. 19). Quantification and statistics as visibility technologies begs many of the same questions as standardisation as a technology of visibility does. Primarily, these technologies do not create visions in the sense of providing a window to the world but create visions that are always a result of restrictions placed by the technology itself and the socio-material circumstances of its application. It is the *production* of these visions that concern researchers such as Espeland and Steven (2008) and Espeland and Lom (2005). By understanding these visions as a result of strategies, decisions, accidents and various socio-material circumstances, one can also provide an analysis of the politics of visibility and, particularly, how visibility is entwined with the exercise and resistance to power (see especially Espeland and Lom (2005)).

Documents as 'inscription devices', described by Latour and Woolgar's (1986) and Latour (1986, 1987), are also fundamentally concerned with visibility: scientists' use of inscription devices is largely concerned with making visible things that are invisible to the naked eye (their objects of analysis). The ways in which documents as inscription devices enable us to *see* something, for instance a topic or a problem, is a central concern for historian Hilde Reinertsen in her dissertation on evaluation practices in Norwegian foreign aid (2016). Here, she asks how Norwegian foreign aid was made an evaluable object and how the evaluation efforts contributed to the transformation of the field of foreign aid during the 1980s. The desire develop evaluation tools for Norwegian foreign aid arose from a critique concerning the opacity of the effects of aid. However, in order to evaluate foreign aid, there needed to be *something* to evaluate and that something needed to be accessible and legible to people without experience from the aid site. Thus, documents and practices of documentation came to play the main parts when Norwegian foreign aid was reorganised as an evaluable object. Reinertsen demonstrates how early attempts at making Norwegian foreign aid evaluable departed from on an assumption that *knowing* is equated with *seeing* (2016, p. 82). To address these issues, Reinertsen develops the concept of *evaluation optics* to 'describe how evaluation tools and routines enabled staff to both see aid and do aid differently' (2016, 15). These tools and routines, that were developed in order to 'enable an external gaze upon aid' (309), mainly consisted of documents; writing, circulating, reading, analysing and storing documents.

Concluding Remarks

This chapter has aimed at preparing the reader for the analytical chapters to come by outlining the theoretical and conceptual framework that I rely on in order to address the aim of the thesis and the research questions introduced at the outset. I have divided the chapter into two, each part focusing on a central concern for the way that this thesis addresses its topic. The first part explained what I mean by foreground documents in my analysis and the second part elucidates what processes might have to be placed under a sociological lens on in order to understand the multiple purposes of documents.

Foregrounding documents was explained as a twofold exercise where, in the first instance, material semiotics was activated as a way to take seriously documents as bearers of meaning and words that refer to something outside themselves, and that are interpreted by various actors in various ways, while also taking seriously the material capacities of documents in that documents are also things that have properties that affect how they can be distributed, what they can contain, how they are legible, which status they are awarded and so on. The concept of affordances, as theorised by Davis (2020) was also discussed as a way to analyse materiality. In the second instance it was emphasised that documents are part and parcel of organisational and institutional practice. Documentation is not merely an effect of an organisational structure, but ingrained and tantamount to that structure. These are, as we will see in the next chapter, not only theoretical approaches to documents and documentation but also methodological.

The multiple purposes of documents – although not listed specifically here – are often enabled by processes of standardisation, quantification and of making things visible. I have emphasised social scientific perspectives on these processes that take seriously the accomplishment of these processes as being always social, always situated in the everyday lives of people. In this way, the theoretical underpinnings of my analysis are inseparable from my methodological approach, consisting of fieldwork and of following the everyday workings of teachers and documents in schools.

4. Methods and Methodological Considerations

The methods, theory, aim and research questions posed in this thesis are intricately entwined. All have changed to varying degrees throughout the years and as one changed, another would often follow and so the work of completing this thesis has been accomplished. However organic this may sound, the changes that have triggered each other and, in the end, resulted in this thesis have not been predestined to follow each other but have always been the outcome of negotiation, chance, selection and rejection. In this chapter I wish to write this journey, making it coherent but not so coherent as to wipe up all the mess. After all, one can hardly remain ignorant of my efforts at exposing other people's tricks and struggles to organise and contain the messy, ephemeral world in neat, enduring documents by organising and containing these tricks and struggles in the highly formalised document of a thesis. This affinity between what we do as researchers and what our informants do, as the previous chapter showed us, has been brought to light by document researchers before me. So in this chapter, I wish to honour this affinity by writing out the process that preceded this text as something messier than a series of rational decisions based on a coherent, scientific logic and 'discoveries' of the constitution of the world 'out there'. Most of the mess has been cleaned up at this point. It has been a meticulous cleaning process, not a 10-minute sweep-up before the guests arrive, so there are careful considerations behind why, and strategies for how, things are lined up, put, or discarded in the way that they are. To keep with the metaphor, these reasons and strategies are akin to what we call methodology and methods. Lastly, it made little sense to put 'all the ethical stuff' at the end of the chapter – as is otherwise our custom – so while there is such a section, many ethical considerations are embedded in the description of how this research was carried out.

Planning a Study and Entering a Field

The majority of the data I have collected for this thesis has been collected through fieldwork. When I look back at this project, the ambition to do fieldwork has been the most constant aspect of my project planning, along with a dedication to study documentation. In part, with a background in anthropology, it is the method that I am trained in. Mainly, however, I knew that the kind of interest that I had in documents required data from inside the walls of the school. This is where I had myself encountered these documents and become curious about them. It was also clear that documents were intricately tied up in the social action and organisation of schools in ways that are not fully accessible from the outside, from the documents themselves or from teachers' reconstructions of events.

Documents are often mundane and tend to analytically disappear behind 'real' action, even when they are instrumental in making 'real' action possible in the first place (Asdal & Reinertsen, 2022; Jacobsson, 2022; Prior, 2003; Riles, 2006). Document work is often considered peripheral to the 'actual' work that teachers are supposed to do (that is planning for teaching, teaching, assessing). Dorothy Smith refers to an 'ordinary invisibility' of work like documentation and highlights how this is problematic when doing interviews. '[…] it is extraordinarily difficult to get people – often teachers, social workers, people working in institutional contexts – to talk about their work. It is difficult to get behind the professional language.' (Smith, 2003, p. 64). In my case, the discourse on burdensome document work and administrative demands is so established that getting teachers to talk *about* document work is not a problem – on the contrary, my experience is that teachers are generally very keen to talk about this topic and have given it extensive thought. It is, however, significantly more difficult to get them to *describe* their document work. Here the problem of the 'ordinary invisibility' of documents comes in. Documents are so ubiquitous and teachers engage with them so frequently and inconspicuously throughout each day that it becomes difficult to extract all the aspects of document work during an interview. Usually, such a description will be a list of the most common documents that they interact with. This, however, leaves out some significant aspects of document work. For instance, the time it can take to *find* a document, the time spent 'clicking' around on various digital platforms to document correctly, the interruptions that can take place during one's document work, the time and place for documenting, the asking for help from colleagues or school leaders to document correctly, the effort spent on choosing the right words and so on and so on. These things are, however, very visible once one steps into the organisation and observes the work that goes on. Elizabeth, who I followed during many, many of her workdays explained that she herself had been surprised by this after I had been around a few days: 'When you told me why you wanted to come along instead of just interviewing, I at first thought "fine, but I am pretty sure that I know what and how we document things fairly well, so I could just tell you during an interview", but when you actually came here I started seeing documents *everywhere* – and a lot more places than I would have thought of at first. It's just that you don't think about it, sometimes it's just something you do.'

From early project plans I can see that I had a fairly stringent anthropological, even Malinowskian[23] (2005 [1922]), idea of the kind of fieldwork I would be doing. I would find a school, preferably one that housed all the compulsory school years and that was located in a demographic area that attracted students from various socio-economic backgrounds, and that school would become my 'island' in anthropological terms. I would immerse myself and spend a year at this proposed school, observing the 'imponderabilia of actual life' among the native teachers (Malinowski, 2005 [1922], p. 15). Currently, however, I have done fieldwork at four different schools for different periods of time and more or less extensively. Two schools I have followed over a longer period of time (4 months and 8 months respectively), one school I followed more intensively during a two-week period and one school I only visited for fieldwork once (but I returned to the school once for an interview). Outside the context of fieldwork, I have conducted semi-structured interviews with five headteachers, five teachers, one civil servant and one focus group interview with five teachers. One of the teachers and one of the headteachers have been interviewed twice. The first interviews were conducted in 2020 and the last follow-up interviews were conducted in 2023. Most interviews were conducted during the same period as my fieldwork (2020-2022). My research – fieldwork and interviews – spans over five different municipalities and a total of eight different schools in the south of Sweden. I also did some digital fieldwork with preschool teachers. The reason for the variation in duration and intensity of the fieldwork at the different schools is mainly due to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and the effects this had on my data collection.

Delimitations

Ultimately, the data collection that I did with preschool teachers has been excluded from the final analyses for this study. The same goes for the interview I conducted with a civil servant. The data from the preschool teachers is excluded on account of this becoming a study on documentation in compulsory schools. The civil servant that I interviewed worked in a municipal administrative unit for compulsory schools and the plan had been to interview more civil servants to gain an understanding of how documents travel within the education system. Ultimately, however, there was not enough time to pursue this research interest to the full extent. This means that the scope of the study is then limited to the study of compulsory school teachers (and to a lesser degree headteachers) who are employed at municipal schools in the

[23] Bronislaw Malinowski was a Polish-British anthropologist who is usually attributed with the 'invention' of participant observation and ethnographic fieldwork. Due to the onset of the first world war, a research trip to the Trobriand Islands became significantly longer than planned and as a result Malinowski's book *Argonauts of the Western Pacific (1922)* emphasised a research method where the researcher spend extensive periods of time immersing himself in the daily lives of his informants, all the while trying to 'grasp the native's point of view'.

south of Sweden. One of the teachers that I interviewed was then employed at an independent school but had previously worked at a municipal school. Conversely, a few of the teachers I encountered at municipal schools had previously worked at independent schools. The decision to focus my research on municipal schools was motivated primarily on the ground that most compulsory schools in Sweden, almost 80%, are municipal (Skolverket, 2024c). But there are other reasons for this decision. Significantly, documents have a particular position within the independent school system compared to the municipal school system, as the former does not fall under the Swedish Principle of Public Access to Official Records ('offentlighetsprincipen'). This means that independent schools are not obliged to share their documents at request in the same way that municipal schools are. The motivation for this is primarily related to business confidentiality. As market actors they have a right to keep results, reports and other documents undisclosed so as to not interfere with their competitive position on the market. The other argument, somewhat amusingly, pertains to the amount of administration that it would entail for independent schools (especially smaller ones) to develop the documentary infrastructure needed for a system that works under the Swedish Principle of Public Access to Official Records (Friskolornas riksförbund, 2020; Huss, 2024). If anything, this division between independent schools and municipal schools serves to remind us of the way that access and non-access to documents is intricately involved in mechanisms of governance, influence and sovereignty. Another reason to not include independent schools is that in the past few years there has been a growing critique against tax-funded, profit-seeking independent schools, even from politicians who have previously been supporters of the Swedish system for independent schools (see for instance Letmark, 2024a; Mattmar & Magnusson, 2016 [2013]; Olsson, 2024b). Furthermore, journalists have exposed a number of cases of misappropriation of funds or mismanagement at independent schools (some recent examples are Barkman, 2024; Leijnse & El-Alawi, 2024; Letmark, 2023, 2024b). There is a risk that this could affect independent schools' trust in outside actors – such as a researcher – spending longer periods of time at their premises. All of these factors contributed to my decision to limit my research to municipal schools.

During my data collection, I have left out details concerning one type of documentation that teachers do quite a lot, which is the documentation that contains sensitive data about pupils. The primary reason for this is not only that the process of collecting such data during fieldwork would be very ethically challenging, but I also felt that it might reduce my chances of getting access to schools in the first place. In hindsight, I am almost certain that this would have been the case. This is a limitation to this study, seeing as teachers spend much time on these documents, discussing details and wordings with their colleagues and so on. However, this does not mean that I ignored the way that teachers worked with these documents. Without divulging the content of the documents or some specific circumstances that led to their production (such as the teachers' perception of a pupil's performance or behaviour), I could still refer to what *kind* of document the teacher was working with and a very general description of how they did so. For example, that a teacher sat for 25 minutes writing an incident report, struggling with choosing the appropriate words. I could also, of course, write down what teachers generally thought about these kinds of documents and document practices without getting into specific cases about pupils.

Both fieldwork and interviews have been conducted with teachers and headteachers at all three levels of compulsory school: lower years F-3[24], middle years 4-6, and higher years (secondary school) 7-9.

Gaining Access

My first gatekeeper was a document and in February 2020, my project was approved by the Swedish Ethical Review Authority. In March 2020, Sweden 'shut down' as a result of the rapidly growing COVID-19 pandemic. Presently, we know what the next two years would look like, with restrictions not being finally lifted until April 2022 in Sweden. In March 2020, however, there was still much confusion and uncertainty and it took a few months until most of us realised that all research that involved physically meeting other people would have to be moved online or reworked so as to avoid meeting people altogether. Even though schools in Sweden stayed open throughout the pandemic, everyone except pupils and school staff were kept away from school premises. Needless to say, my immersive island-fieldwork would have to be discarded entirely. While I managed to get in the odd interview and even a couple of days of participant observation during the brief stints of lower infection rates, by and large the work of teachers remained within the walls of the school institutions that I could not have access to. After some extremely stressful and largely meaningless months for my project, I did something sensible: I had another baby and told my partner that I refused to go back to work before the pandemic was over. So when I returned to work in April 2022, I had a fresh start at gaining access to schools to do fieldwork and this time it went a lot better.

To be fair, 'a lot better' also implied a significant portion of rejection, interviews that never came to be and emails that were never responded to. Most fieldworkers have experienced some level of rejection and gaining access is associated with a not insignificant amount of anxiety and dread (see for instance Davies, 2008). To write these out of the narrative completely would seem untruthful and unwarranted self-praise, even though the ultimate outcome of the labour was access to large amounts of data on teachers' opinions, experiences and concrete work with documents.

Arguably the most dreaded part of fieldwork is gaining access. At three of the four schools I gained access to the field through doing interviews with the

[24] In 2018, the preparatory schoolyear before your start Year 1, called 'preschool class' ('förskoleklass') and often referred as just 'F', became compulsory, increasing the years of mandatory education in Sweden from 9 years to 10 years.

headteacher. At the fourth school I gained access through an interview with a teacher. To gain access through interviews was not planned from the beginning. Indeed, interviews had not been planned at all from the beginning. I had at the outset envisioned some semi-structured interviews as part of the immersive fieldwork but due to the pandemic, interviews became the kind of data collection that I could do during brief periods of low infection rates. As I would also realise when it was time to reassume fieldwork, the interviews also gave the participants an opportunity to meet me and gain a certain amount of trust in me before they let me in into their daily working life.

The teachers and headteachers that have participated in this study have been enrolled in the study through different sampling strategies. I utilised my own network of people through my experiences within the education system. I also consulted established professional networks of various kinds.[25] Lastly, the 'snowball strategy' of getting access to more participants through already enrolled participants was used to expand the number of participants throughout the research process.

I knew, of course, that teachers and headteachers are pressed for time and that the presence of a curious researcher could easily be perceived as yet another work task. I was therefore careful to explain that my approach largely comprises observing teachers as they go about their work as they would anyway. To be as non-invasive as possible is often a goal for the fieldworker, but of course, there are limits to how invisible one can be and a new person in the staff room, at the meeting or in the classroom necessarily draws attention and requires something of the people around them. While in the field, I tried to compensate for this by being helpful whenever I could – helping pupils with their school work when needed and acting as much as I could as an assistant for the teacher throughout the day. Hopefully, some of my experiences from having worked in schools came to use this way.

Doing Fieldwork 'at Home'

In qualitative research in general, and in fieldwork in particular, your own position in relation to the object or people of your study has a long history of methodological and theoretical discussions (cf. Emerson, 2001; Geertz, 2017 [1973]). In my case, I am not a full member of the clan of teachers as I lack the educational background and my working experience is far too brief to compensate for such a lack (if it ever could). Yet I am not entirely an outsider either. Having worked at different schools for 2 ½ years, and particularly having the experience of working as a home teacher ('mentor') for a semester, I have more intimate knowledge of the workings of schools and the everyday lives of teachers than most non-teachers. This came with risks and benefits that I had to navigate and relate to throughout the research.

[25] These cannot be disclosed in more detail for confidentiality reasons.

One of the primary risks of conducting research ‘at home’ is the risk of taking for granted things that you should be curious about. The most commonly espoused method for counteracting this is by exoticizing the familiar and the mundane (cf. Alvesson, 2009, for a counterexample, see Riles 2000). Documentation holds a somewhat contradictory position in schools. It proliferates, is part of very mundane everyday activities and often disappears into the background but it is also a hotly debated topic, a site for contention and impossible to miss. As was outlined in the introductory chapter, what can be missed is the kinds of documents that are rarely or never mentioned in lunchroom discussions and that are never sites of contention, such as pupils’ working sheets, tests (except national tests, which are very much the centre of attention when they are held), class lists and so on. Generally, the document systems and documents that teachers themselves developed for their classrooms and teaching received far less attention during lunchroom discussions, meetings and interviews than those documents that were regulated on the school, municipal or national level.

Another element that I had to remain conscious of was that the idea for and ambition to do this project was born from my experiences from working within the system where I wished to do research. It is by no means uncommon that researchers conduct their studies on objects and in settings that they are interested in or fascinated by (and this can certainly be a strength considering the long time it takes to complete a scientific study). What I needed to remain conscious of, however, was the importance of letting my experiences guide me but not define the focus or outcome of the research. It is a fine line to walk and both ends of a spectrum of preconceptions are equally ineffective: entering the field as a tabula rasa is simply unachievable no matter how remote the research subject and, conversely, overstating your own significance in relation to the field or the analysis risks deflecting attention from the aim of the research and at its worst leads you into the murky waters of giving yourself as a researcher divine right to explicate the way that you understand the world and the world understands you (not to mention that it is tedious).

Not only was the idea for the project born from the observations that I had already made in schools, there were quite strong feelings of frustration attached to my curiosity towards the project. This is evident from my earliest project plans, where the words ‘iron cage’ and ‘covering one’s back’ (‘hålla ryggen fri’) figured more frequently than they do in the final outcome. The reason for this was, I assume, not that my feelings had ‘cooled down’ or that I could bracket my own experiences (in addition, I had the ‘hard numbers’ from union surveys and previous research that validated my experiences of frustration in relation to documentation). Rather, I think the reason why the ‘iron cage’ framing of my project became downplayed was that it is an entirely different experience to enter a school as a teacher – with responsibility for pupils’ safety and learning for an extended period of time – and as a researcher with absolutely no responsibility with regards to the pupils’ education. My sole focus was on the documents and what they were doing – or not doing – there. Thus, it struck me within the first few days of doing fieldwork how often documents are framed as solutions as well as problems and are used by teachers to many different ends.

The benefit of not being a complete novice in the field was that I could follow the conversations and discussions that went on from the very start. This proved immensely helpful as the time for my data collection had been cut short by the pandemic. Teachers and headteachers form a professional community wherein there is much technical jargon and references to rules and ways of working that are not obvious to everyone outside that community. Luckily, due to the extensive time that I have spent in schools, I already knew most of the acronyms that are thrown about ('EHT', 'SKA', 'IUP', 'APT') and I was already familiar with most of the document demands and what they entailed (pedagogical planning, additional adjustments, action programmes, incident reports, the Education Act, annual cycle plans ('årshjul') and so on). I knew the national curriculum, what kind of knowledge pupils were assessed on and how. I also knew the individual schools' relationship with the municipality and the state governing agencies and could therefore understand decisions and issues that arose as a consequence of these. Lastly, I knew the role of the other professional groups that work alongside teachers in the schools (teaching assistants, special needs teachers, psychologists, councillors and so on). This familiarity saved me from a large part of the strenuous period of wondering 'what on earth is going on?'. My institutional knowledge did take me a long way, but did not by any account preclude confusion, uncertainty, and moments of surprise. As has been stated before, the details concerning document systems, routines and requirements are so different between schools that I often had to ask who had sent the document, who it was for, its purpose, who it was accessible for, where it was kept and so on. One interesting observation, that I will return to in the analytical chapters, was how often a teacher could not at all or only partially provide answers to these questions.

Technical Bits: Studying People

The Fieldwork

School days have a very predictable pattern, so my days in the field mostly followed this pattern. Pupils arrive between 8 and 9 am and teachers arrive some time before the pupils (some days school leaders will have taken the opportunity to put in a morning meeting before the pupils arrive). In the lower years, the pupils' school days are shorter, there is one teacher per class and the teacher usually stays with their pupils until the school day is over. The rest of the day is spent planning (if it is one of those lucky days), documenting or attending meetings. In the higher years, the pupils' school days are longer and teachers are differentiated by the subjects that they teach. This gives these teachers a more irregular schedule with some hours here and there without teaching and where they can dedicate their time to planning (if it is one of those lucky days), documenting, attending meetings or substituting for a sick colleague. A few afternoons will be earmarked for meetings. During my fieldwork days, I arrived and left at the same time as the teachers. Usually I would be in touch with a specific teacher that I would meet up with in the morning and follow along throughout the day. I tagged along during the morning preparations, the classes with pupils, the afternoon preparations and documentations and meetings after the pupils had gone home. Everything within this predictable pattern, however, is much more variable. The somewhat perplexing mix between strict routine and utter unpredictability within a school day is difficult to describe. You might have every minute of the day planned, from which subjects are on the schedule, to when, where and with whom you will eat lunch (you will also know what you will eat for lunch), to which meetings you will attend and which staff room you will be hanging out in and when. And even when the day goes pretty much as planned (and it usually does), unforeseen events will occur, you will meet people you did not anticipate and become involved in or observe tasks that you did not expect. This means that while it certainly feels like there is a 'typical day in the field', it is exceedingly difficult to describe, save for the general overview that I started this passage with. This complexity is, of course, for many one of the great appeals of working at schools.

The first day, or days, of fieldwork were always spent introducing my project over and over again to new people. There were perks to this as it would often trigger discussions or thoughts on the topic from the teachers that I introduced myself to. I would also always be asked to introduce myself to the pupils in the classrooms I attended and here my introduction warranted no interest from the audience. I tried, to the best of my abilities, to help out during classes. My notetaking during class was extremely limited. Except for minor observations concerning documents – such as some teachers doing documentation work during class while pupils watched pedagogical videos about a topic – classroom time was spent as a quiet observer or a helping hand with practical matters or pupils' work.

Fieldnotes

The most cherished tool for my fieldwork was a little A5-sized notebook that I wrote fieldnotes in. This little notebook where I collected my data is really at the centre for most ethical deliberations, methodological quandaries and scientific accomplishments of this study. I told my informants that I only wrote down things that pertained to their work with or thoughts about documents. This means that my fieldnotes are not 'classic fieldnotes' in the capacity of being open to anything that goes on in the field. My focus was on documents, both in their physical presence at the schools and how they featured in discussions and conversations between school staff. This, however, is no narrow focus as documents and documentation proliferate within the walls of the school and its everyday ongoings.

To put things in text is a powerful thing, as this study is a testament to. And here, too, materiality matters. The choice of size for my notebook, A5, was made deliberately to make the notetaking seem less imposing. The decision to write by hand was also taken to make my notetaking seem more inconspicuous (in other contexts, a computer would have been the more inconspicuous alternative). Simultaneously, I knew that my notetaking was not – and should not – be invisible. Where, when and how my notetaking was made visible was often a result of ethical deliberations. During meetings and discussions, I would write notes without trying to hide the writing or the notebook in an attempt to make my process of collecting data from my observations as transparent as possible (the unfortunate fact that my handwriting is rather illegible was something that I could not adjust). Conversely, when I moved to a new situation, I was careful to turn the page of my notebook so that my notes where *not* visible to outsiders. To the extent that I wrote down names of teachers at all (and I usually only did this with the teacher that I spent more time with or interviewed), I used the fictional names I had given them. Many times, however, it was not necessary to write down any personal information about the teachers and for this reason many teachers are completely unidentifiable in my data. During meetings I would often just write 'a teacher says' unless it was relevant to specify details about the teacher (such as which subject they taught). Teachers do not talk about and do documentation all day. They sometimes talk about private matters, they sometimes discuss sensitive matters concerning pupils and they sometimes talked about things that were simply irrelevant to my study. In these cases, I would always close my notebook to show that I was not collecting data. Ultimately, the whereabouts and in/visibility of my little book was not coincidental but highly orchestrated.

The fieldnotes written by hand needed *promptly* to be written out on a computer without access to internet and stored on a password-secured hard drive. The haste was largely due to the incredible speed with which one's memory deteriorates, even when you have notes to help that memory. My fieldnotes consisted both of technical observations of documents and digital document systems and of teachers' conversations and stories. In fieldnote form, however, these consisted of mostly incomplete sentences, abbreviations and acronyms, sketches of documents and digital forms, and many arrows. The arrows could sometimes signify the steps one needed to take in a digital system, but often they were used to connect the fieldnotes. Sometimes – particularly during meetings, where I never intervened – things would be said that I did not immediately know how to contextualise or what they meant, but something would be said later that helped me understand what it was all about. Using arrows would then help me remember which piece of information had helped me understand another piece of information. At any rate, all of these things needed to be explicated as soon as possible after I came home from the field. Usually this would be after the kids had been put to bed in the evening and in worst-case it would have to be done the morning after.

Writing out fieldnotes is as tedious as it is important. To revisit almost every moment of your day immediately after the fact and writing it out in full sentences and as a coherent narrative is a strenuous task. It is, however, pivotal in order to retain the information that you have gathered in a coherent way. It can also function as an incipient step towards developing your analysis. As I wrote out my fieldnotes, I would sometimes make analytical observations about small conundrums or repetitions that might become significant. These analytical observations I would write as comments to the text, using the comment function in Microsoft Word so as to separate them from the fieldnotes themselves. Writing out fieldnotes would also invariably give rise to a number of questions, either of things I had missed while I was scribbling in the field or that I simply did not understand. These I would write in a separate document in order to remember to pick them up the next time I met the teacher involved.

The Interviews

In addition to the fieldwork, I have conducted semi-structured interviews with teachers, headteachers and one focus-group interview with five teachers. For the semi-structured interviews, I had prepared an interview guide that consisted of a number of areas that I would like to cover during the interview (in no particular order except for the first background questions). The guides were adapted to which professional group was being interviewed. The areas mainly read as a list of document demands that teachers (or headteachers) have. But I was also interested in what kind of meeting culture the teachers experienced at their schools (meetings are, as we will see, a common forum where documents are discussed and circulated) and which digital platforms they used and for what. In most cases, the interviews began with the interview guide by ticking off the background questions (years worked, career trajectory, kind of employment and subjects taught). For headteachers, I was also interested in how they managed the demands from the local education authorities and how they managed teachers' documentation. After the background questions were cleared, the interviews tended to take a much more informal route as the interview person described their thoughts and practices concerning documentation. Some interviewees had very strong ideas about documents and document work and would add their own analytical take on documentation. In these cases, I contributed to the conversation with my own experiences and thoughts, making the interview much more like a collaborative exploration of ideas rather than an interview. Other interviewees were more descriptive in their replies, giving me a much more detailed understanding of how they worked with documents. I largely let the teachers themselves decide which of these directions the interviews would take (and most interviews consisted of a bit of both). Usually, the conversation would naturally touch upon most points in my interview guide. Before rounding up the interview, however, I always consulted my interview guide to see whether there was any area that we had not covered.

I almost never reused the exact same interview guide twice. The interview guides expanded as I learned more about documentation practices and demands. As an example, my early interview guides did not include questions concerning teachers' parallel documentation of pupils' knowledge because I only noticed this practice after some time. Another example is how I approached the area of Systematic Quality Assurance. It took a few months before I fully appreciated the dual purpose of this documentation practice – as a mechanism for control and as a mechanism for instigating change – and so my first interviews did not ask explicitly about how this dual purpose was managed by the interview persons, and especially by headteachers. Lastly, the interview guides changed slightly depending on what I knew about the school and how they worked and the municipality they belonged to.

All interviews were between 1 hour and 2 ½ hours long. Seven of the interviews were recorded with a voice recorder. These recordings were later transcribed. At the interviews where I did not use a recorder, I took extensive notes by hand and then wrote everything over on a computer directly after the interview. A couple of interviews were carried out without the recorder because I could not guarantee that we would be alone in the room for the entire interview. For instance, a couple of interviews were carried out in staff rooms and even though the interview person and I were the only ones in the room at the time, there was no way of knowing if someone else who had not consented to be recorded would come in at any time. Apart from these practical circumstances, I also harboured an initial reluctance towards using a recorder during my interviews which derived from my inexperience and insecurity about the proper handling of this method. During my anthropological training, I have had extensive practice with fieldwork and the process of writing fieldnotes. I have never, however, practiced interviewing with a recorder and I wanted to be well prepared for it. Using a recorder has tremendous benefits; to be able to extract virtually every word from an interview as well as tone, pauses, sighs and chuckles gives one extremely rich data to depart from. It is, however, also an imposing little gadget. Despite my assurance that the recording would be stored safely in a digital space where only I had access, I am almost certain that my interview persons never completely forgot that they were being recorded. My main reason to think this was the nature of the discussions that took place after I had officially ended the interview and turned off the recorder. These discussions did not contradict the discussions that were on record per se, but they could go further, especially in their critique of management, political ideas and so on.

Analysis

The kinds of data collection described so far produce an incredible amount of text. My fieldnotes alone are around 150 pages of text. As mentioned in the previous section, a very incipient kind of coding began already as I was writing out my fieldnotes. However, most of the analytical work was done after the fieldwork had ended. In the first round, I coded my data according to two parallel principles – one that was based on what type of document practice was showing up in the material and one that was based on conceptual words or phrases ('hålla ryggen fri' or 'parallel documentation') or repetitions (i.e. 'looking for document'). Very early on, the topics for chapters six and seven stood out. The meeting in chapter six is what one can describe as a typical 'case' of processes that were recurring in my material. The perplexing practice of double documentation in chapter seven stood out as a classic conundrum where something that seemed unintuitive was in fact very commonplace and seemed to warrant an explanation. The process of coding and developing an analysis is an iterative process and I have gone back and forth between my analysis and my data many times. This is especially true for the analysis in chapter five of this thesis. It was not evident during the first round of coding that all of the empirical data that I cite in chapter five concerned the circular document process that I discuss there. This insight grew out of a mix of rereading my data from scratch (a process that I have done more often than I care to admit), reading up on document demands and guidelines from the national education authorities, reading previous research and thinking about the overarching aim of this thesis.

Again, the work of Dorothy Smith and her institutional ethnography can help us understand how to approach this complex relationship between the actualities of people's experiences and the institutional order of which they are a part:

> 'Institutional ethnography begins by locating a standpoint in an institutional order that provides the guiding perspective from which that order will be explored. It begins with some issues, concerns, or problems that are real for people and that are situated in their relationships to an institutional order.' (Smith, 2005, p. 32)

Smith also cautions the ethnographer that although the study departs from

> 'exploring the experience of those directly involved in the institutional setting, [these experiences] are not the objects of investigation. It is the aspects of the institutions relevant to the people's experience, not the people themselves, that constitute the object of inquiry' (Smith, 2005, p. 38).

The above descriptions resonate with how I have analytically approached my data. Teachers' experiences of documentation have not been the primary objects of inquiry, yet these experiences are crucial to the analysis. To understand how documents become seen as solutions to problems and as problems in and of themselves requires attention to the actual situations where the documents are activated. Analysis must not stop there, however, as these documents are connected to institutional processes that extend beyond the locality of one school. Documents, to continue with Smith, 'coordinate' actions both within and beyond the local setting (2005). The next section will concern how to study these documents.

Technical Bits: Studying Documents

To a large degree, my methodological approach to documents is inextricably linked to my theoretical approach to documents that I laid out in the previous chapter. I went into the field having read Smith (2005, 2005 [1990]), Hull (Hull, 2003, 2012a, 2012b), Riles (2000, 2006) and Prior (2003). All of these scholars have had considerable methodological ambition as well as theoretical (especially Riles and Smith emphasise that their contribution is as much methodological as theoretical). There is, then, a risk that a prolonged methodological discussion becomes repetitive as it is too intimately linked to the approach to documents described in the previous chapter. I try to condense this discussion by tracing the process of studying documents in this project, asking that the reader keep in mind the approach to documents that underlies this study.

As mentioned, I went into the field with a number of excellent examples of how one could study documents ethnographically (Jacobsson & Martinell Barfoed's aforementioned book is also an example of this). Once in the field, I tried to approach documents in a very broad sense and not just those that had a municipal seal on them. My fieldnotes contained sketches of what document forms looked like, what they asked, where they were found and so on. I was also cautious to include instances where documents were included in conversations, even if the physical document itself was not present. In fact, moving beyond an understanding of documents as vehicles of discourse means expanding one's analysis of documents to include, and in some cases foreground, documents as they are brought to life through and structure action even at a (physical) distance. Somewhat counterintuitively, to study documents in action does not require their physical presence. Examples could include conversations about reporting absence, doctors' notes, questions about where to find things on digital platforms and so on. My notes also included many observations of teachers struggling with a printer, looking for worksheets, handing out worksheets, writing notes to themselves on little post-its, observations of what documents were laying around in the classrooms and staffrooms as well as many other little, mundane tasks that in themselves did not stick out but that in their sheer volume say something about the proliferation of documents. Take for instance this very brief exchange:

> On our way into the meeting, Elizabeth stops in front of the deputy headteacher and pulls out a document that is laying on the pile of two books and a computer that she is carrying with her into the meeting. Without saying a word, she hands over the document – face-down – to the deputy headteacher whose attention seems to be elsewhere but gives a slight nod and puts the document – still face-down – under her own computer.

This unremarkable exchange took only a few seconds but marked the establishment of something analytically interesting, which is how documents move within the school setting and the processes that these movements enable. In this case, I knew that the document contained a reference to a 'problem' that Elizabeth wanted to be addressed. That it contained sensitive information is evident from how both Elizabeth and the deputy headteacher handled the document – at no point was the text in the document visible to anyone in the meeting room. The deputy headteacher's placement of the document under her own laptop signals the document's sensitive nature even further. What is more, it is evident that the headteacher was expecting the document. The decision to refer a problem to a document, then, had been discussed and decided prior to this exchange. Incidentally, I had sat with Elizabeth while she filled out the document and knew the work that she had put into presenting the problem in a way that made it understandable to an outsider *and* that anticipated the kind of solution that she felt that she needed[26]. Handing over the document effectively meant handing over the problem (and its possible solution) to the school leadership. Had we cared to follow the document, however, we might have seen how it became tied up not only in the process of (hopefully) providing a solution to the problem that it referred to, but also how it travelled to other places. For instance, it is very likely that this document became one piece of data for the municipal statistics on this kind of documentation. Here, the document would then perhaps become evidence of a problem of a wholly different sort, such as a wider challenge for schools to handle a particular kind of event or pupil. This kind of statistics, furthermore, might become the basis for action of a different sort than the local actions taken at the school in response to the single document. All of this is to show that documents have ways of coordinating action at a distance and are involved in very complex ways in school governance, in solving practical issues, in making issues visible in the first place, in shifting responsibility and so on.

Although I went into the field with many examples of how to study documents ethnographically, it was not until after I was finished with my data collection that I received a more coherent overview of ethnographic or practice-oriented document research as a methodological approach. In 2022, I attended a two-week doctoral course titled 'Practice-Oriented Document Analysis' that was hosted at the University of Oslo. The course was based on Kristin Asdal and Hilde Reinertsen's book *Doing Document Analysis: A Practice-Oriented Approach* (2022). The authors of the book were also the teachers of the course and the attendants were PhD students across the social sciences and humanities (and from several different countries) whose projects in some way or another involved documents. The course, with help from both the teachers and the other students, provided an opportunity to discuss and further my knowledge and understanding of how one can include documents in qualitative research. The book introduces six methodological 'moves' as conceptual components to help us study documents. The six moves are 'document

[26] Given the sensitive nature of this document, I have no notes of the exact reasoning, only the general outline.

sites', 'document tools', 'document work', 'document texts', 'document issues' and 'document movements'. These describe different ways of conceptualising documents that allow us to ask different questions to what a document is, does or means. These are not discrete entities or mutually exclusive – one can address one's data with a combination of the 'moves' and some of them have overlapping points.

The point, then, is not necessarily to pick one or two and try to staunchly apply them to one's data. It is more a way of thinking about what kinds of questions you can ask from your material and the various analyses that qualitative analyses of documents can generate. These 'moves' frequently disappear from the final analytical framing of a chapter (with the notable exception of chapter six) but can be detected as underlying many approaches to documents. Consider the brief analysis of the short ethnographic excerpt that we just encountered. In this analysis, there is a latent understanding that documents *move* between different *sites*, that *issues* are established and transformed through these movements, by virtue of who the reader is and so on. It is also hinted that documentation like this requires *work* by multiple people and over an extended period of time. Finally, the document that Elizabeth handed over is quite clearly a kind of *tool* insofar as it strives to 'enable things to happen elsewhere' (Asdal & Reinertsen, 2022, p. 40). Concretely, it is a tool in the process of ameliorating the problem that Elizabeth has identified.

Many of the documents that teachers encounter and work with have trajectories that extend beyond the border of the schools themselves. They are sometimes tied up in legal requirements and regulations from the national education authorities (although, as we will see, the way in which they are so can be quite complex). Many of the formal documents that teachers handle are located in digital systems developed by profit-seeking companies and these profoundly influence document practices. Documents also travel to other parts of the education system, such as the local education authorities, where they may change and become tied up with other documents and new purposes. Different documents have different legal statuses and are to varying degrees accessible to different groups of people. Approaching the teachers' documents solely through teachers' interaction with them in the school setting, then, is insufficient for the purposes of this study.

The fact is that it has very often been crucial to situate a document or a document demand within the nexus of legal regulations, national guidelines and local regulations of which they are a part. This is not, as will be evident from the chapters to come, an easy task. Many document demands are, as Castillo and Ivarsson Westerberg (2019) demonstrated in their book that was discussed in chapter two, derived from different sources of governing. Often, however, it *is* important to understand these in order to make sense of what goes on in the schools. It is not so much that different governing texts, such as the Education Act, *determine* action (if it did, the need for fieldwork would be significantly reduced). Rather, and again following Smith, such documents can be analysed as 'providing the terms under which what people do becomes institutionally accountable' (Smith, 2005, p. 113).

What this has meant for my research process is that I have spent a considerable amount of time reading the Education Act, a multitude of guidelines and reports from the Swedish Education Authorities as well as the National Curriculum. These documents I have revisited countless times in the process of understanding the document demands that schools operate under and analysing the specific documentation practices that I studied in the field.

I have also explored municipal websites in order to learn what digital document systems they work with, what information about schools is made available to their citizens through their webpages and so on. I have then taken a closer look at the many digital systems that are used in schools to perform various tasks. These are, as mentioned, usually private companies and have both information, advertisements and tutorials available online. From these webpages I have saved many screenshots showing how they present their product and have transcribed some of their sales pitches. I have also transcribed some of the tutorials that are available in order to analyse how they propose that one use their product. In my analysis, I have used this data to compare and contrast how the digital platforms envision their usage and how teachers and headteachers experience their usage.

A Case of Following the Documents

For the most part, the documents produced in schools travel within the school setting or between different education authorities. However, the documents produced in municipal schools are subject to the Swedish Principle of Public Access to Official Records. This means that the documents are always potentially publicly available (sensitive information about individual people is redacted from the documents when they are retrieved). It means that pupils have the right to access all the documents that concern themselves. It also means that any actor has the right to access the documents produced in schools (in redacted versions where necessary). This technique is commonly used by journalists when they investigate education and school matters. The *potential* audience for many of the documents that teachers produce, then, is the entire Swedish population. Only a few of the teachers that I spoke to thought actively about this when they produced documents and according to some headteachers, *too few* teachers thought about this when they expressed themselves in documents. One headteacher that I interviewed emphasised the ethical responsibility of school staff to write about pupils in a manner that was value-neutral and did not include irrelevant information about whatever was being documented.

When documents *do* travel outside the confines of the education system and reach a wider audience, it is often through journalists' efforts to investigate school matters. One such journalistic effort gained widespread media attention during the period of my fieldwork. 9 May 2022 an investigative documentary was broadcasted on one of Sweden's largest television networks. *Kalla fakta ('Cold Facts')* is a documentary series that is broadcasted with irregular intervals on the Swedish television network TV4. Through investigative journalism, it aims to scrutinise and expose how power, politics and other societal phenomena work in Sweden and how it affects Swedish citizens. The documentary was titled *The Children on the Fourth Floor (‘Barnen på fjärde våningen’)* and concerned neglect and problems at an identified school in Sweden. The documentary was discussed among my informants, gained significant media attention and was nominated for a prestigious journalism award in Sweden.

I watched the documentary with the intention to analyse the role that documents played in constructing the narrative around the neglect of a group of pupils at a municipal compulsory school. In order to do this, I transcribed verbatim all the parts of the documentary that mentioned or concerned documents and wrote short summaries of the parts that did not involve documents. I then analysed how, when and with what purpose documents were cited, called upon or scrutinised in order to understand the role of documents in producing a specific narrative about the events that unfolded at the school that was being investigated. The analysis is presented in chapter eight of this thesis. Writing this analysis also meant revisiting the documentary so as to recall the visual imageries and effects that were used to convey their story.

Ethical Elaborations

It has been a central concern while collecting, storing, analysing and writing out my data that it be done so as to ensure the anonymity of my participants. The first three steps have been fairly straight forward. There are good guidelines in place for how to collect and store data in a way that maintains the anonymity of the participants, as was discussed earlier (my participants were informed about this). The difficult decisions, at least in this study, have been how to ensure the participants anonymity in the presentation of my data in the analytical chapters. The kind of data that I have collected contains no sensitive data in the sense that the Swedish Ethical Review Authority outlines. As mentioned, I left out all details concerning teachers’ own documentation of sensitive data, of which there is quite a lot. Despite the lack of sensitive data in the way that the Swedish Ethical Review Authority envisions it, I have encountered many challenges in deciding how to present my data in this text. Teachers and headteachers work in institutions where their performances are scrutinised and measured and can have effects on things such as salaries, working conditions and career opportunities (not to mention interpersonal relationships with colleagues). The teachers and headteachers that I interviewed and did fieldwork amongst were sometimes critical towards their workplace, colleagues, regulations or document demands. In terms of documentation, they sometimes admitted to doing the bare minimum of what is required and sometimes even less than that. It has been important that the way I present this research here does not have any adverse effects for the teachers and headteachers that have participated in this study. For this reason, the process of anonymisation has been extensive.

All names of school staff and schools are naturally fictional. Furthermore, teachers are sometimes referred to as just ‘the teacher’ in those cases where I think it is risky to use their fictional names. I have also decided to not divulge which municipalities the schools are located in. This is primarily to make it more difficult to identify a school. Smaller municipalities do not have many schools, making it easier to identify a school in a smaller municipality. For a similar reason, I have anonymised some digital tools that the schools work with. Some digital tools, such as google classroom, are used by every municipality that I have encountered, so there is no need to anonymise. Other tools are more specifically used by certain municipalities, so I have decided to anonymise them.

Finally, before we proceed to meet the participants of this study and begin to dissect and scrutinise their words and ways in the analytical chapters, I wish to end with a brief reflection upon sensitivity. I do think that our curiosity towards this subject is best served if we operate under the assumption that the vast majority of actors want what is best for pupils and for schools and that their actions are generally directed towards – in whatever capacity is possible for them – doing good. While this can be seen as a sympathetic gesture towards the participants of this study (and I think that it can), I also believe that it has an analytical value for the specific questions addressed in this thesis. If we are to further our understanding of how documents in practice come to achieve their somewhat perplexing status as solution-problem, coveted-detested, benefit-burden, it makes sense to take seriously that demands for documentation tend to be motivated by principles that most of us would generally prefer that our tax-funded public institutions adhere to, such as transparency, equal access, quality and fairness. If we take this seriously analytically, we can begin to explore the mechanisms through which documents, in the form, structure and range which we are about to encounter them, become framed and understood as the appropriate way to achieve these things.

5. A Circular Document Process

'For whom do we do this?' and 'how does this help us?' were two common rhetorical questions raised by teachers in relation to document practices that they felt were superfluous. In the same vein, headteachers would emphasise (frequently during meetings, but also in interviews) that it was important that 'we do this for us/our organisation/our pupils'. These sentiments or complaints, depending on the tone, were so routine that they almost became inconspicuous. Furthermore, a myriad of different document practices could be the referent hiding behind the word 'this' in the preceding quotes. Systematic Quality Assurance, incident reports and pedagogical assessment documentation are some examples, as well as the additional adjustments and action programmes that are required for pupils who run a risk of not meeting the minimum requirements for the national targets. It is noteworthy, but not surprising given the generalised complaints about the 'burden of documentation', that such a wide range of different documents give rise to the same kinds of complaints among teachers.

The teachers' questions harbour an implicit critique of documentation being a top-down requirement with little ground in, or value for, their everyday work. This resonates with other ways that documentation practices have been framed by various actors: as burdensome, excessive or hijacking time for teachers. These ways of describing documentation also suggest that teachers tend to assess the value of document practices based on the extent to which they help them develop, learn about or facilitate their teaching. Intriguingly, the documents referred to are generally *also* concerned with these things; the ultimate aim of the document practices is often to generate something that instigates change in how teachers teach or improves the performance or well-being of pupils or the organisation. In their form and application, however, the documents also enable control, usually in terms of accountability or monitoring the activities of teachers or the performance of pupils. To understand how and why this is, we need to consider how many different document practices are tied up in the same kind of model for documentation, one that follows a specific trajectory for bringing about change in the school setting, which I will refer to as a 'circular document process'.

Image 5.1
The working model for Systematic Quality Assurance: 'Where are we?' → 'Where are we going?' → 'What should we do?' → 'How did it turn out?' → (the loop starts over) (Skolverket, 2023c)

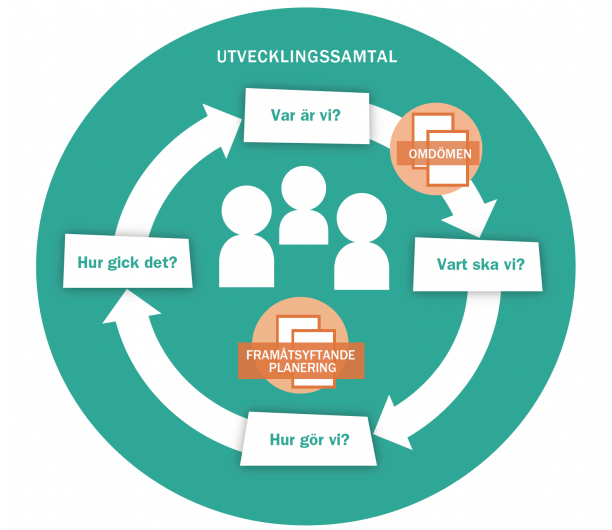

Image 5.2
The working model for parent-teacher conferences: 'Where are we?' → 'Where are we going?' → 'What should we do?' → 'How did it turn out?' → (the loop starts over) (Skolverket, 2017)

Swedish educational scientist Åsa Hirsh has pointed out that most of the document practices in the Swedish education system are based on what she describes as a 'cyclical thinking' (Hirsh, 2017, p. 2). This cyclical thinking runs according to the following stages: it begins with an investigation where one collects information about the current status of a topic ('where are we?'), then it goes on to developing an analysis ('where are we going?') and ends up producing measures that can be implemented in the school setting ('what should we do?') and which in the end need to be evaluated ('how did it turn out?') (see images 5.1 and 5.2). This cyclical thinking is materially accomplished through what I refer to as a 'circular document process'. I have chosen to refer to a circular document process rather than cyclical thinking (Hirsh 2017) in order to highlight that the circle is not predominantly an ideational abstraction but is materially manifested in how teachers and schools work, communicate and know. This material manifestation, moreover, leaves a paper trail, with the implication that the documents produced can travel to different places within (and beyond) the education system, thus enabling actors from beyond the document's site of production to access what goes on in the classroom or the school.

Integrated in most of the document practices that teachers engage with, then, are both mechanisms for instigating change and for providing control, for instance that work is done (and done properly). Moreover, the co-presence of both these mechanisms is naturalised and taken for granted in the circular document process that almost all documents are meant to be a part of. Images 5.1 and 5.2 provide two illustrations of how this circular document process is depicted by the Swedish National Agency for Education. The specific document requirements for the processes described in these illustrations – related to Systematic Quality Assurance and Parent-Teacher Conferences – are legally binding (SFS, 2010:800). The steps of the circle are portrayed as naturally following one another and intrinsically connected. What is more, each step of the process is concerned with the actual daily ongoings of the organisation. However, while the overarching purposes of change and control run parallel in the document practices in a way that is often presumed smooth and natural, the relation between them is less self-evident and frictionless in practice, as the quotes that introduced this chapter indicate.

How, then, does a process that in principle is so closely related to the ongoings of the organisation become experienced by teachers as primarily concerned with control and detached from their working reality? I address this question by first introducing the reader to some of the ways in which the circular document process 'breaks down', by which I mean the ways in which the circular document process comes to be perceived as something irrelevant, detached and superfluous by the teachers. I then move on to considering more carefully the very system for documentation that these practices are a part of. I will argue that the circular document process achieves its taken-for-granted status through its association with scientific reasoning and I consider the ways in which this association affects these practices of documentation and how they are experienced by teachers. Lastly, we take a look at the kind of work that goes into integrating the circle into the everyday work of teachers in a meaningful way.

A Familiar Tension

I have described the circular document process as simultaneously providing mechanisms for instigating change and control and suggested that these often co-exist somewhat uneasily where they are implemented. Similar tensions as the ones that I describe here have been explored by other scholars under different names. Åsa Hirsh has drawn attention to the tension between learning and steering in the use of the Individual Education Plan[27], which is meant to be a tool to make clear and enhance pupils' learning processes (2011). Hirsh describes how the Individual Education Plan enrols several actors that are not directly involved in the education of the particular pupil that the Individual Education Plan belongs to, such as school leaders, school administration and politicians. These actors are concerned with pupils' learning in a more regulatory way, Hirsh argues, which 'inevitably puts the IEP in a kind of tension between steering and meaning and gives the IEP multiple purposes' (2011, p. 18). These documents are supposed to reflect pupils' academic performance and communicate about this to guardians. They also become tools for school authorities to control schools' work and results (Hirsh 2011, 16). In this capacity, they can also become the basis for resource allocation and distribution of staff. Elsewhere, Hirsh has argued that the challenge is 'how all of these objectives can be fulfilled without the IEP losing its primary purpose of acting as an educational planning document (Hirsh, 2014, p. 410). As we will see in this chapter, this challenge is not unique to the Individual Education Plans but pertains in various degrees to other document systems that follow a circular document process.

In a recent study, Liljenberg et al. (2023) frame a related issue as one of autonomy and control. In their article, the authors explore how headteachers in Swedish schools in areas with low socioeconomic status experience and navigate autonomy and control in their day-to-day work. Liljenberg et al. report that the headteachers they interviewed perceived their relationship with the municipal organisers as being focused on control rather than support (2023, p. 253). One way that this control is exerted, according to the headteachers, is through the generation and collection of data from each individual school through different digital systems. Through the digital systems, headteachers experience that their interaction with municipal organisers becomes 'dominated by uniformity expressed through specialisation and digitalisation' (p. 252), making it difficult for the headteachers to communicate in a productive way with the municipal organisers about what their local needs are.

[27] The Individual Education Plan is mandatory for all years where the pupils are not graded and it follows the same structure as the model for the parent-teacher-conferences (image 7.2).

Because the documentation demands in the digital platforms do not correspond to how the headteachers perceive the needs at their local school, the documentation becomes something that many of them describe as doing separately from their work with improving conditions at their schools.

Another example, related to the issues discussed in this chapter, can be found in a report by Reinertsen et al. (2017) written for the Expert Group for Aid Studies, a Swedish government committee evaluating Sweden's work with development assistance. In this report, the authors explore the tensions and contradictions surrounding the dual purpose of 'accountability' and 'learning' in aid evaluations (see also Reinertsen et al. 2022). They conclude that 'the dual purpose of accountability and learning in practice causes difficult trade-offs' (p. 12) and that it often is the learning purpose of the evaluations that comes out short in these trade-offs. The evaluation reports that Reinertsen et al. (2017) have studied are, according to the authors, good at describing 'what happened', discerning causes and effects, giving praise and placing blame (p. 45). There is less to show for the learning function of the aid evaluations; the evaluations' ability to feed back into the aid system is less well-founded (ibid). My own observations from the Swedish school setting resonate with the findings that Reinertsen et al. present in their report, even though 'learning' in aid translates into different practices than in schools. A similar tension was also echoed in Reinertsen's dissertation about the evaluability of Norwegian foreign aid projects, that was mentioned in chapter three. Here she describes how the evaluability of aid was dependent upon the traceability of these projects. Traceability was necessary *both* for making the aid project evaluable and accountable. While these processes ostensibly seem connected, Reinertsen argued that in practice they required evaluation work and accounting work were quite separate and not necessarily compatible. While evaluation work was concerned with the realisation of the aid project in its specific site, accounting work was concerned with the realisation of the aid project in relation to fiscal demands, funds and budget requirements (Reinertsen, 2016, p. 229). So, even though both evaluation and accounting were concerned with the realisation of the aid project, they were so in significantly different ways.

What is meant by 'learning' in the aid evaluations is not always explicitly conceptualised, according to Reinertsen et al. (2017), but is used in a way signifying that it means 'acquiring new knowledge that fosters change' (p. 22). 'Learning', thus defined, comes close to what I in this chapter simply refer to as 'change'. One could also consider the terms 'development', 'improvement' or 'action' (and some of the document practices discussed in this chapter mention these terms specifically) to denote similar processes. These terms suggest that the document practices should result in action that benefits some part of the organisation and the work being done there. Here, the term 'change' will be used because it encompasses all of the aforementioned terms. Along the same line of reasoning, the word 'control' has been chosen to describe practices and features that might also be labelled accountability, monitoring, steering or governing. It is important to stress that these two do not represent two ends of a moral dichotomy between good (change) and bad (control), neither analytically nor for school staff themselves.

The Breakdown of the Circle

In this section, we will take a look at some examples of when the circular document process becomes experienced as detached from what teachers perceive as the relevant aspects of their work. We will see how teachers' everyday work with pupils and in the classroom becomes disconnected from the circular document process in general and how the elusiveness of change in particular affects teachers' engagement with these documents. The empirical examples that we will look at are typical moments when teachers ask themselves 'for whom are we doing this?'.

The Half Circle: Elusive Change and Untouchable Civil Servants

'We are good at analysing, but what about the rest?' one headteacher asked rhetorically during a staff meeting concerning student health ('elevhälsa'). This quote captures a fairly common observation (or rather, complaint) by teachers, namely what they felt was a tendency to discuss and analyse (often during meetings) the same issues year after year without experiencing much progress in the matter. In the example below, Elizabeth described her disillusionment with the utility and purpose of a survey about pupils' 'safety and calm learning environment' and how this disillusionment has affected her approach to the document practice altogether:

> Elizabeth and I are sitting in her classroom in between classes. I take the opportunity when it is just the two of us to ask what became of the survey that she did with her pupils a while ago. A couple of weeks before, Elizabeth had let her Year 2 pupils (7-8 years old) complete a survey that asked questions relating to pupils' well-being and sense of safety in school. Each pupil had completed the survey on an iPad, but Elizabeth had read the survey out loud and let the pupils answer each question individually and synchronically. This way she could explain difficult words along the way and the pupils who could not read very well could also complete the survey. The whole process, which included handing out iPads, rearranging the seating so that those who needed to charge their iPad could sit next to an electrical socket, helping all the children login to their accounts to access the survey and then completing the survey, took an hour. As to what has happened since then, Elizabeth tells me that a working group has compiled and presented the results of the survey for the rest of the school staff. 'It is portrayed as so important that we complete it,' Elizabeth continues, 'but we see the same results every year – there are too few adults present outdoors during recess and the older children behave in a way that makes the younger children frightened to join in on the football pitch. I put significantly less effort into the survey now than I did in the beginning, when I actually thought that it would lead to something'. I ask Elizabeth what the working group does and she laughs and tells me

> that it's a good question. 'I suppose they make this survey and compile the results… and they have monthly meetings. But actually, I don't know what they do there.'

This survey, together with the statistical analysis and adjoining meeting, should ideally result in the implementation of some measures that would lead to improvements for the problems identified in the survey. This is how the circular document process is envisioned to play out. What Elizabeth describes, however, is in fact a half circle: data collection (the survey) and analysis (of statistical representation generated by these surveys) leading up to problem formulation is looped and on annual repeat. In other words, change is elusive. How should we then understand these document practices? Where do they come from and what role do they play in the institutional setting of the school? We can begin by directing our attention towards the governing documents and agencies in accordance with which schools need to adapt their organisation.

These document practices – the survey, the statistics derived from it and the staff meeting dealing with these documents – all stem indirectly from the chapter in the Education Act that regulates 'safety and peace to study'[28] (SFS, 2010:800, p. ch. 5). Here it states that the school organiser is responsible for making sure that the schools implement preventive measures for ensuring safety for the pupils and a calm learning environment (ch 5, act 3). Even though the Education Act does not specify how the preventive work should be carried out (or that it needs to be documented), other national education agencies have guidelines for this. The Swedish National Agency for Education has suggested working areas for schools in their preventive work and some of these areas specify *systematic* work (Skolverket, 2024a) – a term that brings to mind the circular process previously described. Most areas, however, do not indicate the need to document, let alone complete surveys, as part of the preventive work. The Swedish Schools Inspectorate, however, whose Quality Report from 2016 the Swedish National Agency for Education's working areas are developed from, *does* suggest that schools' efforts to improve pupils' safety and provide a calm learning environment follow the by-now-familiar trajectory of first identifying problems and needs (pupil surveys are specifically mentioned as one strategy for this purpose), analysing the observations, developing and implementing actions and, lastly, following up and measuring the results of taken actions (Skolinspektionen, 2016, p. 28). We see, then, that although there is no direct regulation that dictates that schools should go about fulfilling their obligations in the manner described in the ethnographic excerpt, there are incentives for schools to do so.

At least as important as the national education agencies' guidelines and suggestions, however, is the fact that the Education Act states that it is the

[28] 'Trygghet och studiero' in Swedish, the latter being a distinct Swedish word that can be explained as 'a calm and quiet study environment and is described by the Education Act as the 'presence of good preconditions for pupils to concentrate on education'.

responsibility of the school organiser to make sure that schools follow the legislation from chapter five of the Education Act. School organisers are, in other words, accountable, and accountability, we know, tends to generate documentation. Specifically, one way of demonstrating that one takes responsibility is to make sure that the work is documented. By collecting, producing, compiling, and analysing data the schools can show that they are working systematically towards ensuring a calm learning environment. Correspondingly, the municipal organisers can 'see' that schools do preventive work. It matters here that much of this work is accomplished with the help from digital platforms or systems that the municipalities are almost always the purchasers of and where they usually exercise some control over how these systems are used (the aforementioned survey was completed and its results compiled with help from google classroom). Control, then, easily becomes an effect of the circular document process due to the routes that these documents travel within the education system. However, we should not assume that control is always an effect of visibility: just because something is made visible it is does not mean that anyone is looking (the assumption that more visibility automatically leads to stronger managerial control was recently challenged by Justesen & Plesner, 2023).

From Elizabeth's point of view, however, the only thing that is 'seen' through the survey is what she already knows. Her perception that the results from the surveys are predictable and not met with effective measures from the school, has meant that she has reduced the effort that she herself puts into the survey. The concern about getting 'stuck' in the analytical phase, which will continue to come up in the data we are presented with in this thesis, suggests that there is a tendency for the circle to jam up somewhere before the part of the process where the change is supposed to occur.

One headteacher that I interviewed, Robin, elaborated upon these mechanisms and explained how the process of compiling knowledge and analysing at the level of the local education authorities can become detached from the everyday work of teachers:

> 'If you are working as a civil servant at the local education authorities and you have to answer to a city council, there is a fantastic way for you to succeed regardless of what happens out at the schools. You collect data and based on that data you look up an area for development if you want to be nice and a problem with the organisation if you don't want to be nice and then you make up a plan – based on your capacity as civil servant – that next year we'll work with this and the target is connected to, for example, boys' and girls' academic results or something like that. Then you make a project plan for the next year and you go on to tell the city council that next year we are going to work with this because we see a problem in boys' poor academic result compared to girls' and we will spend this amount of money and staff will receive this training ['kompetensutveckling] and then we will measure the results and then I will come back next year and report on the progress of boys' academic results. If you get improved results, which isn't unlikely that you will find somewhere in your data

> depending on where and how you look, you can say ‘look how clever I was who could analyse this and find this and then I made this plan and now the schools have delivered so that we get a better result. And if you *didn’t* get improved results you can tell the council that we need to continue this plan because the teachers aren’t ready or the school leaders haven’t been able to implement this so we’ll have to continue another year. In both cases you are completely untouchable. So it’s convenient to do so, to work that way. You can walk around and be good at your job and liked even though there is no change.’

Robin was an outspoken critic of New Public Management and his observations of ‘successful’ leadership within school management echo classic critiques of New Public Management in general and audit practices in particular. Chains of documents – whether as textually mediated forms of ruling (Smith, 2005 [1990]) or rituals of verification (Power, 1997) – may provide organisations with legitimacy despite a lack of implications for the everyday operations of that organisation. The teachers’ question ‘for whom do we do this?’ and feeling of documenting for someone else’s sake must be seen in relation to this mechanism of institutional control in which document practices have a particular position. Stated differently, there is a tendency for the circular document process to fulfil one end of their bargain, but not the other.

It is important to keep in mind that from the point of view of the local education authorities the breakdown of the circle is in all likelihood not as evident as it is for the teachers. The school organisers are responsible for making sure that the schools work in a systematic way to ensure high quality education that complies with the regulations of the Education Act and that the schools take preventive measures to ensure safety and a calm learning environment. In theory (that is, in the theoretical model of the circular document process), change should occur *naturally* as a consequence of following the steps of the circular model. The local education authorities, we must recall, know the organisation primarily through the documents that are produced in these organisations. If effects are observed in these documents, then work has been successful and if nothing is observed then the call for better methods is close to hand, as Robin points out. In Robin’s description, there are ways of fulfilling one’s legal obligations, and even be ‘clever’ at it, despite little or no change at the level of the individual school. Robin describes this process as one where you as a civil servant can become ‘untouchable’. Documents play a significant role in creating this effect and particularly when they are a part of the widespread circular document process. Another way to frame this is to look at how responsibility is shifted and moved around within the circular system for documentation.

Shifting Responsibility Through the Circle

As was just alluded to, there is an opportunity inherent in the circular document process to shift responsibility by moving a problem (i.e. a document) around. The same method that is supposed to ensure that a problem gets dealt with (by standardising the way that the problem is handled, or documented, from problem to solution) can also be a way to deflect responsibility for the problem. I think it would be wrong to automatically consider this type of deflection as a manipulative strategy applied by staff within the education sector to minimise their own responsibility or effort (nor should we discount that it sometimes is). We must not forget that the circular document model has a strong legitimacy within the system where it operates; it is *assumed* that problems will be solved, changes will be made, improvements happen and transparency secured through these systems (and, of course, these things can also happen). As easily as one can understand this movement of responsibility as a form of strategic or manipulative deflection, one can also understand it as an institutional attempt at finding solutions to a problem. Here, however, the intention of the actors is less of a concern than the process that makes this movement possible in the first place and how it can play out in the everyday ongoings of schools. It is more pertinent, at least for our purposes here, to consider how the shifting of responsibility is made possible by the very system it is a part of.

In both our empirical examples below we will encounter the same area of documentation, namely that connected to the student health teams ('elevhälsoteam' or 'EHT' in Swedish). All schools are required by law to have student health teams and despite the Education Act specifying that student health teams should work primarily with prevention and health promotion (SFS, 2010:800, p. ch 2 act 25), the teachers that I encountered mainly interacted with the student health teams regarding specific problems with pupils. For instance, the student health teams should be involved in the process of assessing pupils' need for special support and action programmes. Many schools also have a reporting function connected to the student health team, where one can report a problem with a specific pupil and receive help. A fairly common comment from teachers about pupils whose behaviour was considered problematic in some way was that 'it's on EHT's table now', meaning that the responsibility for the problem has become theirs or, more literally, the document containing the problem is on their table.

In our first empirical example, we are in a meeting room and the purpose of the meeting is to find strategies to develop the collaboration between the student health team and teaching staff. At this school, a problem has been identified concerning this collaboration, namely that teachers are mostly in touch with student health in order to solve acute problems ('släcka bränder' in Swedish). During the meeting, they wish to focus on how to strengthen their collaborative preventive work. The teachers are all asked to talk about the situation in their classroom for two minutes each and below is an excerpt from my fieldnotes:

> Many of the teachers mention the 'status' of documents related to specific pupils or problems: 'I have handed in a student health team report about this', 'I want to wait with a pedagogical assessment of this pupil for a while', 'I have written to the guardians about this', 'I have a note that says that this pupil is being tested for autism', 'this pupil has been diagnosed'. After the round it is time for the student health team to reflect upon the teachers' stories.

The presence of documents in teachers' narratives about their classroom situations might seem incongruous at first. However, to connect problems to their document status can be a way for teachers to demonstrate that they have taken measures to deal with these problems. It can also, of course, be a way to deflect responsibility for a problematic classroom situation. Furthermore, as the student health team is at this meeting it can also be a way to anticipate questions from these colleagues about whether a problem has been reported or a pupil is being assessed by the right actors. Either way, the manner in which problems are tied up in document statuses signals that teachers have enrolled the appropriate actors to help them with these problems and the ball is on their court, so to speak.

In the second empirical example we meet two teachers who are discussing what to do with a pupil that is perceived as causing problems for themselves and others.

> John looks at me and explains that one sometimes can hesitate whether one should report something to the student health team or not. 'Sometimes,' John says, 'it just results in more work for oneself.' John's colleague confirms this observation. They give an example of a time when the measure that the student health team had suggested was for a teacher to shadow a pupil for three weeks to see whether constant adult supervision had any effect on the pupil's behaviour. 'Of course it had an effect!' John exclaimed. 'Who couldn't have predicted that it would have an effect? But it's a completely untenable situation in the long run not to mention the time it took me to establish what we already knew'.

Here, we see that responsibility drifted back to the teacher, at least for the weeks it took before the effects of the measure should be evaluated. This shifting of responsibility is enabled by the circle. The movement of documents enrols different actors within the education system and is in this way used to move responsibility around. In other words, the problem and its potential solution become tied up in, and moved around with, documents that move between different actors. Meanwhile, in this case, the 'problem' that the document refers to – a pupil's behaviour – goes nowhere and must be dealt with on a daily basis (or however often the problem transpires) by school staff and pupils, leading to teachers experiencing the documentation as mere appendices to work that is already being done.

> 'Some adjustments[29] I don't document,' primary school teacher Fiona says as she opens her computer to show me where and how they document additional adjustments. After some clicking, she finds the form under 'assessments'. 'No one reads it and it just means more work for me. For example this kid,' Fiona says and points at an empty chair, 'I haven't written down that I've given him an inflatable cushion to sit on, I've just given it to him. If I were to document it, I would have to follow up the errand, evaluate it and motivate further measures if I stop using the cushion. And for what purpose? I see him every day, if it doesn't help him I'll just take it away and if it does help him I'll keep it.'

It is worth noting Fiona's pragmatic approach to the additional adjustments; she does the work – provides additional adjustments for a pupil who is struggling – but ignores some of the document demands based on a perception that they serve no purpose for her nor for the pupil. It is also interesting to note the format of the document demand through the digital learning platform. Even though there is nowhere specified that they should do so, the digital learning platform developers have decided to integrate an evaluative function to the additional adjustments documentation, making the document process circular. It is not enough to simply add or remove the additional adjustment in the digital platform. The outcome of the additional adjustment – positive or negative – should also be evaluated in document form.

The Circle as Appendix and a Case of Double Documentation

Another way of looking at the breakdown of the circular document process for instigating change is to consider the documentation as a mere appendix to work that is already being done. I daresay Elizabeth, who we saw earlier had become disillusioned with the survey she was asked to conduct with her pupils, was as interested in keeping a safe and calm learning environment for her pupils as the municipal organiser that she worked for was. I spent many fieldwork hours with Elizabeth and besides the classroom adjustments she made to ensure this, I daily saw her dealing with her pupils' conflicts and problems, providing comfort and solutions where needed. All of this surely contributed to a safe and calm learning

[29] Pupils who are at risk of not meeting the minimum learning requirements in a subject are entitled to additional adjustments. In upper secondary school, there are no formal requirements for documenting additional adjustments, although many digital learning platforms integrate this feature, making it requisite for many upper secondary teachers to document them anyway. In the lower years, teachers are obliged to document the additional adjustments in the Individual Education Plans for their pupils. How they should be documented is not regulated on a national level, but usually school organisers have regulations concerning this and most of the time the documentation is through a digital learning platform (Hirsh 2018).

environment (most days) but was integrated in Elizabeth's daily work and not documented.

The glitch between the circular document process and the work done becomes especially clear in the next empirical example that we will look at. Here, we consider an excerpt from a Parent-Teacher Conference at a relatively small school where I did fieldwork. Parent-Teacher Conferences are more confined in time and space than the ongoing work of improving quality and securing the study environment, so the role of documentation as appendix becomes even easier to spot. Parent-Teacher Conferences should be held every semester between teacher, pupil and the pupil's guardian(s) and should concern how to best support the pupil's educational and social development (SFS, 2010:800, ch 12, act 12). Legally, teachers are not obliged to make Individual Education Plans for pupils in Year 9 (because they receive grades, and there are other requirements for keeping the pupil and their guardians informed about academic progress in relation to grading). However, it is not unusual that teachers who teach the years 6-9 are expected to create Individual Education Plans anyway (see for instance Samuelsson et al., 2018). Sometimes, it has been decided at the local level of the school – the school leadership might think that, despite it not being a requirement, it is a good tool to keep track of and give feedback to pupils on their academic performance. Other times, it can be –as Hirsh (2017) has signalled – that the Individual Education Plan *seems* like a requirement because of the way it is presented by the local education authorities and – not least – the digital learning platforms that teachers use. Below, we will meet Thelma and for her, at least, the Individual Education Plan was perceived as a requirement not only from the school leadership but also one that was legally binding (she was surprised when I told her that it was not). The digital learning platform that Thelma's school used included a documentation tool for Individual Education Plans and it was based on this that the Parent-Teacher Conference should unfold.

> In a small group room, Thelma and I are sitting on one side of a table and a pupil and their guardian are sitting on the other. Thelma has taken up her computer and proceeds to open the digital learning platform that her school uses and locates the tab for Individual Education Plans. When she finds the name of the pupil sitting in front of her, she presses their name and enters a page where several questions are listed. Under each question is a text box where Thelma can write free text. The first question written in bold is 'where are we?'. This question has plenty of sub-questions to help guide the teacher in how to approach the main question. Thelma, however, does not even look at the computer screen. She looks instead at her pupil and asks: 'how do you feel that the start of the school year has gone?'. From here a long conversation follows between Thelma, the pupil and their guardian about how the pupil's school work is progressing. At no point during this conversation does Thelma write in – or even look at – the document form in front of her. What she does bring out, after a while, is a printed piece of paper that shows the pupil's grades in all the different subjects. While she speaks, she jots down small notes to herself on the paper, such as a reminder for her to contact one of her colleagues regarding a retest in one subject and other measures that need to be taken in relation to the pupil's academic

> advancement. Suddenly Thelma exclaims ‘oh no, I’ve forgotten to document!’. She looks at her computer and scrolls down to the questions ‘where are we going?’ and ‘how do we proceed?‘. She quickly enters one of the measures that she has already jotted down by hand on the paper in front of her. When she presses ‘save’ an error message pops up telling her that she is working in ‘double tabs’ and that she needs to close the other tabs before she can continue working in the platform. She tries to continue writing in one of the text boxes but nothing happens. She is effectively locked out of the system. Thelma, however, shows no sign of annoyance and continues the meeting by reiterating with the pupil how they should continue to work for the remainder of the semester. The pupil is given a handwritten note with the main points from the conversation. Thelma and I remain seated after the pupil and their guardian have left the room. Then Thelma pulls out a piece of paper that I have not seen before and that has not been addressed at the meeting at all. It is a self-evaluation form, a document comprised of several pages, where the pupil has answered questions about how they see their schoolwork as holding up. Thelma quickly flips through the document and says to me that ‘I don’t agree with much of what it says here’.

At a later point in time, I asked Thelma what happened to the digital form, the Individual Education Plan, that she was supposed to fill out as a part of the Parent-Teacher Conference and she told me that she filled it out quickly one of the evenings following the meeting. In this example, it is clear that the document form in the digital learning platform fails at providing a structure and navigation for the Parent-Teacher Conference. This stands in contrast to how the documents in the circular document process are presented in guidelines and illustrations (see image 5.2), where they are presented as seamlessly integrated in the work of teachers. From the beginning of the Parent-Teacher Conference the document is superfluous for the way that Thelma proceeds with the meeting. Neither the Individual Education Plan from last year – which should technically be the starting point for this years’ meeting – nor the Individual Education Plan from for this year is referred to by Thelma. Although it proved tricky for Thelma to work in the document at all due to the error message, this technical failing was not in itself the reason why she disregarded the form; she ignored the form from the outset of the meeting, before she knew about the technical issue. In fact, it is worth pausing at the part where she discovered the technical issue. Ironically, she *interrupts* her own documentation (the scribbling on the printed sheet) and the meeting by exclaiming that she has ‘forgotten to document’. What she has forgotten, of course, is to fill in the standardised document form in the digital learning platform. Furthermore, when the pupil and the guardian leave, they leave with a handwritten note with a few bullet points on it and no mention of the documentation in the digital learning platform (which should also be available to them[30]). The self-evaluation form that the pupil has filled out is also ignored throughout the meeting. In fact, the only document that is referred to directly at the meeting is the printed copy of the pupil's grades. The rest of the conversation was based largely on the experiences of the teacher and the pupil concerning the pupil's current academic work and plans for future efforts. These experiences *did* include reflections of previous performances, goals and working methods. Thelma knows her pupil and the meeting has the character of both looking backwards and forwards, which is in line with how Parent-Teacher Conferences are intended to be structured.

At a later point, Thelma and I revisit the topic of Individual Education Plans during a conversation. Thelma makes it clear that she thinks that the meetings are an important part of monitoring the pupils' development and providing feedback, as well as including the pupils' guardian(s) in that conversation. 'It could all be done without all the documentation, though,' she tells me. 'All the documentation' in this case is referring to the standardised form in the digital learning platform. What is supposed to be a tool to make visible and improve a pupils' learning process becomes 'just documentation' and an appendix to the rest of the work done at the Parent-Teacher Conference. This is an issue that will be revisited at length in chapter seven, where we look closer at teachers' assessment documentation.

What is more, we have a case of double documentation because the meeting produces a series of *other* documents that are referred to or circulated during the meeting. Thelma has brought a spreadsheet where the pupil's grades in each subject are listed, which is used to provide and overview of the pupil's overall results, strengths and weaknesses. She also makes notes on one piece of paper about what she needs to do to help the pupil along in some of the subjects, and notes on another piece of paper what the pupil needs to do in order to continue to improve their learning. The demand placed on Thelma to document the Parent-Teacher Conference in the digital platform, on the other hand, must be seen in relation to what Hirsh (2011, 2014) defines as the local education authority's more regulatory concern with the pupils' educational development.

The Problem of Disappearing Documents

Very often with the kinds of documentation discussed so far, the documents do not stay within the boundaries of the school where they were produced. They become charts, graphs and numbers that are shared with the municipal organisers and where they in some cases might form the basis for decision-making, comparisons and allocation of resources. These processes are often a mystery to teachers, who, when

[30] It is possible that Thelma shared this with the guardians once she published the Individual Education Plan a few evenings later. I forgot to ask.

I asked, frequently did not know who would read the documents they filled out or what they would be used for.

> Olivia and Anne are both Advanced Teachers at a big municipal school in southern Sweden. We have just arrived back in their joint work room after classes and in 20 minutes there is a meeting between the advanced teachers at their school and the school leadership. Anne suddenly exclaims: 'we have forgotten the form!' Olivia quickly affirms that they have to fill in a form for the meeting that starts in a few minutes. The form concerns the work environment within their team ['arbetslag'][31]. The questions focus on things such as how well they collaborate in their team, whether they have a shared vision and a joint plan of action for their work within the team. The answers are to be given in matrices and on a five-point scale of how much they agree with various statements. Olivia and Anne lightly discuss and decide where to place their team's work on a scale. The discussions are not particularly deep and the rating sometimes even seems haphazard. They giggle at how quickly they speed through the form. On our way to the meeting, I take the opportunity to ask what the form is for and Anne says that it is part of the Systematic Quality Assurance at the municipal level. She tells me that their school leader had received it first, but she had felt unqualified to fill it out because it concerned the teams and she lacked the necessary insight. Olivia and Anne agree that it was the right thing to do to pass the form on to them in order to make the response 'closer to the grassroots of the organisation' ['verksamhetsnära']. When I ask what the next step in the process is, they tell me that they send the form to their leader who in turn sends it to their leader at the municipality. I then ask what it will be used for, to which both Anne and Olivia shrug and say that they do not know. When we arrive at the meeting it turns out that the form is not due today after all but is due the week after. Olivia and Anne both laugh and lightly admit before everyone at the meeting that they started filling out the form ten minutes before the meeting.

At the meeting, there were no negative responses or reprimands when Anne and Olivia revealed that they had hastily jotted down their responses in the form. As the meeting began, nothing indicated that the school leaders had taken notice of, or were concerned with, this confession. As Liljeborg et al. (2023) have demonstrated, and as my own material also indicates, many headteachers share teachers' concern regarding excessive documentation. The headteachers that I have interviewed who have expressed this kind of concern have also seen it as part of their job to 'protect' their employees from some of the document demands that the municipal authorities delegate. One headteacher described himself as a 'gatekeeper' at his school, by which he meant that he saw it as part of his job to make sure that his teachers were

[31] In Sweden, the norm is that teachers at a school are organized into teams, called 'arbetslag' in Swedish. These can be structured differently – according to subject, year or something else – and be of different size, but the purpose is for these teams to work closely together in matters such as advancing teaching, planning and so on. Sometimes there are also team leaders and these represent their team at meetings, are in charge of documenting certain work and so on.

not burdened by demands from the local education authorities that he and his school leader colleagues deemed unnecessary.

It was not uncommon, as this example is a demonstration of, that teachers did not know where a document went after they had filled it out, who would read it, what it would be compared to, used for, and what it would result in. When this was the case, the word 'word vomit' ('ordbajsa' in Swedish) had a tendency to appear in relation to the document work. Mostly the word was used in a joking manner, but it often had a serious undertone. Sometimes teachers were pressed for time, sometimes they were unsure of the value of a certain document and sometimes both of these criteria applied, such as in the example above. One way in which teachers approached documents that they saw as detached from their day-to-day work was to do the work haphazardly. That is, by doing the bare minimum of what was required of them. Anne and Olivia's detachment and haphazard work was neither an expression of laziness nor ignorance about the education system. As Advanced Teachers at their school, both had at some point been chosen for this position on account of their diligence and success as teachers and as colleagues. They both cared about the quality of education that they provided and both were generally quite good at documentation (my observations had already pointed me in this direction, but it was also expressed by a colleague of theirs during a conversation in the staff room). Haphazard work, then, was not modus operandi for any of these teachers, but was a result of their feeling of this being document work that they were doing for someone else and for unclear purposes (except being somehow related to the municipality's Systematic Quality Assurance), as well as being pressed for time.

The circle, which Systematic Quality Assurance has to operate by (see image 5.1), is clearly not integrated in the way that the model suggests. In fact, in this example, we can trace several steps of its breakdown. Firstly, the municipality's Systematic Quality Assurance requires data from the organisation – data which teachers are easily enrolled in collecting and compiling, as the outcome of the Systematic Quality Assurance ultimately concerns the learning and conditions for pupils (Educaton Act 2010:800). In this case, however, it seems as if the deputy headteacher was the one who was primarily given the task of collecting and compiling the data. Perhaps this had been a move to reduce the workload of teachers, but the deputy headteacher considered herself ill-equipped to fill in the form as it concerned the working groups. We should note that Anne and Olivia agreed with this delegation of tasks; they were better equipped at answering questions related to their teachers' work environment than their leader was. That it was the 'right' thing to do, however, did not mean that Olivia and Anne saw this piece of documentation and the information it contained as particularly important for anything that went on in their daily operations. Under the auspices of getting better data, then, and with the approval of the teachers themselves, the form nonetheless ends up being handled by teachers who fill it out quickly and haphazardly. How the data has been produced, however, is not visible as it travels back up the circular document trajectory and becomes reintegrated in the work of the local education authorities. By this time, the whole process has also become quite detached from the ongoings of the school, yet it has laid claim to teachers' time and resources.

The Circle as a Channel for Communication

Ideally, what happens in the circular document process depends on what is outlined, defined and described – that is, what is made visible – in the first step of 'where are we?'. As we have seen, it is often teachers who are appointed with the task of answering this question and ideally they should be included through the whole process. However, other actors are enrolled in the process as well, usually through the formalised routes that documents travel to school leaders, student health teams, civil servants and politicians. It has not passed teachers by that these formalised routes that documents travel are also formalised routes for communication within the education system. Deciding what is made visible in the first step, then, can be a strategic choice.

Systematic Quality Assurance is a system for working with quality improvement in schools and it is one of the clearest examples of the circular document system (see image 5.1). The purpose of the Systematic Quality Assurance is to 'make visible what we do, why and what it leads to' (Skolverket, 2023c). According to the Education Act, this work entails systematically and continuously planning and monitoring education, analysing the reasons behind the results of the monitoring and based on this analysis, implementing measures that aim to develop the education (ch 4, act 3). The Systematic Quality Assurance also serves the purpose of detecting shortcomings ('brister') in the organisation (SFS, 2010:800; Skolverket, 2023a). It is emphasised by the Swedish National Agency for Education that the Systematic Quality Assurance must take its point of departure in a 'description of the current situation'. On their website, this is described as 'collecting and compiling information about different types of results and target outcomes' (Skolverket, 2023c). Interestingly, the Swedish National Agency for Education adds to this that 'it is not sufficient to solely compile and describe the results' (Skolverket, 2023a, my translation). They list seven examples of what information could be covered and six different methods for collecting it, many of which have scientific connotations (interviews, different forms of surveys, observations and results).

Documentation is considered an intrinsic part of the Systematic Quality Assurance and is one of the document demands regulated by the Education Act (2010:800, p. ch 4 act 6). The implication of this is that whatever is decided as the target of the Systematic Quality Assurance, it needs to be framed in a way that allows it to be observed, compiled and measured in the documents that schools produce as part of their Systematic Quality Assurance. It is not enough that these processes are made visible to teachers, however. Systematic Quality Assurance should, much like the aid evaluations analysed by Reinertsen in her dissertation (2016), produce a 'meta-level of seeing', where the processes are visible to actors from beyond the sites of the documents' production. In practice, it is mainly the local education authorities that provide the ‘second gaze’ (Reinertsen, 2016) upon Systematic Quality Assurance, but according to jurisdiction, pupils and their guardians should also be given the opportunity to partake in the Systematic Quality Assurance (Education Act, ch 4, act 4).

It is also worth emphasising that Systematic Quality Assurance is required both at the level of the local education authorities (‘huvudmannanivå’) and the level of the individual schools. The data that provides the basis for both these levels of Systematic Quality Assurance is not seldom compiled by teachers and headteachers, which can affect the workload of documentation for these categories of people, as we saw in the example above with Olivia and Anne. The example below gives us insight into Systematic Quality Assurance at the level of the individual school (‘enhetsnivå’):

> A group of teachers and I are seated in a teachers’ room after the pupils have gone home for the day. As part of their Systematic Quality Assurance, the teachers are supposed to analyse the progress of their pupils in relation to a specific test that they have developed. One of the teachers, Peter, is new to the school and he asks what they are supposed to be doing. Elizabeth shows him a spreadsheet on her computer. The spreadsheet contains all the Year 2 class lists and every pupil is either marked with a score and a corresponding colour: green (for a high score), yellow or red (for a low score). Elizabeth explains that they (the teachers for Year 2) have developed the test and scoring system themselves. They had decided, Elizabeth explains, that a goal could be for all the pupils to know all the letters of the alphabet and their name. It had seemed like a good idea at the time, she continues, because this is something that they would do anyway so it would not amount to any extra work. Unfortunately, however, it has led to a lot of unnecessary interpretation of irrelevant detail. Such as whether the pupil should have a point deducted for calling the letter *k* ‘ke’ instead of ‘kå’. ‘So if we were to do it again, we’d just check if they know the *sound* of the letter,’ Elizabeth concludes. Another one of the teachers who has been a part of developing the test says that one cannot fully trust the numbers and colours [‘kan inte stirra sig blind på’ in Swedish]. ‘Pupils can have better and worse days. Like this pupil,’ she says and points at the screen, ‘he knew this letter in October but not in December only two months later.’ At this point Peter laughs a bit and asks: ‘so what *does* this spreadsheet tell us?’. The other teachers and I laugh but no one offers a reply. Instead, the teachers now turn to the task of writing the reflections. The pupils’ performances are being compared both to their performances last semester *and* to the expectations that the teachers had for their pupils last term about the current term. As they write, they have a clear focus on efficiency: ‘it’s easiest to write it like this’ and ‘we don’t have to write an excessive amount’ were comments that were heard throughout the process. They observe that the number of ‘red’ pupils has decreased since they started measuring but that a couple of pupils are still ‘red’. They refer to the pupils’ learning disabilities while explaining their unchanged status. Elizabeth tells her colleague, who is doing the typing, to write that they need more help from a special needs teacher [‘specialpedagog’] and that the pupils will not be able to reach the goals without it. Wilma, who is typing, writes that it is ‘disheartening’ [‘nedslående’ in Swedish] that a couple of pupils are still red. ‘Is that too depressing?’

> she asks, referring to her choice of word. The others think for a while and then Peter says, 'but this is the reality' and Elizabeth repeats that she really wants to highlight the need for more help from a special needs teacher. 'What if we write that we *think* it won't be possible without help from a special needs teacher?' one teacher suggests. Again, Peter interjects: 'think? We *know* that he won't make it without this help'. They decide to remove the word 'think'.

At the school where the teachers above worked, the Systematic Quality Assurance was quite heavily standardised and the teachers that I spoke to experienced it to be a top-down process that was not particularly well-tailored to their needs. Their experience echoes an ongoing discussion in the school world about whether the problem with Systematic Quality Assurance is that either the process is not integrated sufficiently into the working methods of teachers (that is, a question of better methods) (Nilsson et al., 2024) or the problem is not with the teachers' methods but with allocation and distribution of resources (Rosengren, 2024). The teachers in the example above would probably favour the second line of argument. Through the circular document system, they have signalled as much by making the need for more resources visible in the form they are supposed to use for their reflection and analysis. Whether or not the teachers are right or wrong in doing so is not relevant to dwell on here. What we should understand is the way that this kind of communication is made possible through the system itself. Moreover, the kind of document movement that makes possible this upward communication is the same which we saw earlier makes possible shifting responsibilities within the education system.

What has become clear through the empirical examples so far is that the actual day-to-day work and the document-based circular model are often not *integrated* processes. This glitch, I suggest, gives rise to the feeling of doing document work for someone else's sake. Documenting for someone else's sake also implies that whatever problem the documents makes visible is moved to other actors within the education system. Once made visible to them, then, it becomes difficult to ignore and warrants action. This is something that teachers sometimes take advantage of when they wish to communicate their needs or demands (this is similar to the mechanisms behind the 'reporting en masse' that was mentioned in chapter three (Åkerström et al., 2021)).

The Circle: A Powerful Metaphor

We have now looked at some empirical examples of when the circular document process fails at providing the means to instigate change or improvements to the organisation. It has been described as a 'breakdown' of the circle. The education system's governing structure and governing documents have been referred to continuously as backdrops to understanding the document practices that have been the focus of the empirical examples. However, governance does not go all the way in explaining the pervasiveness of the circular document process in the Swedish education system. We have seen how the circular document process has been activated even when there is no formal requirement for it – such as with the preventive work to ensure a safe and calm learning environment. One may say that there are implicit document demands that encourage school organisers and school leaders to employ a circular document process. In order to understand the pervasiveness and taken-for-grantedness of the circular system for documentation, I argue that we must look at *other* processes than just governance. Specifically, I suggest that we zoom in on the circular model itself. 'The circle', manifested through ideals of a 'cyclical thinking' (Hirsh 2018) and a circular documentation system, becomes a powerful metaphor within the Swedish education system. All the document practices described so far in this chapter rely on the metaphor of the circle to describe how the practices are meant to be accomplished. It permeates not only document systems outlined by the national education authorities, but also systems where its presence is not formally required.

There is, then, a *normative assumption* about how change should occur within the organisation. Change and development should be based on a circular process, where observations of some aspect of the organisation should be written down and thus become knowledge upon which conclusions can be drawn. These conclusions, in turn, should inform decisions for future action, change, improvement or development, and after some time, these future actions should be evaluated and the process should evolve in this manner, sometimes indefinitely. This chain of events is not problematised in and of itself by any of the governmental bodies regulating these practices, except, we can note, in the implicit warning that the Swedish National Agency for Education raised in relation to the Systematic Quality Assurance: 'it is not sufficient to solely compile and describe the results' (Skolverket, 2023c). The Swedish National Agency for Education is implicitly warning against the risk that the Systematic Quality Assurance merely becomes a document loop with no effect for the work of teachers or pupils. They are, in fact, warning against Robin's worst-case scenario of an 'untouchable' civil servant. This indicates that the Swedish National Agency for Education are at some level aware of a problem with the circular working model that many teachers and some headteachers struggle with and feel frustrated over: namely, that the process de facto stops halfway through and fails to become tools through which development happens. Regardless, the circle remains a powerful metaphor for proper conduct in the educational setting. It is powerful insofar as it is naturalised in the institutional setting of school as an indispensable tool for change. It is also powerful in a more instrumental sense as it provides the education authorities with mechanisms for auditing and holding school leaders and teachers accountable for the work that they do by making this work visible in the first place.

Over the next pages, I will first suggest that this process gets its strong legitimacy from its association with scientific method and reasoning. I will then discuss some of the assumptions built into the model of the circular document process and the ways in which these can help us understand both how the steps of the process become naturalised, but also why they fail to achieve what they set out to do.

Objectivity as a Moral Imperative

One of the most treasured outcomes of adhering to a scientific method for producing knowledge is the ideal that this knowledge may be considered objective. Objectivity, in turn, may have several meanings in contemporary public and scientific life. Daston and Galison, as I mentioned in chapter three, have done considerable work in untangling these meanings and their historical precedents to show how objectivity in the modern sense 'can be applied to everything from empirical reliability to procedural correctness to emotional detachment' (1992, p. 82). Theodore Porter, in turn, took Daston and Galison's concept of mechanical objectivity, and used it to demonstrate how numbers achieved such a prominent position in public life, and particularly in decision-making processes. In later chapters, we will follow Porter in exploring the role of numbers and quantification more specifically, but for now we will consider the significance of mechanical objectivity in lending legitimacy to the circular document process.

In mechanical objectivity, objectivity is achieved through a method of knowledge production that can be described as 'non-interventionist' or mechanised (Daston & Galison, 1992). Knowledge that is produced through methods that show the least interference of human presence (conceived as subjectivity) is idealised. Knowledge thus conceived would be a more accurate reflection of what it tried to represent, uncorrupted by human intention, opinion, expectation or desire. A knowledge untainted by human intervention, moreover, takes on a moral dimension insofar as it promises a disinterested and impartial knowledge, produced by processes that are outside and beyond the specific social settings where they are applied. Porter considers how this kind of mechanical objectivity gains a particularly strong position within public institutions due to the democratic ideals that underpin these institutions, such as fairness, impartiality and equality. I argue that it is in this light that we should understand the pervasiveness and taken-for-grantedness of the circle as a model for instigating change and improvement. A model that echoes scientific reasoning and method like the model of the circle does will derive legitimacy from this association both through the kind of scientific knowledge (that is, accurate or true to natural events) it promises to produce and to the moral value awarded this type of disinterested knowledge. This does not mean, however, that the model *does* perform mechanical objectivity in its application, only that its association with a rigorous and impersonal scientific method (specifically, the circular method echoes the process of experimental research) awards it with strong legitimacy. Indeed, what has transpired so far in this chapter is that the application of scientific methods and reasoning in the educational setting is significantly less straightforward than anticipated by the steps of the circular document process.

Implementing Scientific Reasoning as the Basis for Change

'Governing through knowledge' or 'knowledge governance' ('kunskapsstyrning') has become more prominent in the public sector in Sweden over the past decades (Statskontoret, 2019, 2023). According to the Swedish Agency for Public Management, using 'best available knowledge' as a basis for governance aims to 'increase the quality of the organisations and create more efficient and equitable organisations' (Statskontoret, 2023, p. 11). Within this type of governance, knowledge derived from scientific methods and publications are considered the most legitimate type of knowledge to base decisions on (Fernler, 2011; Porter, 2020 [1995]). To illustrate, we can consider the position of scientificity in the Swedish education system.

The Education Act (2010:800) specifies that Swedish education should be built on a scientific basis and proven experience ('vetenskaplig grund och beprövad erfarenhet'). What is meant by these two terms is not specified in the Education Act, but the Swedish National Agency for Education writes that 'knowledge from scientific studies should be a starting point when preschools and schools plan, execute and evaluate their organisation' (Skolverket, 2023d, my translation). However, 'proven experience' is framed as equally important and defined as 'knowledge that has developed in the day-to-day work in preschools and schools through professionals together testing and retesting, discussing and critically evaluating their own organisation' (ibid.).[32] It is indeed noteworthy that these two, scientific basis and proven experience, are contrasted when the latter quite clearly shares strong characteristics with the former. Especially the process of testing and retesting until knowledge of 'what works' can be generated reminds us of methods for experimental research in particular (Biesta, 2010, p. 494).

Swedish scholar Karin Fernler has argued that while advocates of governance by knowledge tend to emphasise the importance of systematic, quality assured and preferably quantitative scientific knowledge for making policy and other decisions, the criteria for attaining this knowledge is usually not specified in any detail (2011, p. 156). This has recently been reflected in a decision by the Swedish National Audit Office ('Riksrevisionen') to try to open an investigation of the Swedish education system's governing agencies' work with ensuring that their recommendations are based on scientific evidence. This decision was the culmination of criticisms levelled primarily against the Swedish National Agency for Education by Swedish scholars and education debaters (cf. DN DN Ledare, 2024a). This agency, according to the critics, fails to differentiate between results from single studies and broader scientific understandings of issues when they cite 'scientific evidence' to motivate their recommendations (Olsson, 2024e).

[32] An argument could be made that these two broadly correspond to what Daston and Galison (2007) term mechanical objectivity and trained judgment, respectively.

The ideal that scientific methods, reasoning and research should form the basis for decision-making, policies and day-to-day practices in education and in other public institutions has been given many names (evidence-based practice, evidence-based policy, systematic reviews and knowledge governance to name a few). These trends have been explored by researchers empirically, for instance in Bohlin and Sager (2011) and by Segerholm et al. (2022), and critically, for instance by Biesta (2010) and Wiseman (2010). It was also a central concern for Theodore Porter in his book *Trust in Numbers: The Pursuit of Objectivity in Science and Public Life (2020 [1995]).* These strands of research have in common that they are concerned with the application of scientific models and reasoning on policy and other decision-making processes in public institutions. In a manner that reminds us of Marilyn Strathern's observation that audit practices are 'almost impossible to criticise in principle' due to their strong claims to values such as 'responsibility, openness about outcomes and widening of access' (Strathern, 2000, p. 3), these researchers point out that basing decisions – particularly concerning the well-being of children, patients and so on – on evidence of best practice is difficult to argue against (Biesta, 2010; Wiseman, 2010). Rather than arguing against evidence-based practice, these researchers tend to emphasise the need to explore *how* scientific reasoning and methods are implemented in organisational practice and asking what kind of evidence is possible, how evidence can be the basis for action and how it affects governance (see for instance Segerholm et al., 2022; Wiseman, 2010). Bohlin and Sager, in the introduction to their anthology *The Many Faces of Evidence: A Close Look at Evidence-Based Practice [Evidensens många ansikten: evidensbaserad praktik i praktiken]* (2011) make the empirical observation that 'only at a distance does evidence-based practice appear as a monolithic, constant form that can be seamlessly applied to other sectors' (p.16, my translation). At the level of practical application, however, there are always tensions between 'methodological stringency and practical relevance' (p. 19). To the extent that we can understand the documentation in standardised forms, traveling standardised routes, as an expression of methodological stringency (and in cases such as Systematic Quality Assurance, such an argument would be well-founded), this tension emerges throughout the empirical examples in this chapter.

Stuck in the analytical phase

One of the recurring observations from the first part of this chapter was that school leaders and teachers had trouble getting past the purely analytical phase of the circle and on to the 'experiment phase' of developing new methods and implementing them. One way to address this is to consider the bounded and complete view of knowledge that this system presupposes. Governing through knowledge requires that the actors involved have access to a shared and coherent knowledge base. Through an example of a Swedish county council's attempt at developing a regional plan to counteract obesity, Karin Fernler (2011) illustrates that arriving at this shared and coherent knowledge base is no easy matter and takes up a significant amount of the meeting time for the county council. We can see a corollary to this in some of the examples above, particularly the meeting about student health. During my fieldwork, I sat through several meetings where the purpose was to arrive at some kind of shared working area, knowledge or experience to base analysis and future measures upon. It tended to be highly uncertain what the 'outcome' of these meeting discussions were and if there had been time to discuss future plans for action at all, these remained tentative at best. We can also recall the headteacher, quoted earlier, who at a meeting had established that at their school, they were good at analysing, but that nothing really became of the analysis afterwards. Later, at that same meeting, the teachers had been divided into working groups and were to analyse the results of a survey about work and study environment:

> Towards the end of the meeting, the group becomes silent for a little while before one of the teachers says: 'but what do we do with these numbers? It's probably not as bad as it looks. Or it *is* as bad as it looks but we can't know that based on these numbers.' At this point the headteacher, who has spent most of the meeting sitting in deep conversation together with the deputy headteacher, stands up and says with a small laugh: 'our question was: why are the questions so bad?'. She goes on to ask each group to quickly evaluate the exercise, where most groups confirm that they struggled with the questions and results being difficult to interpret. The school leaders agree and tell us that they will improve the survey until next year.

Part of the reason why it is easy to 'get stuck' in the analysis phase can be the amount of effort it takes, and difficulty inherent in, establishing a common knowledge-base. According to Fernler (2011), one of the reasons why arriving at a shared knowledge base is particularly difficult in institutional settings such as city councils or schools is that many different actors are involved in the process of governing through knowledge. In the Swedish education setting, the knowledge base is supposed to be shared by politicians, civil servants, teachers and pupils (and in some cases, such as the Individual Education Plan and the Systematic Quality Assurance, pupils' guardians are also involved). Different institutional actors operate with different organisational logics, Fernler suggests, which makes it difficult to arrive at a shared and coherent knowledge base. What is interesting is that within the education system's circular document systems, it is *assumed* that different actors – pupils, teachers, guardians, school leaders, civil servants and politicians – need the same kind of knowledge for making decisions and developing practice. Furthermore, the standardised templates that many of the document systems are bound up in also assume this. This obfuscates not only the fact that different actors need different knowledge, but also that there are restrictions on what kind of knowledge can be integrated in these documents in the first place. The limits of the standardised form poses one such restriction that we will return to in-depth in chapter seven. But also the potential routes that these documents may travel – within and beyond the education system – place restraints on what kind of information, and with what level of detail, can be put in writing and provide a basis for knowledge.

The problem of causality

Educational scientist Gert Biesta argues that there is a 'tendency to expect far too much from evidence' (Biesta, 2010, p. 492). He posits three dimensions from which we can scrutinise the role of evidence-based practice in education: epistemologically, ontologically and in relation to application, of which the first two deal with issues of cause and effect that are relevant to debunking some assumptions built into the circle. Ontologically, Biesta identifies an ontological assumption about the relationship between action and effects that he describes as simplistic; there is a 'magic bullet notion of causality' that assumes that 'interventions are causes and results effects and that, under optimal conditions, the causes will necessarily generate the effects' (2010, p. 496). The circular document process that permeates national guidelines on document practices, and the models depicting the process (see images 5.1 and 5.2), all show clear traces of this 'magic bullet notion' of causality. This process seems particularly simplistic (even naïve) when we consider some of the issues that the circular document process tries to deal with, such as student's well-being or academic performance. There is a wide variety of variables that may affect these outcomes, and these variables are to varying degrees co-dependent, measurable and within the scope of what teachers can affect. Even when causality seemed to be fairly simple, such as in the example with the pupil whose behaviour improved when an adult shadowed them throughout the schooldays, the model does not account for other contextual factors that would make this solution untenable.

These issues bring us to the next problem with this model's conception of cause and effect, which is that it assumes what Biesta refers to as a 'representational epistemology', by which he means that knowledge about the world is complete and is an accurate representation of the world that it describes (2010, 494). One implication of this, Biesta argues, is that the lack of such representational knowledge is a practical problem that can be solved by implementing better and more far-reaching methods. In the previous section, we saw the headteacher reaching just this conclusion as they promised to amend the lack of progress in their work with student health by developing a better survey next year.

In sum, the circular document process' strong association with scientific reasoning and method enables the documents to be envisioned as an integral part of the work itself. Through them, knowledge is generated and contained for teachers to base future actions upon, they can provide a framework through which teachers can approach a work-related issue or they enable collaborations across chains of different people. These processes are, as we just saw, envisioned as taking place naturally and effortlessly. By following the circular method outlined in the guidelines, change will occur by natural progression.

The Work of Integrating the Circle: The Case of Systematic Quality Assurance

There has been a focus, so far, on the lack of success in integrating the circular document practice in teachers' work in a way that is meaningful to teachers themselves. The motivation for this has been to understand what I have described as a 'glitch' between the documents' *purpose* of being useful tools for teachers in their day-to-day work with pupils and teachers' *experience* of these same documents as detached from this same work. To understand this, it has been necessary to destabilise and question the way that the circular document process is *assumed* to be the optimal mode through which we can know and act upon an organisation. In this last section of the chapter, we shift this focus by considering two 'success stories' with regards to Systematic Quality Assurance. These two stories, told from the perspectives of two headteachers at two different schools, intriguingly pick up an end that I dropped at the beginning of the chapter, namely that of the cyclical thinking. I started out by arguing that in order to make sense of the breakdown of the cyclical thinking, it was pertinent to consider how it was materially manifested in teachers work life as a circular document process. The headteachers that we are about to encounter, however, significantly downplay the circular *document* process and emphasise the cyclical thinking, sometimes even at the expense of documents. To do this, however, requires a fair bit of work from the headteachers to match the work with the expectations and standards of the educational governing bodies, and especially the municipalities.

Systematic Quality Assurance is, as we have seen, entirely developed on the basis of the circular document process. It is revealing that the term itself emphasises the *systematic* nature of this work (the Swedish term is 'systematiskt kvalitetsarbete'). When I started doing my interviews and my fieldwork, I had not given this area of work that much attention and it was not part of my early interview guides. I quickly, however, got the impression that teachers were generally burdened with this work and that headteachers were generally, but not always, excited about it. In fact, in one of my early interviews a teacher at a primary school told me that the spring had been a bit chaotic at her school and that the staff had been under a lot of pressure so the headteacher had said that they this year could 'tone down' the Systematic Quality Assurance. In my later conversations with headteachers, I sometimes reiterated this quote so as to spark a discussion about Systematic Quality Assurance. The response from headteachers was almost always some kind of indignation that a colleague would say such a thing. Most headteachers that I spoke with felt strongly about Systematic Quality Assurance and stated that it was not something that one could compromise or 'tone down' because it should always already be integrated in the work of teachers and permeate the whole organisation. However, Systematic Quality Assurance is also assumed to be enabled and aided by documentation and documentation, no matter how integrated into work practice it might be, requires work. The kind of documentation that Systematic Quality Assurance requires – collecting data, analysing and identifying forward strategies – *does* require one to sit down and do the documentation work. For some teachers, this documentation work is all that becomes of the quality assurance work, leaving these teachers with a less than favourable impression of Systematic Quality Assurance.

These reflections are voiced in teachers' debates and discussions as well. In a recent book titled *Warning Against Systematic Quality Assurance ['Varning för kvalitetsarbete']*(2023), Thomas Ladö, himself a civil servant responsible for quality work, writes a book for school professionals that takes as its point of departure that many teachers and school leaders feel frustrated over Systematic Quality Assurance (and the book seeks to remedy this). In a column for the union magazine *Vi lärare,* teacher HP Tran discusses Systematic Quality Assurance under the headline: 'This is a Waste of School Staff's Time' (Tran, 2024). He introduces the column by stating that 'pupils do not learn to read more because we sit in a cramped conference room talking about how they should read more' (my translation). He states that Systematic Quality Assurance *in itself* is not the problem and he acknowledges that the initial idea surely was good. But, he explains further on in the text,

> 'the Systematic Quality Assurance has become synonymous with long, boring afternoon meetings or study days where school staff deliberate on a number of questions. We talk about who should lead the meeting, we look at power points, discuss in pairs, discuss in groups, take notes, talk about what was said in the group discussions, talking as a whole group and jotting down meeting minutes in a shared document.' (Tran, 2024, my translation)

I was amused when I read Tran's piece, and the quote above reads like a very condensed version of some of my fieldnotes. That Systematic Quality Assurance has a bad reputation in some circles, consequently, is not particularly controversial.

All the greater was my surprise, then, when I encountered teachers that did not harbour these sentiments but stated that the Systematic Quality Assurance at their school was very inspiring and helpful (I also interviewed one teacher who did not know what Systematic Quality Assurance was, which was even more surprising). These teachers explained how they had much freedom in choosing an area of focus and a method for working and that they were given time to learn and develop together with their closest colleagues. At both the schools where I found this positive sentiment among teachers I became curious, as I had almost come to expect stories like the one that Tran gives us in the quote above. So, I asked to interview the headteacher at the respective schools and both agreed to be interviewed. Formally, there were many things that separated the two headteachers. One worked at an upper secondary school in a large, demographically diverse municipality and the other worked at a school that covered all the compulsory years (F-9) in a small, homogenous municipality. One had worked at the school for a long time and the other had worked at their school for only a couple of years. They had, in other words, different conditions for implementing the Systematic Quality Assurance at their schools. Yet their narratives resonate in interesting ways and, I argue, in ways that say something about the circular document process and its relationship to the overarching goals of change and control.

Both these headteachers felt strongly about Systematic Quality Assurance and saw it as an essential element to running a well-functioning and high-performing school. 'Well, do you have four hours? This is something I'm very passionate about,' Jill asked me jokingly when I brought up Systematic Quality Assurance. Both Jill and Robin had very specific – and different – methods for implementing the work at their respective school. Consequently, in an attempt to ensure the anonymity of these two headteachers and on account of the – at least to my knowledge – idiosyncratic ways that they conceived of the task, I have decided to not include detailed accounts of what their methods consisted of but rather focus on the general outlines and strategies they employed. As we will see, these headteachers' approaches to Systematic Quality Assurance shared many characteristics.

First of all, both headteachers spoke about having a clear view of what the municipal administration wanted and what the teachers needed and that these two did not necessarily align.

> 'I'm very literal about following what the Education Act says and what the national curriculum says… I am *less* literal about following what the local education authority ['förvaltningen'] says and I think that this is the success factor' (Jill)

> 'What I think that people do wrong is this: in the worst case scenario – in my world this is the worst case scenario – you have a group of leaders at the local education authorities ['förvaltningsledningsgrupp'] and they conclude, based on their data, that we who sit here, us twelve, we know better than anyone else so now 3000 teachers in this municipality have to do exactly this. So we go to the city council and get funding for one of these development initiatives ['utvecklingssatsning'] and then we book a lecturer and buy reading material. Then we reach out to all the school leaders in our municipalities and tell them to make a plan for how they should use this material for improving what we have decided that they need to become better at. […] And you take all, or at least 70%, of teachers' and school leaders' time for competence development ['kompetensutvecklingstid'] and ask them to do the exact same thing. The result is both that you get a professional group who feels that "ok, so I'm not good enough" and you get an organisation where the school leader becomes the person who controls whether the teachers have done what we have said that they need to get better at. It's just wrong.' (Robin)

Evidently, Jill and Robin were generally sceptical towards the local education authorities' management of Systematic Quality Assurance (although both emphasised that they had a good professional relationship based on trust with their closest leader at the local education authorities). In the excerpt above, Robin emphasises the risk that the process of Systematic Quality Assurance becomes about control much more than about involving teachers in actual process of change. Jill alludes to the fact that the process of Systematic Quality Assurance in the national regulations emphasises that the work should be grounded in the work of teachers and pupils' learning and that this gave her a mandate to ignore some of the demands from the local education authorities if they do not produce the intended effects of support. Later in the interview, she also stressed that this had the effect that they stopped documenting a lot of things for the sake of the local education authorities and could focus on 'documenting those things that we need to have on paper'.

Another similarity in how these headteachers approached the Systematic Quality Assurance at their schools, which is implied in the critique above, was that they emphasised the importance of involving teachers in the work and adjusting the work to the needs of the teachers and the organisation immediately surrounding the pupils. This was the impression that the teachers at their schools had also given me.

> 'We create a [document] product that is supposed to help us, we don't write a [document] product to show someone else how clever we are.' (Robin)

Jill understood the circular model of the Systematic Quality Assurance as a theoretical model that could help to elucidate a process of working that they were already involved with. The risk, as she saw it, with understanding it as something to 'follow' is that working according to the model became an aim and an achievement in and of itself, which deflected attention from the fact that the effect on the education at the school is the primary driving force of the work.

> 'Sometimes I think that not even parts of the local education authority understand this. They tell us that: "now, you headteachers have a meeting time to work with Systematic Quality Assurance". But that's not something that I do together with other headteachers. That's what I do *here*, to make education here as good as possible.' (Jill)

A central component to this highly localised Systematic Quality Assurance was, in both Robin and Jill's version of it, to base the work on 'soft' data as well as 'hard' data. They both acknowledged the centrality of conversation and dialogue in order to develop methods for improving education at their schools:

> 'So, when it comes to collecting the data for documentation, then, we do this less and less by sitting down and writing things. Rather, we do it through sharing experiences. I get various impressions in different settings – it can be staff appraisals, when I listen in on the work teams' discussions, when I have conversations with teachers in the staff room… Then we of course have our grade statistics, our written assessments, lists of pupils who need special support, action programmes and so on, but these things are raw data. […] So the oral communication is central to us and we have taken it more and more seriously over the past years.' (Jill)

> ‘So there is no shortcut when it comes to this work, it requires that we do, do, do and that we talk, talk, talk.’ (Robin)

This kind of work placed high demands on the teachers at their respective schools, both headteachers were careful to point out. The teachers get a significant amount of freedom, Robin especially emphasised, but this came with a responsibility that was proportional to this freedom. Both Robin and Jill expected much from their teachers, but – as was my impression from the teachers – gave the teachers the necessary conditions to fulfil these expectations.

Regardless of how autonomous Jill and Robin presented themselves in how they and their teachers implemented the Systematic Quality Assurance at their respective schools, they both also acknowledged that the local education authorities needed to be reckoned with.

> ‘In the beginning I was much more nervous and I kept thinking that I had to be able to verify everything through some sort of hard data. For the head of the local education authorities, when he asks, I should be able to produce this report and show that. And I’ve completely left this. […] Of course, I need some written conclusions and things to show in my dialogues with the local education authorities, but it’s not like there’s a hallelujah moment there.’ (Jill)

> ‘But there’s a challenge in making this model work in a system based on New Public Management. So then it becomes my job to be able to show [to the local education authorities] the development and so on. So of course I’ve been in dialogue with them and they ask what we’ve done. […] And once, this was a bit fun, we got a new leader at the local education authority and they didn’t understand our quality report when they read it, so then they came out here and spoke to me and I could show them how we work and they spoke to some teachers and then they understood how we work.’ (Robin)

Jill and Robin both accept that the local education authorities have certain demands regarding the process of Systematic Quality Assurance and see it as their job to make the process already happening at their school visible to the education authorities, rather than implementing a model in a manner that ‘fits’ the local education authorities’ forms and expectations.

It must be emphasised that this requires considerable work on their part. Consequently, the integration of the Systematic Quality Assurance as a circular process underpinned by documents does *not* happen effortlessly or seamlessly. Rather, it requires considerable effort and work by these two headteachers to adjust the Systematic Quality Assurance so that it meets the needs of both the teachers and the local education authorities. In the short version, then, at these schools, the headteachers have a clear view of what the municipal administration wants and what the teachers need and that these two do not necessarily align. So, they do what they think is best for the teachers and manage the work with the municipality on their own.

Concluding remarks

Many, if not most, of the document demands that the national governing agencies, local education authorities or school leaders place on teachers are based on a cyclical thinking wherein change and control are envisioned as naturally occurring through a circular document process. The naturalness and self-evidence of these processes' co-existence through the circular document process was often challenged by teachers through their question: 'For whom do we do this?'. It was not unusual, then, that teachers harboured a sentiment that they were doing document work for someone else's sake, for instance the local education authorities, the politicians, parents or school leaders. This stands in quite stark contrast to how the document demands themselves are framed and illustrated by the various education authorities, where the focus is always on providing support for pupils, improving teachers' skills and pupils' learning or ensuring a healthy work environment for pupils and teachers alike. It seems to be in everyone's interest, then, that the work be about improved conditions for learning and teaching for pupils and teachers, respectively. In this chapter, it has been explored how a process that in principle is so closely related to the ongoings of the organisation becomes perceived solely as a tool for control, experienced by teachers as detached from their daily work in the classroom, with pupils.

We have seen how this can in part be seen in relation to governance and the kind of demands that the regulations of the national education authorities place upon school leaders and school organisers. These actors are, in many cases, legally obliged to ensure that certain practices are carried out in the school setting. This kind of accountability produces documents. For instance, municipal organisers, who know schools largely through the documents they produce and dialogue with school leaders, can 'see' that schools do preventive work to ensure a calm and safe learning environment through the documents (in this case, surveys and situation analyses) produced at the schools. What they see, however, is determined by what the document system can make visible in the first place. Consequently, some things remain 'invisible' to outsiders such as the local education authorities. An example of this was the 'little things' that Elizabeth and her colleagues do every day to ensure a safe and calm learning environment. These included the thought that went into arranging a classroom, developing teaching and learning material, consulting colleagues for advice when difficulties arise, collaborative strategies between teachers to make sure that pupils' learning environment is as calm and safe as possible, and so on.

With the circular document process, the documents move between different levels and actors within the education system. This, in turn, produces other effects, such as the shift of responsibility that comes with the movement of documents or teachers' strategic deliberation on *what* to make visible to the education authorities in the first place. From the teachers' perspective, it also means that some documents tend to 'disappear' upwards in the governing chain – their potential use and effect invisible from the viewpoint of the teachers. Invisibility, then, is not just a feature of those things that are not documented but can also occur through the very process of moving documents around. Ultimately, the circular document processes that are supposed to make sure that change occurs at the local level reminds us more of how Michael Power has described checking gone wild: 'ritual practices of verification whose technical efficacy is less significant than their role in the production of organizational legitimacy' (Power, 1997). I have argued in this chapter, however, that it is not enough to only consider governance if we are to understand the pervasiveness of the circular model for documentation.

In part, the circle is powerful in an instrumental sense as it provides the education authorities with mechanisms for auditing and holding school leaders accountable. It is *also* powerful, however, insofar as the circle is naturalised within the school system as an indispensable tool for change. I have argued that this unquestioned legitimacy of the circular model as the optimal mode through which change should occur ought to be explored as a contributing factor to the pervasiveness of the circle in its own right. Here, the affinity to scientific reasoning and methods has been highlighted. This helps us understand how the circular document process permeates not only document systems outlined by the national education authorities, but also systems where its presence is not formally required.

Lastly, we have seen that even when the document demands *do* seem meaningful to teachers, such as with the Systematic Quality Assurance in the last part of this chapter, it requires substantial work from the headteachers to integrate change and improvement of the education with the demands of control from the local education authority.

6. Documents as Necessary and Obstructive for the Same Purpose

This chapter recounts a meeting about pupils' well-being and safety at a school where I did fieldwork. The meeting took as its point of departure statistics on the practices of incident reporting at the school. These statistics had been compiled with the help of a digital system that this school, and all public schools in the municipality, used to report incidents of degrading behaviour ('kränkande behandling'). We can note that this point of departure is in line with the circular document process that we encountered in the previous chapter and, specifically, the step of investigating 'where are we?'. Figuring out where they are, however, proves tricky and by the end of the meeting most of the time has been spent discussing the accuracy of the numbers they are provided with and very little time has been spent discussing pupils' well-being and safety beyond what these numbers can demonstrate.

The discussion that took place during this meeting provides us with a productive site to investigate the position of documents as both coveted and detested within the Swedish education system. Throughout the meeting, the discussion shifted from scepticism to confidence, from trust to distrust and back many times. By following the discussion, I try to point at particular aspects of the documents, the system of documentation or the document work that frame the document and associated document work as necessary, helpful, important, superfluous, burdensome or faulty. The specific research question that will be addressed in this chapter is 'how does the same document become constituted as necessary and obstructive for the same institutional purpose?'. The incident report and its adjoining document system, which will be presented in-depth shortly, serve multiple purposes at different levels of the education system. These purposes, while sometimes presented as complementary or even naturally following one another, in fact not only contradict each other but are also often in conflict with the day-to-day non-documentary activities that teachers do.

For my analysis, I have found it useful to invoke the metaphor of documents as tools (Asdal & Reinertsen, 2022). To approach documents as tools enables us to think of them as objects that do things – that create things or effects –in a relation with their environment. It also, however, quite intuitively suggests that there are material properties of the tool that enable functionality. What is also important is that function, usage and material properties are not self-explanatory, predictable or even singular – several functions, usages and properties can co-exist. This suggests that we cannot take for granted what a document is for or how it should be, or is being, used. Rather, we should take these as empirical questions, which is what this chapter aims to do. The notion of a document tool is particularly useful because so much of the discussion at the meeting revolves around the usage of the incident report: How should we (the school staff) use this tool? For whom is it? What does it let us do? What does it not let us do? In short, what kind of tool is this?

I begin the chapter by describing the incident and its associated documents. The next part of the chapter relays the aforementioned meeting, nearly in its entirety, and with some foreshadowing analytical comments. Lastly, I explore the various ways in which the incident report is constituted as a document tool during the meeting. Analytically, I focus on the *application* of the incident report tool and draw a distinction between the incident report as a tool in its *singular form* and the incident reports in *aggregated forms* as a different kind of tool. Ultimately, I show how the desire to see, know and act upon their organisation through documents (in this instance, the incident report) is both framed as necessary and an obstacle for the same organisational purpose: counteracting degrading treatment in their school.

The Incident Report and Its Associated Documents

The 'incident report' is a document that school staff are legally required to produce when it comes to their attention that a pupil has been subject to physical and/or verbal degrading treatment by another pupil (or school staff). In the Education Act (2010:800, chapter 6), 'degrading treatment' is defined as 'treatment that without being discriminatory according to the Discrimination Act (2008:567) violates a child's or a pupil's dignity'[33] (act 3). This type of treatment is prohibited (act 9) and school staff are obliged to 'report, investigate and take action against' it (act 10). Already we can begin to think of the Education Act as a kind of document tool. Through its formulations, format and legal status, it aims to produce effects – most notably to counteract and prevent degrading treatment towards children and pupils – and sets in motion actions – such as the meeting that will soon be analysed. During the meeting, however, the Education Act is not mentioned once, despite the fact that the aim of the meeting mirrors the aim of the sixth chapter of the Education Act.

How can we consider the structuring effects of a document that is neither physically present nor verbally mentioned in an empirical situation? One way to conceive this is to work with Dorothy Smith's analysis of documents as constitutive of organisations in themselves. As discussed in chapter three, Smith argues that documents act as fundamental material means through which organisations achieve their ontological stability. How this happens, we recall, can never be deduced from

[33] All excerpts from the Education Act are translated by me.

anywhere but the sites where the documents are activated and co-ordinate actions. Thinking with Smith (2001), the Education Act can be understood as a document that exists *in potentia* throughout the upcoming meeting. Documents that are 'out of action' may nonetheless organise how situations unfold and how actors who have read the document proceed in the organisational setting (p. 174). This will be particularly evident in deputy headteacher Rebecca's contributions at the meeting, which nearly always echo the content of the Education Act.

A closer reading of the Education Act reveals that this document initiates a whole set of new documents. It is, in Prior's terms, a *generative document* (2003). For instance, the schools are obliged to 'conduct goal-oriented work to counteract degrading treatment' (ch 6, act 6), in part by 'making sure that measures are taken to counteract and prevent children and pupils being subject to degrading treatment' (act 7) and in part by annually creating a 'plan against degrading treatment' (act 8). The act also specifies that staff are obliged to report as soon as it comes to their knowledge that a child or pupil 'considers themselves to have been subject to degrading treatment'[34] (act 10). Here we see a whole new subset of document tools emerging – the plan as one and the report as another. Although not stated explicitly in the Education Act, the Swedish National Agency for Education specifies that the whole investigation and all preventive measures should be documented (Skolverket, 2022a).

So, chapter 6 of the Education Act often creates a small document realm of its own. The incident report is born from and related to other documents, most notably the Education Act, and the incident report as a document tool must *in part* be understood in relation to these documents and the legal requirements that govern it. These documents have no predictable or stable explanatory value on their own, however. Following both Smith (Smith, 2001, 2005, 2005 [1990]) and Asdal and Reinertsen (2022), I set out to demonstrate how the application of the incident report as a document tool cannot be understood from a normative position beyond the sites where it is engaged but must always take as its point of departure these sites of engagement.

Lastly, it is worth reflecting upon some of the things that the Education Act does *not* say or specify. The Education Act itself says nothing about the format, layout or otherwise formal requirements for the school's documentation in their work against degrading treatment. Any material qualities of, or requirements for, the document tools are left unstated. And although the Act specifies who is *responsible* for the work of counteracting degrading treatment – the municipal organiser or the independent organiser in the case of independent schools – it does not delegate who should carry out the work. In practice, this means that it is the municipal organiser, and to some extent the school leader, who decides *how* this work should be

[34] The teacher should thus not pass any judgement on the reliability of the information but let the investigation following the report decide whether degrading treatment has actually happened (act 14).

documented as well as *who* should carry out the work. There are, then, different routines at different schools as to who conducts the investigation, who writes the report and the evaluation and so on. This also means that the material qualities of the incident report – or incident reporting system – vary between municipalities. I encountered three different digital systems for reporting degrading treatment in the four municipalities that I did fieldwork or interviews in.[35] Some of the municipalities have since changed which digital system they use. This means that in practice, these digital systems (to my knowledge all sold by profit-seeking companies) have a significant impact on what and how incident reports are documented and handled. These educational digital systems tend to market themselves as specialised in helping schools, adaptable to local needs and in line with the legal requirements of the Education Act. I have given the digital system we are about to encounter in this chapter the pseudonym 'EnRoute' and it fits the generic description above.

The Meeting

> After the pupils have gone home the teachers have a meeting concerning the well-being and safety of the pupils. The meeting is led by the school counsellor, Dylan.36 We – some 15 teachers, the school counsellor, the deputy headteacher Rebecca and myself – are gathered in the staff room. Dylan is standing in front of the whiteboard and begins the meeting by saying that he has sent out statistics from 'EnRoute' and a copy of the school's 'shared core values' ('värdegrundsplan'). Dylan asks whether the teachers have taken a look at the documents he has sent out via email and – not unusually – it is difficult to assess from the teachers' reaction to this question whether they have opened these documents or not. Dylan does not linger on this but goes on to tell them that he has printed copies of the 'shared core values' and throws a few copies on each table where the teachers are seated. After a brief run-through of this document, Dylan goes on to the next topic – which is statistics derived from their school's incident reporting through the digital system 'EnRoute'.

It is worth noting the entrance of statistics as the basis for knowledge production and decision-making at this point. Statistics play an interesting part in how incident reporting and work against degrading treatment is framed both in the schools and, to an extent, in the media (for example Persson, 2019). Nowhere in the Education

[35] When I worked as a teacher in 2017 and 2018, we filled in a report form on paper. The information from the paper report somehow went on to become statistics on occurrences on degrading treatment in the municipality, but I have no idea how much of or how this information was digitised. It is not unlikely that there are still some municipalities in Sweden that fill in the reports on paper forms.

[36] The school counsellor in Sweden ('kurator' in Swedish) has a particular role working with children who have problems at home or in school and are often central in the school's work against bullying and degrading treatment and for improving the psychosocial health of the pupils.

Act does it say that schools or municipal organisers are obliged to create any form of statistics based on the occurrence of incident reports at schools. Nor does the Swedish National Agency for Education have any regulations concerning this. Yet, these statistics are often created, made available, discussed and acted upon. The statistics that were discussed during the meeting were generated through the digital system 'EnRoute'. Many modern digital systems have an enormous capacity to process large amounts of information and produce quantified summaries, analyses and models of this information. 'EnRoute' is one of these digital systems and the ability for schools to generate knowledge – in this case, statistical representations of their incident reporting – is highlighted in the marketing of EnRoute. In terms of affordances, then, one can say that EnRoute *encourages* the generation of statistics by making this line of action 'easy and appealing' (Davis, 2020, p. 72). It is entirely possible to use EnRoute without making use of this feature, but it is an action that requires little effort by the user and that, as we will soon see, promises great rewards in terms of knowledge, overview and control for the user, making it seem like a desirable action.

> Dylan begins by saying that their school has 83 reports, the majority of which are verbal or physical violations ('kränkningar'). He compares this number with the number at another school in the same municipality that has 292 reports. A small discussion immediately surfaces as he relays these numbers. The teachers try to estimate how many pupils this other school has compared to their own. Several problems occur here: the school they are comparing with is a larger school than theirs as a whole, but these 292 reports are taken only from the years 4-6. Meanwhile, the statistics from Meadowbrook Elementary covers the years F-6. So, the statistics from Meadowbrook Elementary covers a wider range of years, but, as one teacher points out, they have more classes for each year. The teacher is unsure how many groups per year the other school has, but it is more than Meadowbrook Elementary's groups per year. The teachers and the school counsellor agree that there are big issues with comparing the numbers from these schools. Yet this is exactly what they do next. 'We don't know,' Dylan says and continues with a series of rhetorical questions concerning the statistics they have at hand, 'is it that our pupils commit fewer violations? Is it that we don't discover it whereas they do? Or is it that we discover it, but that we don't report it?'. He goes on to tell us that there is a low degree of consensus at the school regarding when, what and how they should report these violations. 'Perhaps the other school reports more readily?' he asks, again rhetorically.

Thus far we are confronted with a couple of issues to take note of – the first is an awareness among all present at the meeting that the statistics that they are presented with are unreliable and therefore difficult to analyse. Yet, we should also take note of the fact that it is still desirable to do so. The statistics provide an alluring point of departure for a discussion on their work against degrading treatment. This is in line with Theodore Porter's theorisation on the role of quantification in public life (2020 [1995]). Through their association to scientific objectivity, numbers – in this case statistics – promise to provide knowledge that is disinterested and impartial and therefore also just. Especially for publicly funded institutions such as schools, decisions and other actions should ideally be based on knowledge that has this air of objectivity that alludes to a truth that extends beyond the local context where it was formulated.

The separation between localised, non-quantified knowledge and the objective, quantified knowledge of the statistics proves tricky to rely on, as Dylan's interjections indicate. And this relates to the second issue to take note of here, namely that Dylan frames this as a problem of 'low consensus' on reporting procedure. The problem of the poor statistics, then, is a problem of methods, which implies that one solution to the problem could be *better* methods. This echoes the defining problem of Alain Desrosières' book *The Politics of Large Numbers* (1998), namely that the controversies surrounding statistics can be placed in two categories: one that concerns the measurement of the social fact and that takes for granted that this social fact exists (and its measurability becomes a methodological problem, not an ontological one) and one that calls into question the existence of the object itself, or the social fact, as something existing beyond the social conventions of its construction. What Desrosières points out already on the first page in his book and that is evident again and again throughout this meeting, is that 'it is difficult to think *simultaneously* that the objects being measured really do exist, *and* that this is only a convention'. At this point of the meeting, Dylan is evidently leaning towards the former frame of mind when he is suggesting that the problem can be solved through better methods.

> Now a teacher takes the word and points out that they have recently modified their routines for reporting and that the idea had initially been that the 'leisure time activities teachers'[37] should be doing the reporting. This would both relieve the teachers' workload and work well because most of the violations happen during recess, the teacher says.

Here we get the first expression of the reporting as burdensome; it takes time and adds to teachers' workload. This teacher does not challenge the need for the reports per se, just the time it takes from teachers.

> Dylan confirms that when leisure time activities teachers are the ones who become aware of an incident they are also obliged to report. Deputy headteacher Rebecca jumps in to underline what Dylan just said and says that the teachers are obliged to report degrading treatment when it comes to their attention.

[37] 'Recreation centres' ('fritidshem' in Swedish) are where pupils, particularly in the lower years when they are deemed too young to walk home alone or spend time home alone, attend school outside the compulsory school hours. The staff there are called leisure time activity teachers ('fritidspedagoger'). A common additional task for these teachers is often to be outdoors together with the pupils during recess.

Now, we see evidence of the Education Act existing *in potentia* as it is indirectly activated. In fact, Rebecca's comment is a paraphrase of the Education Act. Her comment is a reminder that the issue of the incident report is not merely one of 'how we should make this work for us' but one of being accountable towards the national legal framework for educational institutions.

> Dylan then goes on to tell everyone about a question he had had from a caregiver earlier that same day, about whether or not the school contacts both the caregiver of the perpetrator *and* the caregiver of the victim of the degrading treatment when they write an incident report. 'My thought is that this is something we should do,' Dylan continues and there is an affirmative murmur from the teachers in the room. One teacher says out loud that to contact both sets of caregivers should be 'self-evident'. Another teacher confirms this and adds that this is what, as a parent, one would have wanted oneself. Dylan tells us that the parent he contacted today was thankful that the school had contacted them to tell them that their child had behaved poorly towards a fellow pupil.

The Education Act does not specify whether, when or how caregivers should be notified about their children's behaviour and the Swedish National Agency for Education tells us that it is up to the schools to have routines concerning this (Skolverket, 2022g). So far at the meeting, however, the practice of who to contact when an incident of degrading treatment happens seems straightforward, even 'self-evident' as one teacher puts it.

> 'But,' Dylan now says, 'what do we do if we have a pupil who displays this sort of behaviour towards fellow pupils *often*? How often should we call this pupil's guardians?'. A teacher replies that 'if the incident is reported in EnRoute then the guardians should be notified'.

Here, Dylan challenges the certainty of the need to always contact the caregivers when an incident report is written. The teacher, however, remains convinced that the right thing to do is to contact the caregivers regardless of the circumstances around the report. But the teacher challenges, albeit indirectly, another aspect of the reporting system, namely that all incidents should be reported. Even though Rebecca and Dylan have stressed that they are obliged to report degrading treatment when it comes to their attention, teachers are frequently put in positions where they have to assess whether an argument, a fight or a nasty comment falls under the category of degrading treatment (this is also evident in previous research on Swedish teachers' reporting of degrading treatment, see for instance Lindgren et al., 2021). These assessments are made in various ways and in practice teachers solve many conflicts and cases of degrading treatment without reporting.

> The discussion about whether or not to always contact caregivers continues. 'Is this not one of the boxes that we should tick on the report itself?' another teacher asks,

> referring to the question of whether or not to contact the pupil's caregiver. Several teachers nod in reply.

Clearly, the format of the report suggests that this issue is not self-evident. The choice to tick the box or not gives the reporter the possibility to not contact the caregivers. At a later point in time, I asked to see the report form in EnRoute and it turned out that the teachers were right and that is 'one of the boxes' one can tick. Towards the end, the form asks: 'who has been informed?'. This is followed by three boxes that the reporter can click: 'nobody', 'caregivers', 'pupil's home teacher' ('mentor' in Swedish). In terms of affordances, then, one can say that EnRoute allows for the action of contacting caregivers. Allowing is, in Davis' conceptualisation of it, neutral in intensity and multidirectional in its application (Davis, 2020, p. 80). This does not mean, however, that the choice is neutral in other regards, such as the consequences of one's clicking. In fact, in this case the neutrality paired with the multidirectionality even leaves the responsibility of making the decision up to the reporter which also makes them accountable for whichever decision they make. The choice, then, is far from self-evident. A reporting system that took for granted that the caregivers should be contacted could either have omitted the box completely or even added a reminder for the teachers to notify the caregivers about the report, which would be a kind of *encouragement* to contact pupils' caregivers as a particular line of action. It could even, of course, *request* that the teachers contact the caregivers by making it mandatory to tick a box that said 'Caregivers have been contacted' before one could submit the report.

> 'We should make a template, a small template, that can guide us in deciding when and what to report,' Dylan continues. 'As it is now, the reports are very uneven. There are many possible explanations for this: some teachers might be more zealous than others, some pupils, especially the younger ones, perhaps tittle-tattle more and so on.'

Here the lack of consensus among the staff concerning reporting procedure is again brought to the fore. The statistics tell us that some teachers report more often than others, but again it is not possible to know whether this reflects teachers' idiosyncrasies (in this case, degree of zealousness) or the circumstances under which the different teachers work (in this case, with younger or older students). I mentioned earlier that the issue of 'low consensus' can be interpreted as one of poor methods, with the implication of the solution to the problem being *better* methods to reach higher consensus. In this section we get an indication of one such method – the template. Interestingly, a potential new type of document is introduced as a solution to a problem with the first document (cf. Forssell & Ivarsson Westerberg, 2014). It is not unusual that regulations and general guidelines are formulated in ways that are so vague that professionals find it necessary to create clarifying checklists, manuals or, in this case, templates. Some documents spawn new documents (Jacobsson & Martinell Barfoed, 2019). Creating a guiding template, however, proves difficult in practice. This is not only because it is difficult to define where the line should be drawn between various behaviours and their status as degrading or non-degrading. It is also due to the fact that the Education Act has already established which acts to report, namely all of them.

> 'Should we report the things that the children say have happened, but where there have been no adult witnesses? So, every time there is a kind of situation where child one says [this] and child two says [that] and child one says and child two says… Do you actually believe everything that the children say?' the teacher says with a tone of disbelief. Another teacher replies that they should report it anyway and write the information as it has been reported to them without judging the veracity of what each child has said. Rebecca joins the conversation. 'Yes,' she says, 'the short answer is yes, you should report these kinds of incidents too. It is important that the children are given the possibility to "own" their version of what has happened.'

The teacher's intention with this outburst is, I daresay, not to vilify children or to belittle their experiences (or at least not as the primary or sole intention). Rather, it is better to think of this outburst as a reflection of a very mundane experience for most teachers, namely the daily effort that teachers put into solving conflicts and the insurmountable time it would take to report every one of these incidents. Discretion is, regardless of the wording of the Education Act, an important part of teachers' work with reporting incidents of degrading treatment (this is one of the main findings in Horton et al., 2023). Rebecca, on the other hand, represents the 'should do', the legal requirement, in this case. The issue of time management does not fit the narrative of the official guidelines and regulations – there is no clause that reduces the teachers' duty to report degrading treatment based on time concerns or personal judgments of the severity of the offense.

> Dylan continues and says that these reports usually do not result in lengthy investigations and that most of them are closed fairly quickly. A teacher quickly replies to this: 'and here we have the next problem! Work that doesn't amount to anything.' Dylan does not seem to share this perception of the reporting system as work down the drain. He points out that it can be interesting to compare reports over time in order to get an overview – 'as long as everyone does it in the same way,' he adds. Rebecca says that it is difficult to draw any conclusions from the data when there are few reports. She says that there are certain things that are important to keep track of, like where incidents happen and whether there are individual pupils who are involved much more than others.

It seems likely here that Dylan has picked up on the above-mentioned underlying issue of time and prioritising one's work because he emphasises that the result of the reports, the investigations, are not excessively time-consuming. A teacher is then quick to challenge this explanation by bringing up a common complaint about document work – that it is 'work down the drain'. Dylan's mistake, or what Dylan is being challenged on here, is the idea that the issue is merely about time in *quantitative* terms, i.e. that the main problem is the *lack* of time. The teacher rephrases the issue to also concern time in *qualitative* terms – why should they prioritise spending their time on writing these reports?

> A teacher asks what they should do when there are two pupils who have diametrically different versions of what has happened, even of who is the offender and who is the victim in a situation. Dylan says that in these cases two reports should be filed. After a short silence Dylan says: 'we are having a hard time but it's not visible.'[38]

Here, 'a hard time' refers to the numerous conflicts that teachers have to solve and the foul language they often hear exchanged between pupils. He is also saying that if one were to look for evidence of this (that is, look for the numbers in EnRoute) they would not find it because they do not file enough reports. That is, they do not produce a sufficient number of reports to reflect their problems.

> A teacher replies that 'we did not feel that it helped us'. Rebecca confirms the teacher's qualms concerning the usefulness of reporting in EnRoute and underlines that it is important that 'EnRoute is *our* tool.'

The teacher's reply can be understood as an excuse for why they have not reported incidents more frequently and it echoes a common complaint among teachers about unnecessary document work. This complaint was frequently phrased with some iteration of a question familiar to us from the previous chapter: 'for whom am I doing this?'. Deputy headteacher Rebecca acknowledges this experience and stresses that the reporting system should be useful for 'us'. 'Us' in this context should be seen as opposed to for the parents, for the municipality, for the politicians, journalists or the Swedish Schools Inspectorate. EnRoute is, however, not by a long shot 'their tool'. At the most basic level, the document content produced by school staff in EnRoute is public (albeit in significantly redacted form). At a more specific level, EnRoute as a digital system makes reports retrievable and accessible to outside actors in a relatively quick and easy way. What is more, it is not only the reports that are accessible and easily retrieved, but also the aggregated knowledge derived from these reports and presented as statistics. In fact, this very meeting, where numbers between different schools have been compared, serves to illustrate how the data from EnRoute travels and is used and analysed by external actors. Indeed, this is one of the motivations for municipalities to purchase these services in the first place.

> The conversation returns to the 'when and what' of the reports. Dylan suggests that they should file a report when the same thing happens two or three times. 'But of course,' he adds, 'there are degrees of severity in this… someone hits someone in the head or there is outright physical abuse we don't wait two-three times before we

[38] In Swedish: Vi har det tufft, men det syns inte.

report it. But if someone says "you fucking…"'[39] and pauses without specifying any particular degrading noun before he states again that even here there are degrees of severity. A teacher is quick to add that she thinks that it's important that girls should not have to come to school and be called 'a fucking whore'[40]. 'This is sexual harassment,' she states, 'and it is important that we emphasise that this is not okay'.

In this section, Dylan returns to the task of strengthening the consensus among the staff on when and what to report. When trying to formulate more precise standards for how they should act, however, he runs into some problems. 'Frequency' could seem like one parameter to consider. Should they always report 'first-time offenders'? 'Severity' could seem like another parameter. Should they always report all name-calling? But when discussing specific examples, it becomes clear that it is difficult to reduce the various types of degrading treatment to these categories.

> There are no protests to the teacher's suggestion for zero tolerance for sexual harassment and Dylan writes the words 'sexual harassment' and 'gender' on the whiteboard. A different teacher adds that ethnicity should be on that list, too, and Dylan writes down 'ethnicity' next to the other words and says that when we hear of these kinds of incidents we should act immediately. 'But,' a teacher who until now has not said anything says in an exasperated tone, 'what happens? Nothing.' 'That's up to us to decide,' Dylan replies. 'We email the pupil's caregivers and file a report in EnRoute directly.' At this, there is a short silence and then Dylan suggests that they take a look at some statistics again.

It is not wholly clear what the teacher means with the interjection 'nothing happens'. He could mean, as I take it Dylan interprets it, that pupils call each other these things all the time without any action being taken. Whereupon Dylan's suggestion to file a report and contact the caregivers makes sense because these are, in fact, actions that they can take. It is, however, also possible that the teacher meant 'but what happens [*when we report*]? Nothing' and was referring to the problem at large – the name calling and verbal abuse – when he stated that 'nothing happens'; the degrading treatment continues, regardless of the reports.

> Dylan has suggested that they look at some statistics and on the table in front of him are a bunch of papers that he now takes a look at. I can see tables and graphs but the papers are not shared with the rest of us (though they may have been circulated by email beforehand). Instead, he tells us that the most common time and place for incidents is recess and that the most frequent day is Monday. 'I was a bit surprised by this myself,' he says, 'one could have guessed that it was the other way around, that Fridays, right before the weekend, would be more common.' A small murmur breaks out and teachers seem to be discussing this piece of statistic among themselves

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[39] In Swedish: din jävla. 'Jävla' and 'fucking' as adjectives are used in similar ways in Swedish and English, but the Swedish 'jävla' is milder than its English counterpart.

[40] In Swedish: jävla hora.

when one teacher says so that everyone can hear: 'maybe teachers don't have the energy to sit and write reports on a Friday?'. The teacher asks this question with a little smile and Dylan and some teachers let out a small chuckle before the next piece of statistic is relayed to us. We are told that there is a 'great leap' in number of reports in the month of October, two years in a row. 'One can speculate,' Dylan says, 'whether this is because the honeymoon is over by this time and that it is just before the autumn break. Maybe we let things go under the radar a bit in the beginning, but that we in October start to really deal with the things that do not get better. However, there are no peaks before Christmas or before the February break. The peaks are in the middle of the semesters – in October and in March.' A teacher says that he thinks that it is odd that there is not a peak in the end of December. Both teachers and pupils are usually quite tired at the end of the autumn semester and it could seem reasonable that there would be a peak in incidents around then.

When statistics make a re-entry into the discussion, we can again see the pendulum swing from adherence to the accuracy of the statistics (Dylan's surprise over the statistics proving his preconceptions wrong, addressing the peak in October as a reflection of real peak in number of offences) to critically questioning the accuracy of the same statistics (do we actually learn anything about the occurrence of degrading treatment or merely about teachers' varying propensity to report?). We should also take note of the fact that their efforts of 'knowing' the organisation through the statistics is thwarted by the knowledge that they already have about the organisation beyond what the numbers show them. Every piece of information that the numbers show them, they have counterevidence for, or is complemented by insights gained from their everyday experience with colleagues and pupils. The trust in numbers, to draw on Porter (1995), extends to an ideational level insofar that numbers *are* the mode through which one can best know 'what is going on' but it does not extend to the particular numbers that they are presented with at this meeting. The trust in these numbers is in fact strikingly low. The pendulum can in this light be seen as a movement from trust in numbers *as such* and distrust *in these* numbers specifically.

'The next point is location,' Dylan says, '*where* do these incidents happen? They happen in the schoolyard (35 reports) and in the classroom (17 reports). And what does this mean? It means that it is here that it is easiest to detect degrading treatment – these are the places where we adults are'. No one has anything to add to this observation and Dylan continues to ask: 'Who are the perpetrators? There is a fairly even distribution across the grades, but with a peak in the first grade. 48 of the reports are about boys and 34 are about girls.' Here a few teachers raise the issue of what kind of acts are reported. They argue that one is more likely to report physical violence, which they say boys commit more frequently, but that they believe that girls do more things that do not come to the teachers' attention and that they verbally abuse their peers more. Dylan comments on these observations by saying that he thought that there would be more verbal abuses, but that the majority are incidents of physical abuse or violence. To this he adds that they all need to become better at reporting cases of verbal degrading treatment. As an example, he refers to a neighbouring

> school (a different one than in the beginning of the meeting) where they have zero tolerance for verbal abuse and that this is one of the first things that pupils learn when they come to the school. 'Why don't we have it like that here?' he asks rhetorically.

It is implied here that 'zero tolerance' at the other school is a kind of action rather than a 'mere statement' of facts or reiteration of guidelines. Meadowbrook Elementary, of course, has a similar policy of 'zero tolerance' towards degrading treatment (it is even, as we have learned, required of them by law to have that policy). What is implied, rather, is that the other school makes something more of this – they report, and at Meadowbrook Elementary they should also report, verbal abuses more frequently (at the meeting we were not presented with statistics of verbal degrading treatment from this other school). Again we can pause and quickly reflect over the link made between 'action'/ 'doing' and producing a document. It is suggested that reporting in itself is an action towards the goal of 'zero tolerance' against verbal abuses. Reporting is thus constituted in its own right as a way to counteract degrading behaviour. In relation to this particular example, what makes reporting an effective 'action' against degrading treatment? Are the reports intimidating? Are they taken more seriously than other actions, such as breaking up a fight or a quarrel, or other consequences, such as a reprimand or a phone call home to the guardians? As we are about to see, this is exactly what Dylan suggests in relation to the next piece of statistics.

> Then Dylan goes on to speak about frequency and regularity: in 20% of the cases it is the same pupil displaying degrading treatment, but the remaining 80% are 'isolated occurrences'. Dylan interprets this as something positive because perhaps pupils are discouraged from that kind of behaviour if they are reported.

This analysis reinforces an idea of the report as something intimidating. We now see the documents framed as efficient in a wholly different capacity than before. Dylan's theory is that the report in and of itself is effective because it discourages degrading treatment. We should also notice here that the effect that Dylan is suggesting that the report has – that of discouraging degrading treatment – is actually in line with the aim of chapter 6 of the Education Act *and* of this meeting.

> We move on to the next piece of statistics where we return to the issue of whether pupils' legal guardians should be contacted. In 53% of the cases the pupil's legal guardian has been contacted and in the remaining cases their teacher has been contacted. Dylan concludes this statistic with stating that the pupils' guardians can be contacted more often. A teacher again voices the opinion that 'that should be self-evident' and yet again a discussion concerning the accuracy of the statistical fact at hand arises. One teacher points out that the formulation of the question in the digital form on EnRoute might be the issue. 'Doesn't it say something like "has the pupil's guardian been informed?" or something like that?' she asks the group, 'perhaps a teacher hasn't done it yet but intends to do so but ticks the box that says "no" because *technically* they haven't done it yet?'. One teacher laughs a little and comments 'how

> literal…' and another suggests that they change the formulation to 'will the guardians be contacted?'. The time is nearly 4 p.m. and Dylan moves forward on the agenda.

After the meeting, a teacher approached me and said in a low voice that 'you and I should talk some more about this EnRoute'. The teacher went on to tell me that there is one more reason why at least they do not report everything like they should. At a meeting a while back, the leadership – according to this teacher – had presented a different take on the statistics from the incident reporting, namely that some teachers report a lot more often than other teachers. And at that meeting this had not been brought up as an accolade but rather as the opposite, according to the teacher. 'It felt as if they meant that the ones who report a lot can't solve their own problems and I don't know if I was one of the ones who reported a lot, but it certainly didn't make me more motivated to report. That meeting affects my reporting, at least', the teacher said and added that too many reports can also be 'bad PR' for the school by giving the impression that this is a 'problem school' and potentially dissuading parents from choosing Meadowbrook Elementary for their children. The teacher had felt that this had also been an implicit concern for the leadership at the meeting a while back. What was said at that meeting and the intentions of the leadership, I do not know beyond the account of this one teacher. Before we proceed, however, it is worth briefly reflecting upon the format of the discussion that has been presented so far, namely a meeting.

Although a 'meeting' can be conceptually difficult to define (Hall et al., 2019), this particular meeting was arranged and executed in a way that many would recognize as being appropriate for a meeting: there was an invitation with an agenda, the meeting was held in a room where the chair of the meeting – Dylan – was standing in front of a whiteboard and the rest of the participants were seated so that they could see the chairperson, there was a scheduled time for the meeting and someone was taking meeting minutes. Meetings of this kind are important to organisations. In their book on the Swedish culture of meetings, Hall et al. even argue that meetings are a defining feature of organisations as they are 'social situations in which the organisation's structure, culture and leadership both are reflected and produced' (2019, p. 12). We can see this clearly in the meeting above: the meeting is led by Dylan, who – although not a school leader – has more extensive responsibility for the development of certain parts of the organisation than the individual teacher has. Deputy headteacher Rebecca, who is the highest leader present, often gets the last word on how they should act. The topic of the meeting concerns work practices, visions for the organisations and comparisons with other similar organisations, in this case other public schools in the municipality. We can add, however, that structure, culture and leadership are not only reflected and produced at the meeting, they are also contested. Primarily this is noticeable when individual teachers raise the question 'what is the point?', questioning the very practice that is being discussed at the meeting. We should just as quickly add to this, though, that these contestations do not open up for serious deliberation on change and the critique of the incident reporting ends with that critical question. The meeting format could be conducive to this abrupt stopping of criticism. As Hall et al. remind us, meetings are a setting where leadership, decision-making and power play out (2019, p. 12). To report and follow up on 'incidents' is required by law and the school leadership are responsible for making sure that the school follows the regulations in the Education Act. To decide to *not* report certain kinds of incidents or to solve them without the aid of a document system is strictly speaking not even possible to suggest as real options without breaking the law. Everyone knows that there are incidents that go unreported and they can discuss why this is and how to rectify it, but it would be difficult to discuss whether this is actually a problem without forfeiting their responsibility towards the pupils and the organisation. All this is to remind us that a meeting's structure – the points on its agenda, the attending parts and so on – affects what and how things can be said about a particular issue.

What Kind of Tool Is This?

I argued in the beginning of the chapter that to understand documents as tools was a useful conceptual framing for analysing this meeting because it allows us to ask certain questions about the purpose, the use and the material properties of a document. In the previous empirical section I hope to have demonstrated that these questions do not have straightforward answers and that the same document can have many potential capacities, act as problem or solution, involve several different actors and be used for different purposes. In this section I wish to elaborate on my analysis by probing deeper into the various uses and features of the incident report that were discussed at the meeting. On a general level, the incident report is framed primarily as a *tool with which to counteract degrading treatment.* On a more specific level, it varies in how, to what effect and with what success it acts as such a tool. These issues will be analysed in three steps, the first being with a focus on using or *applying* the tool. Secondly, we will consider the *singular* incident report as one variation of the incident report tool, and thirdly, we will consider the plural incident reports, the *aggregated* incident reports presented as numbers, as another variation of the incident report tool.

Applying the Tool

At the meeting, the incident report is treated as an insufficient tool on a number of accounts. We can start with considering some of the issues related to *applying* the tool. Here school councillor Dylan and the teachers raise slightly different concerns, which in turn highlight slightly different iterations of the incident report as a tool to counteract degrading treatment.

Dylan's main concern is one that I have identified as a *problem of methods*, which relates to an iteration of the incident report as a tool to *know* the organisation, its problems with, and work against degrading treatment (this knowing, we recall from the previous chapter, is a natural starting point for instigating action on behalf of a problem). According to Dylan, the problem is not located in the tool itself, but rather in their application of the tool. Dylan raised two problems with their reporting practices: the problem of low consensus (they do not have a shared understanding of what and when to report) and the problem of frequency (they do not report often enough). In order for the knowledge produced by the incident reports to make any sense, the argument went, the reporting needs to be reliable. Reliability, in turn, depends on a level of consensus about exactly *what* is being measured and *how*. Usually, achieving this requires not only clear definitions and tools, but also a degree of control of the variables in the environment that you study (Latour, 1987; Porter, 2020 [1995]). The environment at Meadowbrook Elementary, however, proves difficult to control in a way that allows for standardised routines for reporting. One aspect of this problem is *conceptual* – how do we identify an incident of degrading treatment? When does, using the language from the Education Act, a behaviour violate a child or a pupil's dignity? Anyone who has been to a school recently, or anyone who has themselves attended a school institution, will know that there is a seemingly never-ending stream of creative ways that pupils can offend, isolate, tease, injure and bully each other. These events, moreover, occur in specific contexts by people who have particular relations and histories with each other. The conceptual grey-zones can be many.

Dylan's response to the problem of poor methods is to develop better methods. Concretely, he suggests that they create a template. This template can be understood as another document tool, one that aims to assist one in using the first document tool, the incident report. The template would in this case be a document that specifies the meaning of the Education Act's definition of degrading treatment and its application in the school setting. It is neither an unusual nor a puzzling response. The template would aim at providing clarity. It would act like a grid to place over the various events at Meadowbrook Elementary to tell us whether a specific event should be reported in EnRoute. As we recall, however, the attempts at formulating these points proved difficult. The suggested point about frequency was quickly amended by a clause on severity – physical violence should always be reported.[41] Dylan never came as far as to suggest exactly what 'fucking' things pupils could call each other without a report being written in response but no one disagreed when a teacher said that 'girls should not have to come to school and be called "a fucking whore"'. The same went for degrading treatment targeting ethnicity. All in all, on a *conceptual* level teachers might not have such differing notions of what behaviour is tolerated and what is not. What gets lost in this discussion, however, is that two

[41] This is something that teachers at other schools than Meadowbrook have also echoed, that it is easier to know when to report physical violence than verbal abuse.

problems are being conflated, namely the problem of what behaviour is considered degrading and the problem of what behaviour should be reported. It is a logical conflation seeing as the law requires one to follow the other. Deciding that a kind of behaviour should not (at least not always) be reported is also to suggest that it is *not* a degrading treatment. No wonder Dylan did not want to be the first to suggest what ill things should not qualify as degrading treatment. Furthermore, the Education Act states that it is *not* the job of the reporters to assess whether someone has in fact been subject to degrading treatment or not – this will be decided as the result of the investigation following the report (SFS, 2010:800 ch 6, act 10). Interestingly, legal scholar Maria Refors Legge concluded in her PhD dissertation that the utopian 'zero tolerance' regulation of the Education Act in fact made this particular legal regulation *ineffective* for the purpose of counteracting degrading behaviour (Refors Legge, 2021). An important reason for this is that the law is acted upon – by school leaders as well as school governing institutions – on the basis that schools can be sanctioned if they do not comply with the regulation. It is within this line of thinking that one can understand deputy headteacher Rebecca's comment that 'the short answer is yes, you should report these kinds of incidents too,' when a teacher asked about whether they should report in a specific situation. As the person responsible for making sure that the school follows the regulations of the Education Act, Rebecca has little option but to tell the teachers to report. The conflation between the issue of reporting and identifying degrading treatment has a further implication, namely that it obfuscates the fact that teachers still *do* deal with 'incidents' all the time.

What gets less attention at the meeting is that the problem is not only conceptual, it is also *practical*. And it is from this vantage point that the teachers assess the issues concerning *using* the tool. Reporting takes time and requires effort. This was raised implicitly in comments like the one about what kind of teacher has the energy to sit down and write reports on a Friday. The idea that teachers' increased workload and general exhaustion when the Christmas Holidays approach affects their proclivity to report negatively suggests that reporting is an activity that requires time and energy. At a practical level, what reporting implies is that you have to talk to all parties involved and gain an idea of their version(s) of what has happened. Then you need to sit down with your computer and log into EnRoute or whatever other platform or paper form your school is using, ideally at a time when you do not have other engagements such as teaching a class or attending meetings, although I have witnessed teachers at different schools writing incident reports both during class and meetings. Then you have to write the report in the appropriate language. This was a particular concern for a teacher at a different school than Meadowbrook Elementary. 'We'll see if I can write this well enough to not get it sent back to me for revision,' the teacher said dryly, adding that there were very high standards for the language of the reports at their school – the language should be neutral and not in any way indicate the veracity of the claims. The work of writing the report is then usually followed up by a number of other measures. Often, the involved pupils' guardians are contacted and in more severe cases other school staff are directly mobilised, such as a school curator, school psychologist or school leader. Evidently, the incident report tool requires work not only with the document itself, but also in the co-ordination of other actors that need to be enrolled in order to complete the report. What transpired at the meeting was that some teachers remained unconvinced by the return on this investment of time and energy, questioning how reporting as such helped them counteract degrading behaviour.

The school councillor's and the teachers' different concerns regarding using the incident report tool reflect the division between emphasising the incident report in its aggregate form (Dylan and, we should add, Rebecca) or in its singular form (the teachers).

The Incident Report, Singular

Standing alone, a single incident report is discussed as a tool in two different ways during the meeting. The first relates to the way in which producing the report becomes coterminous with action and, specifically, a tool to prove that action has been taken. The second relates to the report itself being conceived of as a having an intimidating effect on pupils, dissuading them from 'violating a fellow pupil's dignity'.

There is extensive research that shows how the act of documenting one's work also becomes proof that work has, indeed, been done (Åkerström et al., 2021; Asdal & Reinertsen, 2022; Jacobsson & Martinell Barfoed, 2019; Prior, 2003). Katarina Jacobsson and Elizabeth Martinell Barfoed state in their book on Swedish social workers and paperwork that documents are so central to social work today that the occupation to a large degree is defined by it; 'documentation is the only constant sign that "social work has happened here"' (2019, p. 17; my translation). We see evidence of this conceptualisation of the incident report when a teacher claims that 'nothing happens' and Dylan replies that it's 'up to us to decide. We email the pupil's guardians and file a report directly.' To Dylan, the report and the email are traceable evidence of the fact that *something* has been done.

When documentation becomes intrinsic to what it means to *do* one's job it can also mean that the *lack* of documentation could be interpreted as a lack, or absence, of action (cf. Åkerström et al., 2021). According to Prior, it can even be interpreted as 'failure': 'the lack of documentation is commonly invoked to demonstrate lack of concern, planning, foresight and organization' (2003, p. 62). In chapter eight, we will explore this more thoroughly by investigating an example of what can happen when documents leave the sites of their production and become mobilised as evidence for action or non-action by external actors. In relation to the incident report, however, this would mean that no report would imply no work and by extension a failure to counteract degrading treatment. We see traces of this kind of conception of the incident report when Dylan compares the actions of another school with those of their school. The other school has a *zero tolerance*-policy against degrading treatment that, according to Dylan, is implemented from day one. As I noted previously, Dylan is implying that the other school's 'zero tolerance'-policy is a form of action rather than mere words. When Dylan rhetorically asks, 'Why don't we have it like that here?' he is invoking a sensibility where *not* reporting is the same as a failure to act. In this instance, it is also clear that the report is presented not just as *a* tool to counteract degrading treatment but as the *primary* tool to counteract degrading treatment. Alternative tools – such as the conversations and conflict mediation that the teachers already engage with on a daily basis – are not discussed and can only qualify as actions if they are reported. The primacy of actions that are documented can sometimes lead to the obfuscation of actions that go undocumented. In fact, 'it is as if it never happened' (Åkerström et al., 2021, p. 2).

At one point at the meeting, it is suggested that the incident report has an intimidating effect which in itself decreases the likelihood of transgression. Dylan ponders whether, given that only a minority of the pupils recur in the statistics on degrading treatment, the reporting has a preventive effect in and of itself. Here we again see a shift in focus of what the document purportedly does and its purpose in that it is the report in and of itself that produces the desired effect of counteracting degrading treatment. That the reports are markers of severity is not only suggested in relation to reoffenders, however. It is also indicated in the way that the school staff want to rank which behaviour should be reported and not. The report in itself becomes a clear signal that this or that behaviour is not tolerated. Implicit in these reasonings is also that the report is a more powerful tool to dissuade pupils from degrading behaviour than other, non-documented tools.

In what can be understood as a counter to this kind of reasoning, Agneta Hult and Joakim Lindgren have interviewed teachers about their incident reporting practices (2016). Some of the teachers of pupils in the higher years say that they have seen a tendency for some pupils to not get teachers involved in their conflicts because teachers make 'such a big deal of it' when they report. Reporting can, as outlined above, start a whole process that goes on for days or even weeks and that includes a number of people. Some of the teachers that Hult and Lindgren interviewed were hesitant to whether this is really constructive for addressing the conflicts that pupils are having (2016, p. 87). What these teachers are suggesting is that, at least for older pupils, the decrease in reports might not reflect an actual decrease in degrading treatment but rather reflects a decrease in the number of conflicts that come to the teachers' attention (see also Lindgren et al., 2021 on similar issues). The oldest pupils at Meadowbrook Elementary are twelve years old so the comparison serves mainly to remind us that the effects of reporting – in this case that pupils are dissuaded from behaving poorly towards one another – should not necessarily be taken at face value.

The Aggregated Incident Reports

The plural version of incident reports is discussed as a tool to counteract degrading treatment in an entirely different capacity. Assuming that all reports are reflections of things that have happened, an aggregated knowledge of these reports, presented as statistics, should reveal patterns and tendencies of how things are and enable the school staff to do a situation analysis. Both Dylan and Rebecca stressed, when the purpose of the reports was challenged by a teacher, that the reports can help them get an 'overview' (Dylan) and to 'keep track' of the 'where, how and who' of the degrading treatment (Rebecca). And it would seem, judging from the discussion at the meeting, that the knowledge that the reports produce is taken to be best understood through statistical representation. Standardised and digitalised documents such as the incident report are, after all, quite easily quantifiable and the generation of statistics is a built-in feature of EnRoute. The statistics can be sent out automatically or retrieved on demand depending upon the wishes of the customer.[42]

One important function of the incident report then, if we return to the simile of documents as tools, is to produce knowledge about the school organisation. This knowledge production is frequently discussed in terms of *seeing* or *making visible* aspects of the school organisation. The metaphor of seeing has a prominent position in relation to organisational knowledge production, as was discussed in chapter three. In Reinertsen's dissertation (2016), we recall, *seeing* was treated as synonymous with *knowing* in the process of making aid an evaluable object; 'knowing' was defined 'as that which might be seen' (p. 82) not only to the aid workers but to external actors as well. In organisational research, scholars have highlighted the specific role of digital technologies (such as EnRoute) in enabling a kind of intensified visibility-making, driven by an organisational assumption that more information translates into more overview, more transparency, more knowledge (an assumption that some organisational scholars have sought to destabilise (cf. Flyverbom, 2019; Justesen & Plesner, 2023; Quattrone et al., 2021)). Indeed, visibility has been described as a *root affordance* of digital technologies (Flyverbom et al., 2016).

At the meeting at Meadowbrook Elementary, vision was enabled by quantification through statistical representation. There are no formal requirements for generating or analysing statistics of schools' incident reporting. To do so anyway is not unique to Meadowbrook Elementary. For instance, in a local newspaper article from 2019 titled 'Here are the Malmö schools with the most incident reports'[43], the

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[42] I do not know which of these options this municipality has gone for.

[43] This newspaper article is written in response to the upcoming 'school choice' ('skolval') that parents make for their children and the framing question for the article is "what should parents and teachers think about when they choose schools?".

city of Malmö's then-director for the local education authority ('grundskoleförvaltningens direktör') stated that

> 'the statistics on the reports are meant to work as a wakeup call for the politicians. They get an idea of what it looks like at the schools. If they see a school that over time has many reports the municipal organiser has to act. The same goes for a school that has very few reports.' (Malmquist in Persson, 2019, my translation)

Clearly, there is an expectation from the school organisers that statistics should be compiled and used as a basis for action. However, the newspaper article goes on to point out that the extent to which one can base action upon the number of reports is highly questionable. Some schools have zero reports but when the journalist contacts the school this turns out to be wrong, they have written reports but there has been an administrative mishap so the reports had not been sent to the politicians. The journalist also contacted the headteachers of the schools that had highest numbers of reports. They did not seem worried about the high numbers of reports. One said that the high number of reports is a reflection of the fact that her employers pay attention to degrading treatment and that the reports are 'tools to help us *see* where we should place our resources' (Persson, 2019, emphasis added). Another headteacher says that she is 'proud' of the number of reports and says that:

> 'it's because we react. At the slightest suspicion, so it doesn't have to be degrading treatment, we catch it and take action. That's why the figures are high. And we are a big school with 700 pupils.'

We can discern that the newspaper article follows a similar back-and-forth-line of argument as the one at the meeting at Meadowbrook Elementary. A significant amount of the meeting time was spent analysing statistics generated from data on incident reporting via the digital platform 'EnRoute'. The statistics are there and they try to learn something from them but continuously come back to the problem of the inadequate data that underlies the statistics. The newspaper article indicates that the problem of low consensus on how and when to report is one that pertains to other schools than Meadowbrook Elementary. Yet still, the statistics *should* set off an alarm for the politicians, director Malmquist says in the newspaper article, and allow the politicians to get an idea of what it *looks* like at the schools. However, it is very likely that when the alarm bell rings, the politicians will not know exactly what they are looking at, just as the teachers and school leaders at Meadowbrook Elementary were uncertain about what they saw in the statistics from their school and municipality. While seeing and knowing are discursively framed as one and the same, in practice the two sit rather uneasily with one another. In the case of incident reporting, both as presented at the meeting and in the newspaper article, I argue that the uneasiness largely stems from quantification and statistics as technologies of seeing.

There has been a rich body of social scientific literature that considers the profound impact of statistics and quantification for how we know, understand, even create, and act upon the world around us (Desrosières, 1998; Espeland & Steven, 2008; Porter, 2020 [1995]; Rudinow Sætnan et al., 2011). But what of the statistics on degrading treatment measured through data from incident reports? It would be a long stretch to claim that the statistics from 'EnRoute' had far-reaching consequences for Meadowbrook Elementary as an organisation or for the teachers employed there. A couple of months later, I asked one of my informants there whether they had had any updates on the routines concerning 'EnRoute' after the meeting and she shook her head and said that, to her knowledge, it had not been mentioned again since. In the above-mentioned newspaper article the journalist's last question to a headteacher is: 'how do you think that the incident reports affect parents' choice of school?'. The headteacher replies: 'Not very much. A school often has a firmly rooted reputation in the city and that is difficult to break' (Persson, 2019).

The statistics from the incident reporting, at least in these cases, quite clearly fails in its attempt to be the basis for action in the way it was intended. However, following Desrosières (1998), the success of statistics' *prescriptive* purpose (that is, providing the basis for action) relies on the success of the *descriptive* purpose of statistics (its ability to describe things-as-they-are in the world). At the meeting, discussions rarely even touch upon the prescriptive purposes of the statistics (unless we count the template which, to be fair, is more concerned with rectifying the problems with the descriptive purposes of the statistics). Most of the meeting is spent challenging the numbers' ability to accurately represent their object of analysis – the incidents of degrading behaviour at Meadowbrook Elementary. Almost invariably, the numbers are being challenged with reference to teachers' experiential knowledge and inferences about themselves and their colleagues. In other words, what is seen is not believed. There is a discrepancy, then, between what is known through experience and what is known through the technologies of seeing.

'We are having a hard time but it's not visible', Dylan says at the meeting, referring to the low number of reports at their school giving a misleading picture of how much conflict the teachers have to deal with. This quote illustrates another kind of visibility problem, namely that there is *not enough* visibility. Looking only at the numbers, Dylan implies, a person could draw the conclusion that pupils at their school are much more well-behaved or that there are fewer conflicts than for instance at the other school whose numbers they tried to compare with earlier. Dylan is indicating that such a conclusion would be mistaken. With this, the problem caused by poor statistics shifts slightly – from being about the difficulty of doing analyses and basing actions upon them to being about obfuscating what is *really* going on in the organisation. The hard time they are having, the work they are putting into solving conflicts among pupils, is not visible (to people outside the organisation looking in). Dylan makes clear that they themselves *know* that they have issues with degrading treatment. The problem is that it cannot be traced, that the problem is 'invisible'. Invisibility comes to be about the lack of reports, and documenting incidents of degrading treatment becomes a tool for making visible that which is invisible. What the teachers were quick to observe and raise, though, and that was discussed earlier, is that making their work visible does also require just that: more work.

At this point, we can briefly recall the newspaper article discussed earlier where one headteacher, whose school had among the highest number of reports, said that the reports were '*tools to help us see* where we should place our resources' (Persson, 2019, emphasis added). Deputy headteacher at Meadowbrook Elementary, Rebecca, made a similar observation to the headteacher in the newspaper article when she said that they want to keep track of where incidents happen and whether there are individual pupils who are involved much more than others. The reports are then tools to get a view of one's own organisation. At first glance, this could seem like a problem of organisational invisibility like the one Dylan described above. In both instances, producing *more* reports is presented as a solution that should elucidate a problem. There is a small difference, however, in the kind of vision that the reporting enables in Dylan's statement and the headteachers in this paragraph. In Dylan's example, the point is to make visible something they already know exists. Visibility in this instance becomes a way of producing evidence of teachers' hard work with managing conflicts and preventing degrading treatment. The other examples of seeing one's organisation, however, concern seeing that which is not already known, like the who-when-where of degrading treatment, in order to provide a basis for action.

Ultimately, at the meeting, nothing was learned that could be trusted or that they did not already know and no solution to the problem of 'poor methods' materialised. One is tempted, at this point to ask 'why bother?' if the failure of statistics is so blatant. But statistics fail as a basis of action only insofar as we neglect seeing 'meeting' and 'newspaper article' as actions. Statistics can in this capacity as much be seen as having a structuring effect on how organisations organise as it can be seen as a tool to produce knowledge. This relates to an ideal for public governance that is based on decision-making and knowledge that is impartial and disinterested, in other words, objective (Porter, 2020 [1995]). The kind of objectivity that is aimed for through statistical knowledge production at this meeting is one that is familiar to us from the previous chapter, namely what Porter refers to as a mechanical objectivity. To reiterate, mechanical objectivity is one that aspires to be accomplished through strict and meticulous adherence to rule – a process through which personal attachment and idiosyncrasies are permanently removed. Dylan's suggestion to create and implement a template is a clear example of this. The template would provide more specific rules concerning when and how to report, which would resolve the problem of teachers' idiosyncratic reporting practices. As Dylan said, the reports will not be useless '*if everyone does it in the same way'* (machine-like, we can add).

It is in this light that we should understand the efforts of the teachers and school leaders (and perhaps also the journalist's) to know by numbers, to 'see' their organisation with impersonal and objective distance and hence with a clearer and more accurate view. Statistics should produce knowledge that is 'independent of the particular people who made it' (Porter, 2020 [1995], p. ix). Clearly, the numbers we are presented with at this meeting are not successful in conveying this. All knowledge produced by the statistics on the reporting on degrading treatment is challenged on account of the idiosyncrasies of the reporters (for instance, more or less zealous teachers) or the timing of the reporting (who wants to sit and write reports on a Friday? Perhaps we 'toughen up' a couple of months into the semester and report more?). In light of this, Dylan calls for better methods for reporting. More specifically, he wants the group to develop a strategy for making sure that everyone reports the same things, with consistent frequency and in the same way, i.e. a higher level of consensus. The flaw is not located in statistics as a form for knowledge to base action upon, the flaw is located in the methods for producing the statistics, as previously discussed.

Concluding Remarks

In this chapter I have sought to demonstrate how the same document – the incident report – is conceptualised in different ways throughout a meeting concerning that document. What the document is for, its capacities and its potential effects for the teachers' work and the school organisation shifts. We have seen how – depending on what aspect of the document that is invoked – the document has been taken seriously and seen as a solution to problems and it has been challenged and its value contested. I have addressed this multifaceted character of the document by asking 'what kind of tool is this?'. It is, in fact, one of the questions that the school staff also grapple with at the meeting. It is clear that the desire to see, know and act upon their organisation through documents (in this instance, the incident report) is both framed as *necessary* and an *obstacle* for the same organisational purpose: counteracting degrading behaviour in their school. It is framed as necessary insofar as it potentially provides the organisation with objective knowledge that can help them make decisions about how to better counteract degrading behaviour. It is also framed as necessary in other regards, such as documents' reified and preserved material status having intimidating effects on pupils, and the reports giving the school an opportunity to make visible problems that they are having. However, a tension arises due to the fact that the same method for making these things happen – reporting incidents – is also an obstacle for teachers' daily, practical (as in non-documentation) work with counteracting degrading behaviour. In one version of this obstacle, reporting simply takes time and with debateable effects. In another version, the reporting system deflects attention from the *other* kind of work that teachers do all the time.

Finally, this chapter demonstrates the structuring effect that documents have over teachers' time and work despite the physical absence of the document itself. Meetings like this one were not an unusual part of my fieldwork at schools. Many meetings concerned issues that were framed by documents, that should be understood through documents or solved by documents. In the next chapter, we leave the meeting room and take a closer look at teachers' work with documents and document systems.

7. Documents as Material Challenges of Knowledge Assessment

In this chapter, I take as my point of departure an empirical practice that seems somewhat paradoxical. The practice concerns knowledge assessment or, more concretely, the documentation of pupils' knowledge advancement. Generally, schools require teachers to document their assessment of pupils' knowledge in a digital learning platform. These digital learning platforms are advertised as ideal assessment tools where teachers can monitor, document and share information regarding their pupils' academic development. They are also tailored to the learning outcomes and guidelines set by the Swedish National Agency for Education and the Education Act. Although there are different digital learning platforms, they all share many of the same material features: grid systems, colour schemes, comment sections and in-built references to the national learning outcomes and grading system. However, the vast majority of teachers (and all the teachers that I have encountered) also develop their own, idiosyncratic document system to monitor their pupils' knowledge advancement (Lärarförbundet, 2019, 2021). Given the focus in the previous chapters on the frustration that teachers feel in relation to the excessive demands for documentation, it strikes one as curious that so many teachers develop an idiosyncratic document system *in addition to* the mandatory document system provided in the digital learning platforms (this was also discussed in Sandén, 2021). Furthermore, many of these idiosyncratic document systems share similar material features to those found in the interfaces of the digital learning platforms: many (but far from all) are digital, contain spreadsheets, colour schemes and references to the grading criteria from the National Curriculum. It would seem, then, as if teachers were setting themselves up for double work. Unsurprisingly, I will argue that this is not an example of teachers not knowing what is best for them. Rather, I suggest that the digital learning platforms fail at producing document tools that aid teachers in making assessments To understand why they fail requires us to look carefully at the materiality of the different document systems as well as the task teachers want to accomplish through them, namely knowledge assessment.

The digital learning platforms aim to serve many purposes in one single assessment tool: they strive to simultaneously be tools for communication with pupils' guardians, for administration, for knowledge production *and* for the actual work of assessing pupils – all this whilst purportedly providing efficiency and saving teachers' time. The digital learning platforms, then, aspire to fulfil multiple purposes in one single tool. In this chapter, it will be investigated how, and to what effect, these multiple purposes are materially accomplished. Drawing on Bowker and Star's conceptualisation of standardisation as *material* as well as conceptualised (2000), I will argue that the high level of standardisation in the digital learning platforms makes them suitable for a number of purposes, such as knowledge production and management, and simultaneously makes them untenable for teachers when they are taking on the complex and multifaceted task of assessing pupils. By contrast, teachers' idiosyncratic assessment documentation systems serve only one purpose, namely that of aiding the teacher in making assessments of pupils. These document systems, however, are entirely useless for any other purpose than making assessments.

In order to understand the multiple purposes of the document systems, how they contradict and how these purposes are manifested materially, we need to take a closer look at the task at hand, namely the assessment of pupils' knowledge and the document demands in place for this purpose. I begin the chapter by outlining the task as it is presented by the national governing bodies and documents. I then go on to presenting the rise, use and purpose of digital learning platforms in Swedish schools over the past decade or so. It is argued that one of the appeals of the platforms is exactly that they promise to fulfil multiple purposes in one tool. I then zoom in on the document systems for assessment, both those systems that are built into the digital learning platforms and the idiosyncratic systems that teachers develop themselves. Here, I draw on affordance theory as developed by Jenny Davis (2020) (see chapter 3), to explore how the material features of the document systems affect teachers' use of them. In the last section of the chapter, I seek to demonstrate how the strive for a document system to fulfil different, partly contradictory purposes, is worked into the material capacities of the documents, constraining some actions and enabling others, ultimately making the tool inadequate for the task that the teachers are the most concerned with, namely making fair assessments.

The Purpose and Regulation of Knowledge Assessment

The assessment of pupils' knowledge is a core task for Swedish teachers. Naturally, this is related to the education system's broader purpose of instilling the next generation with whatever knowledge that is deemed relevant for their future and for functioning in society. The task must also, however, be seen in relation to how the education system supposes that one should control that this instillment of knowledge does in fact happen *and* how it measures to what extent it happens (for a discussion on assessment as a school governance tool, see Lundahl, 2011). In this section, I first outline how the documentation of pupils' knowledge progression is regulated by policies, legal acts and governmental bodies. I then go on to outlining what kind of knowledge Swedish school children are supposed to acquire and how this is measured and assessed. This information will be important for our understanding of why teachers experience the digital learning platforms' assessment tools as arduous.

Documenting Knowledge Assessment: Regulations and Guidelines

The task of assessing and documenting pupils' knowledge is outlined and regulated in a series of documents. In the Education Act (SFS, 2010:800), it is established that one of the purposes of education through the schooling system is for children to obtain and develop knowledge (ch 1, act 4). It furthermore states that 'the person who has decided the grade must, upon request, inform the pupil and the pupil's guardian(s) of the motivations for the grade" (SFS, 2010:800, pp. Ch 3, Act 17, my translation). The Swedish National Agency for Education, in their 'General Guidelines for Grading and Assessing' (2022b), highlight that pupils' knowledge development should be documented, but also that the *what* and the *how* of the documentation should be guided by the professional judgement of the individual teacher. In the very same document, they warn against relying too heavily on digital learning platforms in assessing and grading pupils (Skolverket, 2022b, p. 22).

The governing documents, then, establish that pupils' knowledge progression should be documented by teachers, but do not specify how, what, or to what extent. Furthermore, the responsibility for making sure that these regulations are followed lies with the headteacher of the school and the responsibility to make sure that the schools have the necessary preconditions to follow the regulations lie with the school organiser (Education Act 2010:800, Ch 3, act 14-15).

What Kind of Knowledge to Assess and How

Since the reforms in the 1990s, the Swedish curricula's conceptualisation of knowledge has shifted, from an emphasis on knowledge largely understood as *facts* to an emphasis on knowledge understood as *abilities*, such as problem solving, reflection, analysis, argumentation and so on (Skolverket, 2015a, p. 35).[44] These changes to the curriculums have had significant implications for the role of assessment in the Swedish education system. Instead of prescribing what pupils should learn, schools are given goals or targets to work towards and the success or failure is measured according to what degree one has reached these goals. Teachers and pupils are responsible for interpreting and reaching the goals formulated in the curriculum and the municipalities and the state are responsible for controlling that

[44] As mentioned, the Swedish government has flagged major changes for the Swedish curriculum and assessment structure. Magnus Henrekson, professor of economics, is currently in charge of a government inquiry into the Swedish grading system. His verdict is not merciful: 'Today's grading system is among the most demoralising things we have in Sweden. It is arbitrary, harmful and corrupting. I also find it emotionally offensive. Besides grade inflation and the lack of consistency in grading, it is also unclear what is actually being assessed.' (Bergling, 2024a)

schools reach satisfactory results (Forsberg & Lundahl, 2012). The significance of this system of management-by-results for the rise and proliferation of digital learning platforms in schools has been highlighted by Swedish researchers (Andreasson & Dovemark, 2013; Ledin & Machin, 2021). Through the digital learning platforms, school leaders' and organisers' ability to control to what degree schools, teachers and pupils reach the goals and outcomes set out for them is enhanced. Assessment, then, is not only about the knowledge acquisition of the individual pupil but also about controlling that schools fulfil their mission.

The syllabi are the parts of the curriculum that regulate what and how teachers should assess pupils' knowledge and are therefore the parts of the curriculum that teachers engage with most frequently. Each course is composed of three sections: one that states the *aim* of the course, one that outlines the *core content* of the course and, lastly, one section that describes the *grading criteria* for each course. In order to understand the document practices – and some of the contention – concerning assessment, we need to take a closer look at how the national curriculum defines the task. In Sweden, the years 6 through 9 are graded on a scale from F to A, where E is the lowest pass-grade (younger children's knowledge is assessed differently). In image 7.1, I have inserted a page from the grading criteria for English, year 6. All courses have the same layout and structure, and the specific page below is chosen at random for the purpose of illustration.

There are a few things to note about how the grading criteria are structured and written. To begin, there are explicit grading criteria for grades E, C and A. Grades D and B signify that the pupil's knowledge is between the grades directly above and directly below. Another important point is that the grading criteria for each grade is written as a continuous text, with paragraphs distinguished somewhat from each other by indentations. The paragraphs, in turn, each correspond with one *aim* of the subject (the aims are presented and summarised in bullet points in the first part of the subject's syllabus).

Grading criteria

Grading criteria for grade E at the end of year 6

The pupil listens to, understands and interprets the **most essential** content of language with a simple structure which is spoken clearly and at a relaxed pace and deals with everyday and familiar topics. The pupil reads, understands and interprets the **most essential** content of simple texts about everyday and familiar topics. The pupil selects simple information from a limited range of oral and written sources and uses the selected material **in a somewhat relevant manner** in their own production and interactions.

In oral language output of various kinds, the pupil expresses themself in a **simple and comprehensible manner using phrases and sentences.** In written language output of various kinds, the pupil expresses themself in a **simple and comprehensible manner using phrases and sentences.**

In interactions, the pupil expresses themself in a **simple and comprehensible manner using words, phrases and sentences.** The pupil also uses strategies that facilitate and improve the interaction **to a limited extent.**

The pupil comments in English, **in a simple manner**, on conditions in different contexts and areas in which the language is used.

Grading criteria for grade D at the end of year 6

The pupil's overall proficiency level is assessed as being between C and E.

Grading criteria for grade C at the end of year 6

The pupil listens to, understands and interprets the **main content and clear details** of language with a simple structure which is spoken clearly and at a relaxed pace and deals with everyday and familiar topics. The pupil reads, understands and interprets the **main content and clear details** of simple texts about everyday and familiar topics. The pupil selects simple information from a limited range of oral and written sources and uses the selected material **in a relevant manner** in their own production and interactions.

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ENGLISH

In oral language output of various kinds, the pupil expresses themself in a **simple, relatively clear and somewhat cohesive manner**. In written language output of various kinds, the pupil expresses themself in a **simple, relatively clear and somewhat cohesive manner.**

In interactions, the pupil expresses themself in a **simple and relatively clear manner using words, phrases and sentences.** The pupil also uses strategies that facilitate and improve the interaction **to some extent.**

The pupil comments in English, **in a simple manner**, on conditions in different contexts and areas in which the language is used.

Image 7.1
Pages 47-48 in the Swedish National Curriculum (Skolverket, 2024b, highlights added)

Another thing to take note of is that the grading criteria for E and C (and later A) are identical except for the bold type, which is specific for each level. To exemplify and compare, I have highlighted and translated two sentences, one from the grading criteria for the grade E and the same sentence but for the grade C.

> Grade E: In interactions, the pupil expresses themself in a **simple and comprehensible manner using words, phrases and sentences.**
>
> Grade C: In interactions, the pupil expresses themself in a **simple and relatively clear manner using words, phrases and sentences.**

The distinction between the two grades is then whether the pupil expresses themselves in a *simple and comprehensible* manner or a *simple and relatively clear manner* (or, of course, somewhere in between for the grade D). There are no further elaborations on how to make assessments based on these rather vague assessment points in the curriculum. The Swedish National Agency for Education do, however, acknowledge and elaborate on the difficulties of grading. In a short video on their webpage titled *Film for Teachers: Grading [‘Film för lärare: Att sätta betyg’],* they highlight that teachers need to read and interpret the grading criteria ‘based on their knowledge of their subject and their experience’ (Skolverket, 2022d, my translation). Aside from using their professionalism, expertise and experience, the video also informs us that teachers frequently consult their colleagues if a grade is particularly difficult to assign to a pupil. Lastly, they emphasise several times throughout the video the importance of the teacher making an *‘overall assessment’ [‘sammantagen bedömning’]* of the pupils’ knowledge in relation to the grading criteria.

The Rise and Use of Digital Learning Platforms

Digital learning platforms are becoming ubiquitous in the Swedish education system. The extent of their use has not to my knowledge been measured and quantified, but according to public management and organisation scholar Johan Sandén (2021), whose doctoral thesis investigates how teachers are affected by digitalisation, the systems are an integrated part of the Swedish schooling system. This is further supported by the two union surveys on teachers’ documentation work from 2019 and 2021, which both report that more than 8 out of 10 teachers document their assessment of pupils’ knowledge in a digital learning platform (Lärarförbundet, 2019, p. 13; 2021, p. 11). Just as it is difficult to quantify the current use of digital learning platforms in schools, it is also difficult to quantify their use over time. Apart from establishing that the use has, in fact, increased over time, there is no reliable data on how quickly or steadily the increase has been.

A political decision that might have affected the use of digital learning platforms was when the Swedish government published a 'national digitalisation strategy for the school system' in 2017, which amongst other things focused on digital infrastructures and tools (Regeringen, 2017). Some researchers argue that we should understand the proliferation of digital learning platforms also in relation to processes of neoliberalisation and marketisation of the Swedish education system. For instance, Ideland et al. (2020) argue that a common discourse in Swedish media and politics is of the Swedish school system being in a state of constant crisis. To respond to this crisis, private actors (referred to as edupreneurs) have entered the education scene with solutions, such as digital learning platforms, for sale.[45]

One interesting illustration of the significantly taken-for-granted use of digital learning platforms can be found in a book from 2014 called *Assessing and Grading: Ten Challenges in the Teacher's Daily Life*[46] (Grettve et al.). In this book, the authors address ten challenges related to assessment and grading for teachers. Two things stand out in relation to digital platforms: the first is that the chapter on digital platforms, the last chapter of the book, is titled 'Take a Stand in Questions Regarding Digital Assessment Tools'[47]. In this chapter it is not assumed that schools do use digital assessment tools (or that they are by default desirable), but it is stated that many schools are starting to implement them. In the past ten years, then, digital learning platforms have gone from being an issue to 'take a stance on' to being an integrated and largely taken for granted part of the education system (notwithstanding the words of caution from the Swedish National Agency for Education). Another interesting observation from this book is found in the chapter concerning the documentation of one's assessments. Here it is not only assumed that teachers have an idiosyncratic system for documenting their assessments, it is considered *vital* that the document system *is* tailored to the needs of each individual teacher:

> 'In order to monitor each pupil's development and performance in each subject, it is important to find a way of documenting that suits your own way of working' (Grettve et al., 2014, p. 155, my translation).

[45] In the majority of cases, the digital learning platforms are developed by private actors and sold to school organisers. Stockholm Municipality launched a slightly different variety where they built a platform and hired consultants to help them make the different functions and suppliers work together (Stockholms stad 2022). The project was massively expensive, took about six years to implement, was heavily criticised by users, and received national press attention for its inefficiency, difficult interface, expensive implementation and leaks of personal data about its users (Svd Ledare 2021; Lindholm and Larsson 2021; Eriksson and Jacobsson 2023). In 2022, four years after it was officially launched, the platform is being phased out and replaced by a different platform, Infomentor.

[46] Swedish title: Att bedöma och sätta betyg: Tio utmaningar i lärarens vardag.

[47] Swedish title: Ta ställning i frågor om digitala bedömningsverktyg.

As we will see further on, the standardised format of the digital learning platforms' assessment interfaces does limit the extent to which the document systems can be adapted in accordance with each teacher's needs and this in turn poses challenges to what kind of assessment tool the platforms can provide for the teachers (see also Sandén, 2021).

The Multiple Purposes of Digital Learning Platforms

While browsing the home pages of some of Sweden's most used digital learning platforms, some common marketing buzzwords are discernible. Below are excerpts from the home pages of five different learning platforms that are widely used in Sweden (Vklass and Unikum both claim to be Sweden's most used platform (Unikum, 2020; Vklass, 2019)). All emphases and translations are my own.

> '**Gather** documentation, systematic quality work and **dialogue** in Unikum and **get more time for learning**.' (Unikum, 2020)

> 'You have **everything in one place** and can follow the child's development – all the way from preschool to adult education. This makes it **easier** for you to work professionally with learning for all unique children, regardless of age and school type.' (Unikum, 2020)

> 'InfoMentor is a learning platform that **simplifies** everyday school life by **bringing together** planning, **assessment**, documentation, **analysis** and **communication** with the home in **one tool**. It enables teachers to focus on the development of each individual pupil and child and gives them **more time for teaching**. InfoMentor is simply a tool to make preschool and school even better.' (Infomentor, 2023)

> 'Vklass aims to **combine** great graphic design with **user-friendliness** and **accessibility** for everyone. We have also realized that the services we offer must be social and modern in order for users to adopt the platform. Without logins to the platforms, the product creates no value for the school. […] With **simplicity**, **communication** and **transparency** as keywords, we develop Vklass and all related services. (Vklass, 2019)

> '**Everything** your organisation needs. **Administration** and **communication** in one place. SchoolSoft is the **all-in-one system** that **streamlines** operations and **gives you more time** for other things.' (SchoolSoft, 2023)

> 'IST Learning is a digital learning platform that **simplifies** everyday school life by **gathering** functionality for planning, **assessment**, **performance reviews**, follow-ups and **communication** in one place. The system is developed to facilitate and **streamline documentation** and **communication** for teachers, students, guardians and headteachers in everyday life.' (IST Lärande, 2023)

What these excerpts tell us is that all these platforms aim to provide services that encompass several different needs and requirements of the organisation (indicated here by words like combining, gathering, bringing together or even being an ‘all-in-one system’ (‘helhetslösning’)). Furthermore, they emphasise the simplicity of using their platform, making working as a teacher easier, streamlining operations and so on. Hand-in-hand with these claims is the assertion that using the platform will free up time for teachers, giving them more time to teach. Lastly, it is worth noting the emphasis on communication and dialogue as prominent features next to the administrative functions. Given that the vast majority of teachers keep idiosyncratic document systems for monitoring their pupils’ academic progress, perhaps it is not much of a disclaimer to announce that teachers do not usually feel that these rather enthusiastic promises are fulfilled in practice. In fact, we can contrast the excerpts above with some quotes from my fieldwork:

> ‘I think it’s an extremely arduous platform. There’s a lot of clicking and “where do I find…”’
>
> *- Andrea, secondary school science teacher (interview)*
>
> ‘Hey guys, don’t forget that we’ve been excused from the most laboursome task – filling in the results in [the learning platform]!’
>
> *- Ben, secondary school teacher, trying to cheer up his colleagues who are finishing up the end-of-semester grading (fieldnotes)*
>
> ‘I have worked with so many of them! Unikum at [that school], InfoMentor at [that school] and now Schoolsoft. And my children use Vklass at their school. Perhaps Unikum is slightly…. No… no, actually they’re all the same crap.’
>
> *- Eric, secondary school teacher (fieldnotes)*
>
> ‘The last week, when one is finished grading, is always much quieter and then one can fill in the assessments in the digital learning platform. It’s super annoying. It is a copious clicking – click, click, click – you sit like that for a hundred years with all your classes and everyone is annoyed about it because no one looks at it later, or no one… very few look at it later.’
>
> *- Thelma, secondary school teacher (interview)*

These quotes suggest that contrary to the aims of the digital learning platforms, teachers experience the digital learning platforms as burdensome. It is also worth noting that Ben and Thelma’s quotes also indicate that teachers do not use the platforms for the purpose of assessment; the assessment has already been done (and documented in their own, idiosyncratic systems) by the time they register the assessments in the digital learning platforms. Using the digital learning platforms, then, does *not* free up time for the teachers but does quite the opposite. In fact, in Sandén's research on digitalisation strategies in Swedish schools, the use of digital learning platforms was the only digitalisation strategy he explored that the teachers he interviewed were *undividedly* negative towards (2021, p. 142).[48] In order to explore more closely why this is, we need to take a look at how assessments are done through the digital learning platforms.

Assessment Through Digital Learning Platforms

The grading criteria are integrated into the interfaces of the digital learning platforms to facilitate teachers' assessment of pupils' knowledge. Although the interfaces of each digital platform look slightly different, there are some striking similarities in how they integrate the grading criteria text from the national curriculum into their digital systems. Below I account for some of these. During the course of my research and, more specifically, during the course of my data collection a change took place in relation to assessment of pupils' knowledge. In 2022, the national curriculum was updated for the first time in 11 years. The changes to the curriculum are considered minor compared to the two previous curriculum changes, but still meant that the grading criteria, aim and core content of each subject were slightly reformulated (in very general terms, these changes meant fewer and less detailed grading criteria with a slightly stronger focus on factual knowledge). My data therefore comprises material collected before and after the new curriculum was implemented in July 2022. I try to navigate these changes and differences in a clear way throughout the text. All images from the digital learning platforms are taken from their publicly available homepages, youtube-pages and blogs.

Chopping things up and putting them in grids

One of the first things that stands out when we look at the assessment interfaces of the digital learning platforms is that the grading criteria from the national curriculum are inevitably chopped up and put into tables and grid systems. Below, I have included two illustrations (images 7.2 and 7.3) of what assessment interfaces can look like.

[48] The other strategies were digitalisation through use of social media, classroom teaching, and for management and control.

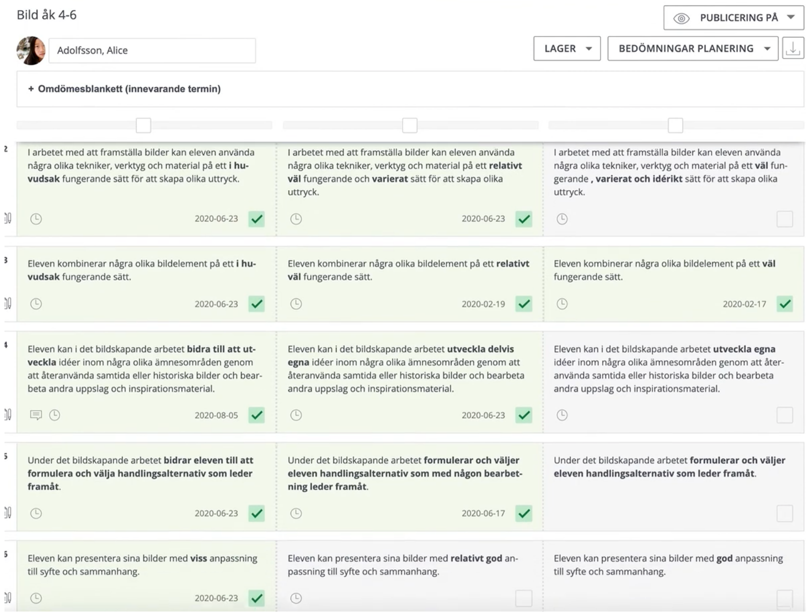

Image 7.2
Screenshot from information video 'Bedömning och dokumentation' ['Assessment and Documentation']. This example is from before the 2022 curriculum change (InfoMentor, 2020)

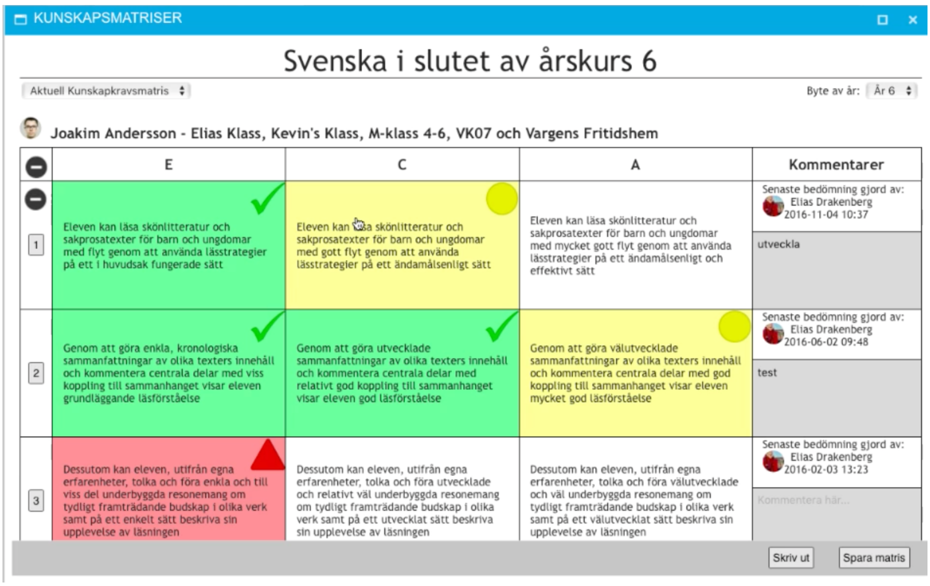

Image 7.3
Screenshot from information video titled ' Kunskapsmatriser' [Knowledge Matrices], uploaded on Vklass' webpage (Vklass, 2022)

In both the above examples, three columns mark the steps in the grading criteria (E-level, C-level or A-level). The very first column, however, adds *numbers* to the different parts of the grading criteria. The rows feature the same section from the grading criteria but for different grade levels. Whereas the grading criteria in the national curriculum, depicted in image 7.1, read like a coherent text, the grading criteria in the digital learning platforms are not only divided, they are also numbered and given colour schemes, so that they read more like a checklist than a continuous text. This, as will be demonstrated shortly, has consequences for how one can work with assessments in the digital learning platforms.

Tables, grids and spreadsheets offer many of the same affordances. Tables facilitate making comparisons between different things. A table usually presents the elements that comprise it as being on the same level, making comparison between them seem natural, logical, relevant and desirable (and obfuscating whether comparison actually is any of these things (cf. Ledin & Machin, 2021)). This is similar to what John Law refers to as the *homogenising* effect of spreadsheets (2002, p. 27): there is 'no room for that which cannot be treated within the built-in logic of the spreadsheet'. Relevant to this is also that these are tools of *simplification*: 'much is being turned into rather little. Much, is of course, being deleted. (Though much […] is also being created)' (ibid.:28).

It should also be emphasised that the standardisation of the grid system across *all* subjects assumes that different subjects require the same kind of document system. It is easy to make this assumption because the grading criteria are written in a standardised way. However, what is assessed, how pupils present their knowledge and how the learning situations are structured, varies between the subjects. As we will soon see, this is one of the things that is reflected in the teachers' own idiosyncratic document systems.

The homogenising and simplifying effects of these tools enable further commands to be applied to the data being fed into the grids. More precisely, the information being fed into the system can be turned into data that can be used for various statistical ends: compilations of how an individual pupil is doing in each subject, in all subjects or over time as well as various compilations and comparisons at group level (how many pupils are 'red' in the Maths? How many pupils are red in assessment criterion 1 in Maths? How do these two classes compare?). None of these commands would be possible unless the format that the data was being fed into had a relatively strong degree of simplification and homogenisation.

Box-ticking and 'Clicking'

The processes of homogenising and simplifying are further aided by the use of box-ticking to signify that a pupil has achieved a certain level. This gives the impression that grading is a technical process (see also Ledin & Machin, 2021). It also gives the impression that there is a natural and self-evident line between the content of one grid and the next. One gets the impression that the grids represent mutually exclusive, discrete entities. What this does is that it misrepresents the vagueness of the formulations in the grading criteria that I demonstrated earlier. Additionally, this is quite contrary to the emphasis that the Swedish National Agency for Education asserted in their information video on assessment of pupils' knowledge. There, they highlight the use of professional judgment, making an overall assessment and interpretation. According to some of the teachers with whom I spoke, the digital learning platforms – due to their grid and checkbox style of presenting the grading criteria – actually go *against* how the grading criteria should be read and, by extension, how pupils should be assessed. Even the Swedish National Agency for Education warn against this in their pamphlet:

> 'General Guidelines for Grading and Assessing': 'Box-ticking without analysis and reflection can lead to the teacher's various bases for assessment being incorrectly valued in the grading process. Ticked boxes in grading matrices are therefore not sufficient when it comes to grading' (Skolverket, 2022b, p. 22, my translation).

Furthermore, the fact that 'much is being turned into rather little' (Law, 2002) implies the removal of contextual information, variations, detail and examples. This process, of turning much into little, in fact makes the tables *illegible* for some purposes. One of the most commonly espoused advantages of using digital learning platforms, according to both school leaders that I have spoken to and the digital learning platforms themselves, is that information can easily be *transferred* from one setting to another; if one teacher leaves his or her job, the teacher who takes over will have information about the pupils' knowledge in the various subjects. Indeed, this is one of the arguments of the Swedish National Agency for Education as well (Skolverket, 2022b). However, many teachers that I have spoken to claim that they do not know what to make of another teacher's assessments in the digital learning platforms. As one teacher said, 'I don't know what this pupil has been tested on, I don't know how they write, how they interact in classroom situations, what areas they have covered…'. We will return to discuss this further later in the chapter and for now we will only note that those aspects of assessment that do not fit the logic of the table are, in fact, valuable information for many parts of teachers' assessment work.

Lastly, box-ticking is the activity that the teachers quoted in the previous section referred to as an incessant 'clicking'. This stands in stark contrast to how a headteacher that I interviewed, Suzanne, referred to the box-ticking or 'clicking':

> 'A click is a very easy form for documentation that we can actually make use of. […] One click per pupil. It doesn't take very long. (small pause) But that's probably something that one can think differently about.'

Suzanne's small hesitation towards the end of this quote indicates that she is aware of teachers' complaints about 'incessant clicking'. It should be added that most teachers would also refute the idea of 'one click per pupil'. As one teacher put it: 'I have about 150 pupils and the grading criteria are divided into 15 boxes… that's well more than a thousand clicks! It's insanely annoying'[49]. Suzanne, however, remains convinced that the box-ticking is work that pays off because it generates useful documentation. In the next section, we will learn that the usefulness of the box-ticking must be seen in relation to the colour schemes that these clicks generate and Suzanne's managerial responsibility to distribute scarce institutional resources.

The Use of Colour Schemes

Colour schemes play a significant role in the assessment interfaces of the digital learning platforms. Many platforms use the colours red, yellow and green (Unikum uses different shades of the colour blue). Although there is no consensus on exactly what these colours should signify (and some platforms leave it up to the individual school to decide how to use the colour schemes), there are some tendencies in how they are used. Red tends to denote some level of risk (usually, that the pupil is not meeting the minimum requirements of a course), yellow to denote a lesser level of risk (for instance, that the pupil displays knowledge that is partly, but not entirely, within the scope of an assessment criterion section) and green to denote that the pupil is performing well. Similar to grids and box-ticking, colour schemes also suggest that there is a technical process behind the information displayed (Ledin & Machin, 2015) – information has been sorted and put into delineated and defined categories. Below I have included two illustrations of what these interfaces can look like (images 7.4 and 7.5).

[49] This was before the curriculum revisions of 2022. After 2022 there were significantly fewer boxes to tick due to the grading criteria being condensed. The teacher in this quote acknowledged this as a marginal improvement to the 'clicking work' but no improvement whatsoever to the assessment work in the digital platforms.

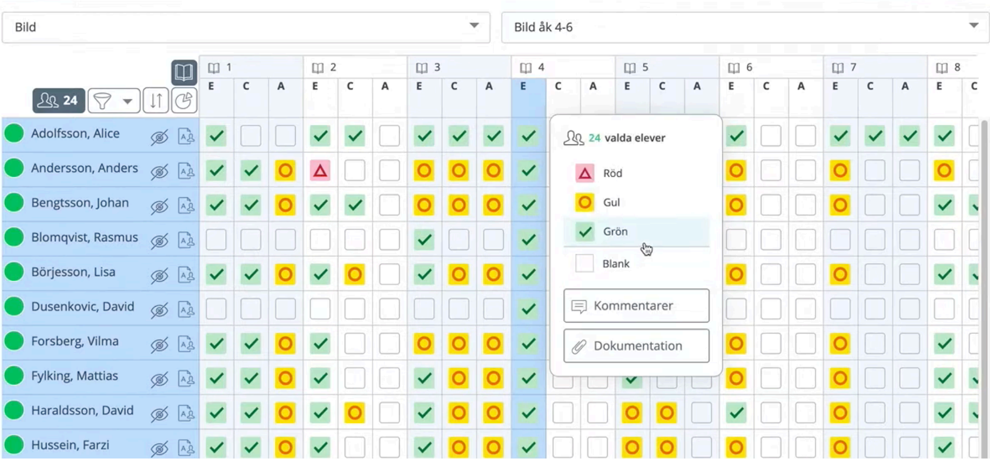

Image 7.4
Screenshot from Infomentor's video 'Bedömning och dokumentation ['Assessment and Documentation']. Illustrates overview over assessment in a Year 5 Arts class (InfoMentor, 2020).

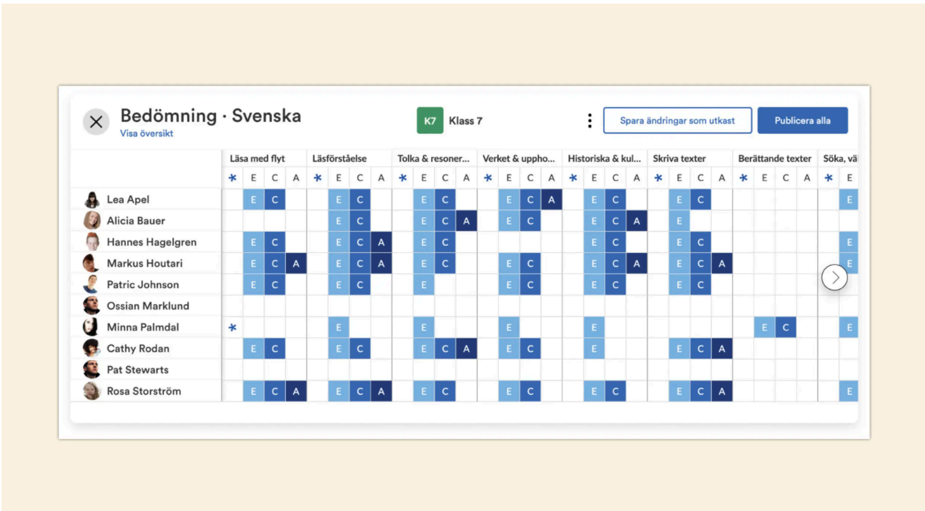

Image 7.5
Illustration from Unikum's blog (Unikum, 2023).

Image 7.4 represents an overview of how a Year 5 is doing in Arts in the platform InfoMentor. We have the pupils in the first column from the left. The second column signifies the first section of the grading criteria (marked by the number 1 next to an illustration of a book) and is in turn divided into three columns (one for each grade level of the grading criteria). Until 2022, InfoMentor did not tell the users *how* to use the colour scheme and when we select a colour the word next to the colour is the name of the colour and not an indication of what information this colour signals. This was changed with the new curriculum in 2022 and the yellow symbol now denotes progression: ‘the criterion is not yet fully met, not everything is covered in teaching’ (InfoMentor, 2022). Schools can also choose not to use the yellow marker at all. Judging from the teachers I spoke to both before and after this change, the significance of the change has been negligeable. Not one teacher that I spoke to mentioned this change and the complaints concerning colour schemes remained unchanged before and after 2022. These complaints mainly centred on a lack of consensus on how to use these colour schemes (the same complaints were also heard from teachers using other platforms than InfoMentor).

Image 7.5 is from the digital learning platform Unikum and illustrates how a Year 7 is doing in the subject Swedish. In this colour scheme, there is less leeway; the colour turns a darker shade of blue for each level of the grading criteria that you have met. In addition to the blue colour scheme, the asterisk symbol is used to denote that a pupil is in need of extra support [‘insatsbehov’] to manage their schoolwork. It is also worth noting that pupils do also get the grades D and B, but these are not represented in any of the above overviews. They can, however, be displayed in other assessment overviews (there is a large number of variations of compilations, as previously indicated).

The main reason the colour schemes play a significant role in the digital learning platforms is that they are used as markers when data on the pupils are being compiled in different ways. The box-ticking is the basis for many different ways that one can ‘see’ pupils’ results (some staff used the metaphor of a ‘lawn’ to describe the visualisation of the colour data). Each ticked box colour-codes the pupil’s learning in relation to the grading criteria. A few clicks away one can find this data compiled in several different iterations. On the individual level: how each pupil is performing in a certain subject, over time, or an overview of how they are performing in every subject. On the group level one can see results for each subject or for each home group or even the whole school. In these compilations, the colour schemes are usually used to visually convey how a student or a group is doing overall. It is the kind of organisational visibility that box-ticking affords that Suzanne is referring to when she is defending the usefulness of the ‘click’. Suzanne saw the colour schemes as helpful for her own planning and allocation of resources:

> ‘It’s a fairly simple signal that means that we can have a look and see that, okay, group 7D is very red in the subject English, while 7A is completely green. That means that if we have extra resources in group 7A, perhaps we can move those to group 7D, which is very red. So, it becomes a tool that can help us utilise our resources in the best way. And quite – or relatively – little documentation effort from the teachers.’

Ben, a secondary school teacher who was also quoted earlier, was of a slightly different opinion than Suzanne. To him, the colour scheme was one of the *potential* benefits of the digital learning platform (although, as his earlier quote indicates, he did not consider the 'clicking' that Suzanne refers to as light documentation work). Ben acknowledged that it could be useful for the municipality to have figures on how different schools were doing for comparison (that is, comparison of the distribution and frequency of the colours red, yellow and green at the schools in the municipality). However, the problem according to Ben was that there was no consensus between the municipal schools on what the colours meant and because schools acted differently, the municipality would not really know what they were looking at or how to interpret it. At the previous school where Ben had worked, the teachers had been told to use the colour scheme in one way, and at his current school they used it differently. During my fieldwork, I also encountered a few teachers who disagreed with the assigned way of designating colour and who rather used the colour schemes in ways that they thought were more appropriate.

Both Ben's and Suzanne's reflections touch upon an observation concerning digital learning platforms that has been made by both researchers and teachers, namely the degree to which the digital learning platforms function primarily as *management* platforms rather than *learning* platforms. With their focus on standardisation, accountability, transparency and streamlining, the platforms have been analysed by some researchers as neoliberal governance tools rather than tools that aid pupils in learning or teachers in teaching (Andreasson & Dovemark, 2013; Grimaldi & Ball, 2021; Selwyn, 2011). Johan Sandén (2021) interviewed 27 teachers, headteachers and administrators for his doctoral research on how digitalisation affects teachers' work. The teachers he interviewed used the digital learning platforms more as management systems than systems for teaching and learning (Sandén, 2021, p. 130). Suzanne would elaborate on this further in our interview when she returned to the use of the digital platform at their school:

> 'Actually, we use it less and less in connection with pupils' learning. We use it a lot for communication. We publish information for parents. The schedule is important and they can see that there. Homework, assignments, tests… In other words, exchange of information.'

Digital platforms as tools for communication have received less scholarly attention (save for some notable exceptions, such as Sandén, 2021), but is echoed in several places in my material. For instance, Andrea, who was quoted earlier in this chapter, remained sceptical of the use of the digital learning platforms for teachers and for pupils but added that she believed that the parents were happy with it and that it worked well from their side. Other teachers, however, described the communicative feature of the digital learning platforms as a failure and that most guardians and pupils never looked at the information there anyway (see for instance Thelma's quote on p. 163).

Thus far, then, we have seen how the material properties of the assessment interfaces on the digital learning platforms enable statistics to be generated, comparisons to be made, managerial decisions to be made and communication with actors who are not directly involved in the everyday life of the teachers and pupils. All of these purposes require a high level of standardisation. However, the digital learning platforms, we recall, *also* aim to be an aid for teachers in their practice of assessing pupils. The highly standardised forms that we have encountered so far, however, seems to leave little room for the flexibility that the Swedish National Agency for Education espouses that the document systems for assessment should have (Skolverket, 2022b). To counteract the rigidness of the standardised form, the digital learning platforms' assessment interfaces all feature some kind of comment section.

Managing Variation and Uncertainty: The Comment Sections

Grading according to the grading criteria is tricky business and requires teachers to make *overall* assessments that reflect the entirety of the grading criteria and not only their individually chopped up components. Moreover, a grade should reflect the sum of the pupil's overall performance, not just the sum of individually graded assessments. It is, as the Swedish National Agency for Education warned, about more than box-ticking. To meet this demand, the assessment interfaces of the platforms have different kinds of comment functions available. These differ slightly. In InfoMentor, the comment section is available by clicking on a grid. After one has written a comment a little speech bubble with text can be seen in the left bottom corner of the grid box (see image 7.2) so that the teacher can see that there is a comment attached to the grading criteria. In Vklass, the comments have their own column on the far right (see image 7.3). This means that the comments can be seen all at once and simultaneously with the assessment for each grading criteria. It is also common that the teachers can, if they want, make these comments public and share them with the pupils and their guardians for quick feedback.

Despite this feature being available, I have yet to see a teacher use this function very much. The main reason for this, I suspect, is that teachers tend not to use the digital learning platform's tools *for* assessment, but rather merely for registrations of assessments that they have already made (with the help from their idiosyncratic document systems).

How Do Digital Learning Platforms Afford?

Above I have discussed different features of the digital learning platforms. I have summarised the most prominent features of the assessment tools that teachers use through their digital learning platforms. This summary is naturally incomplete; the number of different assessments that can be made within one digital platform is too extensive to be covered in this chapter. To illustrate, on the platform Vklass, under a heading called 'assessment' we find no less than seven different assessment forms available to the teacher: 'Individual development plans' (IUP in Swedish, also referred to as ‘omdömen’ on vklass), ‘assessment matrix for the subject’ (‘bedömningsmatris för ämnet’), ‘pupil log (assessments/agreements)’, ‘register grades’, ‘results overview’ and ‘knowledge matrix’ (‘kunskapsmatris’). How many of these features the teacher is supposed to use and how they should use them varies between schools and school organisers.

In this chapter, the focus has been on those interfaces where assessment is meant to be carried out (not just registered, as when one registers a course grade). And there has been an emphasis on those features that the platforms have in common. There is an empirical reason for this: the complaints that teachers have about the digital learning platforms are strikingly similar between teachers, even those who use different digital platforms. This is also echoed in Sandén’s interviews with teachers: none of the teachers that he interviews considered any work they did in the digital learning platforms as pedagogical work (Sandén, 2021). This resonates with my own findings and supports a framework where commonalities are highlighted.

To add to this, the fact that the platforms seem be experienced in a similar way by teachers despite the platforms looking somewhat different, indicates that Davis’ suggestion to pay attention to *how* technologies afford rather than *what* they afford should be taken seriously. To illustrate, we can take a look at the changes that InfoMentor made in their assessment interface after the new curriculum was integrated in 2022. For most platforms, the change of curriculum meant that the wording of the grading criteria was replaced with the new wording and that the number of cells was reduced (because the number of grading criteria sections was generally reduced in the new curriculum). In the case of InfoMentor, however, a few more changes were implemented at the same time. A couple of these changes were in accordance with some of the common criticisms that teachers would raise against the platform. Firstly, after 2022 the grading criteria were divided and put into grids based on *sections* of the grading criteria rather than *sentences.* Secondly, the meaning of the colour scheme was (somewhat) specified and the aim and core content of the subject was integrated in the matrices. All of these changes echoed common complaints that I heard about the platform before 2022. If we frame the complaints in terms of affordances and *what* the interfaces afford, we can say that the grid sheet from before 2022 that chopped up the grading criteria on the level of the sentence and did not include the core content and aim of the course *discouraged* the teacher from making an overall assessment of the pupil’s knowledge. In contrast, chopping up the grading criteria on the level of section (which the Swedish National Agency for Education also does in their commentary material) and including the core content and aim of the course in the matrix could be seen as a way to encourage teachers to make an overall assessment. In the same vein, specifying the meaning of the colour scheme should, for example, allow and encourage comparisons between units – be they pupils, classes or entire schools. However, as previously mentioned, none of the teachers I encountered mentioned any of the aforementioned changes when they discussed InfoMentor. In fact, I am not even sure that any of the teachers knew about or had reflected at all over these changes.

In my data, these small changes in the digital learning platforms' assessment interfaces made little to no difference for how teachers experienced them. At the same time, I have argued that the differences between the material composition of the digital learning platforms and the teachers' idiosyncratic document systems are not great either – they often use colour schemes, spreadsheets, reference the grading criteria and so on – but that the differences that we do find make a world of difference to how teachers experience them. Clearly, then, we need to look beyond *what* technologies afford. In short, to ask *what* a technology affords is to situate the affordance of the technology in some inherent and invariable properties of the technology itself. Seeing as the teachers' own idiosyncratic systems and the digital learning platforms share many of the same material features but are used very differently, such an approach seems unsatisfactory.

Rather, affordances need to be accounted for in terms of the contextual and relational aspects of peoples' engagement with technology. Jenny Davis suggests that we do this by asking three questions: *how* does the technology afford, *for whom* does it afford and *under what circumstances* (2020). These questions can be addressed in a myriad of ways, but I have identified some aspects that I take to be the most germane to how the digital learning platforms work. Asking *how* technologies afford makes it easier to identify aspects of the technology that are not directly visible in the features of the technology as such. By far the most common complaint I heard from teachers when they talked about assessment through the digital learning platforms was the 'clicking'. Temporally and technically, a 'click' is a brief and simple action on a computer. However, as one primary school teacher explained to me, if you have 26 pupils, 7 subjects and between 3-6 grading criteria in each subject, you quickly have around a thousand clicks. Besides the repetition, a 'click' can also be arduous as a tool of navigation within the digital learning platform: one can make a wrong click and end up somewhere unintended (and going back is not always as easy as it might seem), you might be unsure where to click to get to the right place and have to resort to trial and error to find your way, you might be so lost that you need to consult a colleague for help to know where to click, and getting to where you want to be can require a series of clicks. For example, I mentioned the seven forms of assessment available to teachers on the platform Vklass. In order to find the headline 'assessment' at all, one has to first go to a tab called 'My courses' from where one has to find the class one wants to look at from a list featuring all the classes that are available to you and from there one has to find the tab 'result' before you reach the heading 'assessment'.

That the 'clicking' is considered such a taxing task must also be seen in relation to other parameters, specifically *for whom* the work is done and *under what circumstances*. Many teachers expressed that they felt that they were reporting in the digital learning platforms for someone else's sake – either the school leaders or municipality or pupils' guardians. The compilations of results, the metaphorical ‘lawns’ (‘gräsmattor’) that were mentioned earleir, were definitely more celebrated by school leaders than teachers (although a couple of teachers also expressed satisfaction over the ‘lawns’ they could produce from their results).

The digital learning platforms’ role as a *communication tool* with guardians has already been mentioned and was frequently mentioned by teachers albeit in quite different ways. Teachers and headteachers that I have spoken to have unanimously agreed that there is a significant difference in how pupils’ guardians engage with their children’s education based on the socioeconomic background of the parents. Headteacher Suzanne summarised it like this:

> ’When I started as headteacher at my previous school, we had quite poor socioeconomic circumstances but I never received an email from parents even though it was crisis and catastrophe… many pupils who failed subjects – not a single parent email. At this school the pupils can have grades that are well above the pass level, and high average scores… my oh my, how many emails I can receive about these pupils. So there is definitely a big difference.’

This difference is also reflected in how teachers in my material talked about the communicative function of the digital learning platforms. One teacher who worked at a school where many pupils came from a working-class background or had parents with limited experience of the Swedish education system, complained that ‘no one reads what is communicated on the platform anyway’. Teachers who worked in more affluent areas could often see the communicative value of the platforms for the guardians, although some raised questions concerning the unquestioned need to continuously update the parents. ‘What does it do to the pupil to get updates on their progress every single week?’ one asked. Other teachers pointed out that even though they are obliged to keep the parents updated and include them in their children’s schooling, the work in the digital learning platforms is well beyond the scope of what they are required to report.

Lastly, we need to consider the circumstances under which teachers work and how work with the digital learning platforms fit in with the everyday work at schools. Teachers have consistently told me that they are often pressed for time most of the time. Furthermore, days at schools often do not go exactly as planned – many little things, and sometimes big things, that require teachers’ attention pop up throughout the day. This was one of the things that struck me very early on during my fieldwork, how often teachers are interrupted while attempting to complete almost any task. For instance, colleagues pop in to ask something or find something, guardians write emails, pupils pop in to chat, look for something or report about a conflict that the teacher needs to deal with. Under these circumstances it is worth considering the additional demands of the digital learning platforms – while being pressed for time, the ‘clicking around’ and ‘where do I find…’ that Andrea was quoted on in the beginning of the chapter, exasperates the frustration of not easily finding one’s way around on the platform or making ‘wrong clicks’. Furthermore, the internet needs to be functioning, one needs to have one’s computer readily available (and it needs to be charged), one needs to log in and then start the ‘clicking’. These are not in themselves demanding tasks, but when put together and seen in relation to the time pressure that teachers report that they experience, it can certainly discourage the use of the platforms.

Idiosyncratic Document Systems: Some Examples

As mentioned, all the teachers that I talked to about knowledge assessment throughout my interviews and fieldwork, had some kind of personal document system for assessing pupils’ knowledge *in addition* to the assessment tools through the digital platforms that they were required to use. What kind of system they had, however, varied greatly and I encountered both digital and analogue systems. In order to illustrate the wide variety of idiosyncratic document systems, I have chosen to present some of the range that I saw during my fieldwork and interviews. It has been somewhat tricky to find a way to illustrate what these document systems look like without collecting or revealing any data on the pupils themselves. What I have done is that I have sat down with a few teachers and replicated the structure and layout of their system, but not any of the names or specific comments about the pupils. The comments, however, have an important function in the document systems and I have worked around this by writing what *kinds* of comments the teacher would include rather than include the comment itself. Where numbers or point systems are used, I have replaced the numbers with different numbers, but kept the logic of the number system (developed by the teacher) intact. Lastly, since each of these document systems is unique to the individual teacher, I have chosen to not use the teachers’ pseudonyms here.

The Analogue Ring Binder

One of the more elaborate document systems that I encountered during my research was developed by a natural science and mathematics secondary school teacher. She kept all her documentation in two ring binders. These contained sheets of paper, one for each student in each of her subjects. The binders were organised firstly by subject (biology, chemistry, physics, technology and mathematics), secondly by group and thirdly by pupils’ names alphabetically. Each paper contained the following printed information: the pupil’s name, class, subject and a grid system containing the grading criteria for that subject. In addition, each paper had a number of handwritten notes and symbols that the teacher used to monitor the pupil’s academic development in that subject. I have replicated an example to illustrate what her system looks like and what kinds of symbols she uses (see image 7.7). As mentioned, this particular example is anonymised and the results fictitious. It is merely used to demonstrate the features of this teacher’s document system and how she uses it. To make the illustration as authentic as possible, I have printed the grid sheet and used a pencil to make notes (as the teacher does) and then scanned the document.

William Olsen	Teknik	7D
The pupil makes **simple** inferences about choice of technological solutions and their consequences for the individual, society and the environment. The pupil describes, in a **simple** manner, how some technological solutions have changed over time, and the reasons for the changes. INFRASTRUCTURE	The pupil makes **developed** inferences about choice of technological solutions and their consequences for the individual, society and the environment. The pupil describes, in a **developed** manner, how some technological solutions have changed over time, and the reasons for the changes. X	The pupil makes **well-developed** inferences about choice of technological solutions and their consequences for the individual, society and the environment. The pupil describes, in a **well-developed** manner, how some technological solutions have changed over time, and the reasons for the changes. PROGRAMMING
The pupil examines different technological solutions and explains, in a **simple** manner, how the constituent components work together to achieve purpose and function.	The pupil examines different technological solutions and explains, in a **developed** manner, how the constituent components work together to achieve purpose and function.	The pupil examines different technological solutions and explains, in a **well-developed** manner, how the constituent components work together to achieve purpose and function, and then **points to other similar solutions.** MECHANISMS X
The pupil performs technology development and design work in a **somewhat organised** manner. In the work, the pupil **tests out** ideas for solutions and **contributes to** formulating and choosing alternative courses of action. The pupil creates documentation that sets out the intention of the solution **to some extent.** II	The pupil performs technology development and design work in an **organised** manner. In the work, the pupil **tests and retests** ideas for solutions and formulates and chooses alternative courses of action **that, with some reworking, lead to progress.** The pupil creates documentation that sets out the intention of the solution **relatively well.** II	The pupil performs technology development and design work in a **well-organised** manner. In the work, the pupil **systematically tests and retests** ideas for solutions and formulates and chooses alternative courses of action **that lead to progress**. The pupil creates documentation that sets out the intention of the solution **well**. III

Image 7.7
Replication of idiosyncratic document system for the subject Technology.

Above the grid is written the name of the pupil, the subject and the class that the pupil belongs to. The grid system is an overview of all the grading criteria for the grading levels E, C and A. If we read the grid system column by column, we find in the first column from the left the grading criteria for the grade E, in the second the grading criteria for grade C and in the third the grading criteria for grade A. If we read the grid system row by row we get the same section from the grading criteria, but for different grades.

The grid sheet with the grading criteria is printed and put in a ring binder. The rest of the information, that is, the information that is particular to that pupil, is filled in with a pencil or a highlighter directly on the paper. This includes circles with words in them, the symbol 'X' and short lines. The circles with words in them are tests that the pupil has had. In the example above, the pupil has been tested on the three topics 'infrastructure', 'programming' and 'mechanisms'. *Where* the circled test is placed signifies the pupil's performance on that test. So, the test 'infrastructure' aimed to test how well William could reason about technical solutions and their consequences. He performed at E level. A test on the topic of 'programming', however, aimed at testing the same skills and here William performed somewhere between C-level and A-level. This test is therefore written across the line between C-level and A-level. This teacher therefore could use the space *across* the grids to show certain information. She could also use the space *within* one grid to show other information. We can see in the example above that a test on 'mechanisms' is placed very far to the right in its grid. This is to show that the test result was a *very* strong A – the pupil had performed exceptionally well. Had the circle been placed closer to the left line in the same grid, the teacher would have wanted to illustrate that this test was a weaker A-level (though not quite B-level). Furthermore, the teacher explained that she knows exactly the content and extent of each test so when she looks at the paper she knows immediately that the test on 'programming' was a large test that required a lot from the pupil, whilst the test on 'infrastructure' was much smaller in scope and time and that the test on programming therefore should weigh heavier in the overall assessment.

The lines in the bottom row are used to show how the pupil has performed in practice-oriented assessment situations. The third section of the grading criteria in the subject Technology encompasses methods, implementation and practice. These can for example be classroom assignments where the pupil is asked to construct something (in a group with other pupils or alone). After the class is finished, the teacher can take out the ring binder, look up the pupil and sketch a short line to illustrate how the pupil performed on that assignment. The teacher showed me how she uses this 'line'-system in all her subjects, but that they could mean slightly different things in different subjects, depending upon the grading criteria. Depending on the subject, they could denote labs, constructions, group work or how the pupil works with processes.

Lastly, the placement of the symbol 'X' is a reflection of the overall assessment of that part of the grading criteria. These are written out at the end, when the pupil has completed all the tests and tasks that aim to cover that part of the grading criteria.

The above aims to illustrate how this teacher documented pupils' knowledge in the subject Technology. It is worth noting, however, that her document system was to a certain degree also customised for each subject that she taught. For instance, in the document system for the subject Mathematics she added a colour scheme that – in her system – was useful because the grading criteria in Mathematics are much more specified in terms of knowledge content than in any of the other subjects.

On a surface level, the grid sheet does not look too different from the ones that we have seen on the digital learning platforms. The way in which this printed piece of paper allows this teacher to make assessments differs, however, in significant ways from the digital learning platforms. To begin, the teacher stressed the accessibility of her binders. Pulling down her binder, opening the correct page and making a little mark was quicker, the teacher argued, than clicking one's way into the digital learning platform and finding one's way around in the platform. The real benefit, however, was not in the accessibility but in how various stages and aspects of the assessment practice could be reflected in the document system. Specifically, the teacher mentioned that different kinds of assessment tasks, the fluid scaling of assessments (i.e. the grade 'C' could be written as a stronger or weaker 'C'), and overall assessments were worked into her document system. Here, one could interject that the interfaces of the digital learning platforms also integrated features that aimed to capture these aspects of the assessment process (through such things as the comment sections and the colour schemes). However, this only serves to highlight again that asking *how* rather than *what* material objects afford provides a much richer understanding of how interaction with material objects takes form. In the digital learning platform, the teacher argued, the process of incorporating these elements would require quite a lot of work compared to using her own document system. 'I suppose I *could',* she told me, 'write some of these things in the comment sections of the platforms but it would just be so much more work than simply writing this line here or that test there'. She stressed that in her document systems, these things were *directly visible* to her; by looking at this one page, she had all this information at once. What was visible to her, however, required knowledge not only of how her document system worked but also knowledge of the pupil, the forms of assessment and how to rank the various assessments. Creating statistics based on this document system would require extensive reworking to more exactly categorise and standardise the information in the documents. Additionally, this idiosyncratic document system would not communicate well without the guidance of the teacher who developed it. In fact, it would be quite incomprehensible to an outsider. Even I, who sat with this teacher for an hour discussing how the document system worked, could not have drawn any substantive conclusions from the system if I was given a page at random. Not because I did not know how the system worked, but because I had not followed the teacher's lectures, assessments and other context-specific elements of this teacher's work.

The Digital Spreadsheet

The digital spreadsheet is one very frequently encountered type of idiosyncratic documentation among teachers. Their exact layouts vary, of course, but some features are more common than others. One spreadsheet almost always contains one school class. The left-hand column then invariably contains the name of the pupils in that class. The following columns usually contain the tests that the pupils have done and either a grade or the number of points on that test. Many teachers also have one column where they can write comments. A few also use colour schemes. That the teachers' spreadsheets read quite similarly – pupils' names in the first left column, each row dedicated to the performance of one pupil and so on – can be understood in relation to some of the in-built affordances of the table format. As Ledin and Machin have shown in different papers, we tend to 'read' tables from left to right, each column having a syntagmatic relationship to the preceding and following column (Ledin, 2015; Ledin & Machin, 2015, 2021). This feature also creates a sense of logical sequence between the columns (Ledin & Machin, 2015, p. 478). Furthermore, the use of borders as a kind of visual separation creates a sense of things being compared in the same way in terms of – for instance – quantities, qualities or temporality in the columns (Ledin & Machin, 2021, p. 5). Again, this structure reminds us how assessment interfaces on the digital learning platforms look. However, all the spreadsheets that I have seen contain information about particular tests and assignments that the pupils have done. The information directly visible in the digital learning platforms' grid systems is usually the grading criteria and the grade scale, whereas the information directly visible in the spreadsheets of the idiosyncratic document systems is almost always related to specific tests and assignments. It is worth raising the point here that this makes these idiosyncratic document systems easier for teachers to use in the process of assessing pupils, but it also makes the systems untenable for other purposes, such as creating statistics, because the various tests and assignments that teachers use to assess their pupils do not relate to the grading criteria in a standardised way. This point will be elaborated upon later in the chapter.

Arts and Craft: The Camera as a Tool for Documentation

Quite a few arts and crafts teachers[50] document pupils' work and progress through photographic representations of the artefacts or works that the pupils produce, both the end product and the steps of the process of completing the work. One crafts

[50] These are two separate subjects in the Swedish education system.

teacher described how he could derive much information from these images of pupils' work – both from the visual representation of the artefact as such (the techniques used, the level of detail and level of sophistication of methods used to complete the work), and from information that is not directly visible in the image, which the teacher recalled clearly when looking at the image: for instance problems that the pupil had encountered during the work process or methods they used to overcome obstacles. There is a significant amount of contextual information about the pupil's work, then, that is not available to an outsider looking at the image, but that the teacher can discern because he closely followed the pupil's process of making the artefact. This crafts teacher did, however, have a brief form of paper documentation that aimed to ensure that his judgment and memory served him right. Central to the grading criteria in the crafts subject is the work process itself. In order to keep track of which pupils had in fact chosen their own methods and assessed and reassessed their methods and so on, the crafts teacher had printed overviews of the classroom's seating arrangements. The symbol 'X' next to a pupil's name denotes that the pupil has worked independently in creating their artefact. 'You don't want to risk being fooled by a nice-looking product,' the teacher explained, 'what if the pupil has had help with every step of the way and has in fact barely made the artefact themselves?'.

The Class List/Roster

'The class list! You have to write about the class list!' one teacher exclaimed with a small laugh during a focus group interview about idiosyncratic documentation and digital platforms. The joking tone stemmed from the fact that the class list is one of the most basic and durable kinds of document that teachers use. To give something as banal as the class list its own section can therefore seem humorous. But the fact is that this little document tool, which is a grid list of all pupils in a class – their names on the lefthand side and empty lines or boxes on the righthand side – is a very frequently used document tool for all sorts of purposes, including for assessment (it looks like the teacher's calendar in image 7.8, but already has the names of the pupils filled in). In fact, the class list is so inconspicuous and omnipresent a document that one of the teachers in the focus group did not automatically consider it a document tool for assessment at all. When I asked him directly what kind of document system he used for assessment he said that he did not really have one. He explained that he used google classroom[51], where all his pupils' works, assignments and tests were stored, as the primary source for

[51] Google classroom is an educational platform that is widely used at all schools that I have been in contact with. In relation to pupils, teachers use it to publish information, tests, assignments, instructions, upload PowerPoints, upload reading material and so on. Teachers can also correct papers and tests through interacting directly with the pupils' documents. Very many teachers use this tool widely in their teaching and testing of pupils.

information while assessing his pupils. At this point another teacher interjected with an incredulous tone, ‘so you look at the classroom assignments and then feed a grade directly into the platform?’. ‘Well, basically,’ the teacher replied, ‘or, I have a class list where I write down the results from national tests, homework assignments – although these do not weigh very heavily – and other tests or assignments that they have done so that I have an overview.’ The other teacher commented that this was also, in fact, a kind of document system, which the first teacher agreed to. However, the teacher who used the system made sure to emphasise that the class list in and of itself was not enough to make an overall assessment (‘helhetlig bedömning’). For this he also relied heavily on the method of looking back at the pupils’ work, indeed, much like the crafts teacher above looked at images of pupils’ artefacts.

‘The Teacher’s Calendar’ (‘Lärarkalendern’)

One of the secondary school teachers I met during my fieldwork used a document system that resembles the class list in many ways, but was an integrated part of an instrument that these days is rare to come across: the teacher’s calendar. The teacher’s calendar in itself is not too rare to come across, but judging from my experience it is not commonly used as a primary document system for assessment anymore. In fact, when the teacher and I sat down in the teachers’ staff room and she brought up her teacher’s calendars, her colleague exclaimed: ‘I don’t understand how you dare to have a system like that! I would be way too afraid to lose it’. Her colleague’s tone was friendly and without judgment, and the teacher with the calendar laughed and said that she had used this system for 15 years now and that she saw no reason to change a system that works.

As we can see from image 7.8, the assessment pages of the calendar strongly resemble a class list (except that in the calendar you have to fill in the names of the pupils yourself). In fact, the way that she used the calendar resembled how the teacher described above used the class list. When she sat down, she took out two teacher’s calendars, one from the previous year and one from this year, and opened them on the assessment pages for class ‘7C’ and ‘8C’ (the same class, consecutive years). These pages were already largely filled in. At the top of the page, she had written which class the page referred to. In the topmost row, in the cells following ‘Namn/Ämne’ (‘Name/Subject’), she had written the names of essays or tests that the pupils had done. The grading criteria were not written out in this document system, but the teacher knew exactly which grading criteria the essays and works were meant to test so writing out the grading criteria would be superfluous. After she had taken out the teacher’s calendars, she went on to retrieve a bunch of plastic folders, containing printed copies of student essays and tests. Then she got out a post-it note and wrote ‘8C’ on it and stuck it on one of the plastic folders. When all the right documents were in place, she began the process of grading each student based on their total performance that semester. Some grades were jotted down in a matter of seconds and others took a lot longer (one pupil she temporarily 'gave up on' and said that she would return to later). When she hesitated, she frequently began to look around at the other documents around her – the teacher's calendar from the previous year, showing how the pupil performed then, and the printed versions of the student's work from the semester. If she was still unsure, she turned to her colleague, a Swedish teacher. Usually, it was enough that she said the name of a pupil and the Swedish teacher would catch on and give an update on the pupil's performance and progression in her own subject.

As I sat there, I was puzzled by these conversational exchanges. They went both ways – both teachers at intervals raised various pupils – but it was never framed as a conversation where they were asking each other for help. Nor did they give the impression that anything had been 'solved' after the conversation was finished. To me, it seemed the conversations ended rather abruptly and that they returned to their paper without reaching any conclusion about a particular pupil. Later, it transpired that they used each more as a 'sounding board' than aids for deciding on a specific grade. The conversation between these two teachers while grading was in reality a continuation of other conversations they have had throughout the semester. They have talked about these pupils many times before during the semester and these previous conversations are a kind of backdrop to the conversations that I heard. This suggests that part of the professional knowledge and experience that the teacher relied on was a shared knowledge, grounded both in their knowledge of the specific grading criteria, but also on shared knowledge of the pupils themselves. The significance of this kind of knowledge for assessment is emphasised by the Swedish National Agency for Education when they suggest that teachers use collegial support to make assessments (Skolverket, 2022d).

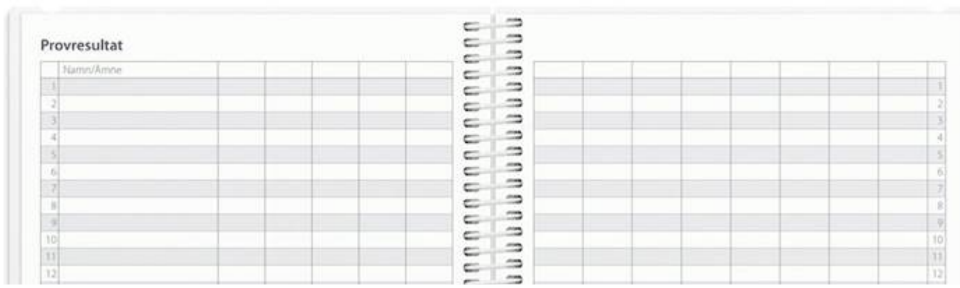

Image 7.8
Teacher's calendar, assessment page (Office Depot, 2023).

Knowledge Within and Beyond the Document System

A significant feature of the majority of the document systems accounted for above (with the notable exception of the elaborate, analogue ring binder) is that none of the systems strive to be a *total* or *self-sufficient* system for assessing pupils' knowledge. Most teachers referenced a kind of back-and-forth between their document system, the pupil's assessed work, general impressions of the pupil's development and skills and conversations with colleagues. The idiosyncratic document system is within this way of working, *one of* the tools that the teachers use for assessment. In many cases, it helps create some kind of overview of how the pupils have performed at different points of the academic year. Some teachers preferred digital versions (mostly through a spreadsheet) and others preferred printed or analogue versions. Some teachers used slightly different systems depending on which subject they were assessing. All systems had ways of integrating knowledge that was not directly accessible to someone who had not followed the teacher's work throughout the year. For example, with the class list, the teacher could look at the document and know how to scale the various assessments that the pupil had done (national tests weighed heavy, home assignments weighed significantly less and so on). In addition came all the knowledge about the pupils that the teacher had accumulated throughout the months of teaching but that generally was not documented – *how* pupils worked with their assignments, their contributions to classroom discussions and problem solving at a group level, their progression and so on.

In the next section, it is argued that the idiosyncratic document systems' ability to integrate, reflect or work alongside information from beyond the documents themselves is central to their use and value to teachers. Concomitantly, the digital learning platforms' inability to do this is at the core of understanding why teachers find them difficult to work with. However, the digital learning platforms inability to do so must be understood in relation to their additional purposes – such as communication, knowledge production and administration – all of which require a certain level of standardisation of the assessment interfaces, which in turn places certain material demands on these interfaces. Standardisation, a material as well as conceptual practice (Bowker & Leigh Star, 2000), makes the digital learning platforms ideal for knowledge production, management and communication with guardians, but simultaneously poses a serious problem for teachers when they need to consider the unpredictable, complex and layered task of making overall assessments.

Managing Complexity and the Limits of the Standardised Form

So far, we have looked at how assessment of pupils' knowledge is regulated at a national level and the assessment tools available for teachers through digital learning platforms and the teachers' own document systems. We have seen how the digital learning platform interfaces' standardised assessment tools generally are well-suited for the purposes of management, communication and knowledge production. However, they have proven insufficient for the task of making assessments and their affordances are ill-tailored not only to how teachers assess but also to the realities of their workdays. In relation to this, we have explored how teachers' own document systems work around the issues inherent in the digital learning platforms. Importantly, we have seen that much assessment is based on information *beyond* the content of the document systems themselves. The idiosyncratic document systems do not generally aim to be a total or self-sufficient system. This makes sense if we understand it in relation to how the task of assessment is outlined. The process of making an *overall assessment*, which is emphasised by the Swedish National Agency for Education and is echoed by many of my informants, by definition requires one to rely on a broad and first-hand knowledge of a pupil's performance over a semester. Why cannot the digital learning platforms' assessment interfaces help the teachers in making these kinds of assessments? I argue that an essential part of the answer can be found by looking at how the corollaries that the standardised form of the assessment interfaces incur, affect their uses for the purpose of assessment. Simultaneously, standardisation is essential for accomplishing the *other* purposes of the digital learning platforms.

Classifying and Standardising Knowledge

Assessing and grading in accordance with the national curriculum is essentially a kind of classification work. In their book *Sorting Things Out: Classification and Its Consequences* (2000), Bowker and Star explain that classification systems appear as complete systems with mutually exclusive categories that are based on consistent classificatory principles. Teachers classify pupils' knowledge according to standardised criteria for what this knowledge should entail. The classificatory principles of the system are outlined by the National Curriculum: knowledge is classified by way of subjects (such as English, Music or Arts) that are divided into subcategories of skills that are deemed relevant for the subject. In reality, we know that classification systems are never as smoothly navigated as they appear: items will fall outside the classificatory principle, some items do not fit into mutually exclusive categories and some things require quite some tinkering and creativity to be able to fit into a class of things (Bowker & Leigh Star, 2000). As we have seen, in practice teachers rely on many things outside the wording of the grading criteria in order to make assessments. Furthermore, there is always a tension between imposed standards and local contingencies; no classification system or standardisation tool can ever account for the range of complexities, varieties and ambiguities found in the world that the classification scheme refers to.

One central insight of Bowker and Star's book is that classifications and standardisations are *material* as well as symbolic (Bowker & Leigh Star, 2000, p. 39). That is, they are not merely abstract concepts but are actualised and operate differently according to how they are constituted materially. For instance, in the digital learning platforms, the placement of the grading criteria in grid-systems which demand box-ticking has the effect that the digital learning platforms visually and practically accentuate some features of a classificatory system, such as the mutually exclusive nature of the categories and the aspiration to be 'a total coverage of the world it describes' (Bowker & Leigh Star, 2000, p. 10), making it impossible to integrate that which does not already fit within the logic of the system. That the system is complete is accentuated by the lack of possible actions *outside* or *beside* the grid system; all information must pertain to the grids, anything that cannot be linked to the grids is by default superfluous.

To complicate matters, the grading criteria are not entirely mutually exclusive, even though the grid systems and colour schemes sometimes leave us with this impression. The grading criteria are specified for grades E, C and A and these are the categories that are represented in the grid systems. A pupil's knowledge can, in fact, be categorised as being *between* two grids. For instance, a pupil's knowledge can be deemed to be between a C and an A (it cannot, however, be deemed to be *both* A and C, nor can it be deemed to be beyond the scope of the grade system F-A). In the digital learning platforms, the ambiguity inherent in the grading criteria is materialised through colour schemes or comment sections. As we have seen, however, these features are not considered sufficient from the viewpoint of most teachers. It can seem, then, that it is the standardised form's inability to handle ambiguity, complexity and variation in a messy reality that makes the digital learning platforms so difficult to work with. However, we do well to remember that the teachers' own document systems *share* many of the same characteristics as the systems in the digital learning platforms. However, I suggest that one of the issues that the idiosyncratic document systems try to solve is the problem that digital learning platforms treat all ambiguity *uniformly.* That is, they assume that an ambiguity is just an ambiguity and that all ambiguities can be expressed in a standardised way. For instance, that they can be expressed in text-form in a comment section or that they can be reflected through a certain colour. In the next section, I try to demonstrate how the teachers' own document systems try to work beyond this by making different kinds of local contingencies *visible* in the document systems. It is exactly the features of the idiosyncratic document systems that incorporate and make visible local knowledge (such as references to specific tests or idiosyncratic symbols) that make them virtually impossible to extract standardised knowledge from.

Addressing Visibility Issues

What all idiosyncratic document systems have in common is that they contain information and are structured in ways that mean that they are only properly legible by a teacher who has particular knowledge about that group and the work that they have done. That is, the systems *require* knowledge from beyond the systems themselves. Much of the work that the idiosyncratic document systems do can be understood as ways of making particular things *visible* to the teacher while assessing. The notions of 'seeing', 'recognising' ('få syn på' in Swedish) or 'making visible' were reiterated frequently by teachers when they were explaining their own document systems, and often paired with the words 'easily' or 'quickly'. For instance, 'in this way, I can easily see what the pupil has done and how they have performed'.

Once again, we can make use of Bowker and Star's work to make sense of this. Arriving at categories and standards, they argue, implies deciding what will be visible or invisible (Bowker & Leigh Star, 2000, p. 44). I argue that an important part of this decision process is deciding *for whom* something needs to be visible. As previously discussed, a central concern and purpose for the digital learning platforms is to make the assessment process and outcome visible to management, guardians and pupils. To make things visible in this way requires that one removes those signs, symbols and features that require idiosyncratic interpretation or knowledge from beyond what is communicated in the document. Furthermore, another central concern of the digital learning platforms, that was also mentioned earlier, is to make things comparable. To make things comparable also requires a high degree of uniformity in the language and style in which something is presented which *also* has the effect of removing traces of variation and local contingencies. To cut the digital learning platforms some slack, the very scope of what they aim to do in itself makes their task an exceedingly difficult one: digital learning platforms are the kinds of objects that 'must satisfy members of communities or organisations with conflicting requirements' (Bowker & Leigh Star, 2000). To expect that one system can satisfy the requirements and uses that teachers, parents, pupils *and* management have of the assessment process might simply be utopian. It would seem as if the multiple purposes of the digital learning platforms place such demands on the materiality of the systems that it becomes impossible to fulfil all purposes – and it comes at the expense of teachers' work with assessing.

If a central concern for the digital learning platforms is to make things visible for *others,* a central concern for the idiosyncratic document systems is to make things visible for *the teacher themselves.* The sole purpose of the idiosyncratic document systems is to help teachers assess pupils' knowledge in a just way. As we have seen, teachers have many different ways of making aspects of the assessment process visible to themselves; some are dependent upon which subject you teach or what is being assessed (for instance, one teacher had different document systems for lab work and written tests, even within the same subject). For many teachers, what their document systems convey is only legible to them when they use the document systems *together* with other documents and strategies, such as experience-based and undocumented knowledge.

Concluding Remarks

I introduced this chapter by presenting the reader with an empirical enigma: why do teachers develop their own idiosyncratic document systems for assessing pupils parallel to the mandatory assessment tools available in the digital learning platform? It would seem, I stated, that the teachers were setting themselves up for double documentation work. However, this was not taken to be the case because teachers did not actively use the assessment tools in the digital learning platforms for the purpose of assessing. Rather, filling in the assessments in the digital learning platforms, the relentless 'clicking' as many teachers referred to it, was something that teachers generally did *after* the assessments had been made. For the actual process of assessing, teachers relied on their own idiosyncratic document systems. The focus of the issue, then, became centred on understanding *why* the digital learning platforms' assessment interfaces fell short in providing the teachers with a tool that could help them in making assessments of pupils' knowledge. It was suggested that the *multiple purposes* of the digital platforms placed certain material demands on the interfaces of the assessment tools that made them unsuited for the task of making assessments. All of the additional purposes of the digital learning platforms required the platforms to – in some way – make the assessment process comparable and visible to others. That is, the templates needed a certain degree of standardisation.

The standardisation that marks the digital learning platforms, however, is incompatible with the work that teachers are expected to do while assessing; the requirement to make *overall* assessments that rely on experience, expertise and professionality ('tacit knowledge' to follow Polanyi (1958)) means that teachers need to have document systems that can integrate or reflect this type of knowledge. Furthermore, for this reason most teachers do not consider their document systems as all-encompassing or self-sufficient systems for making assessments – a significant portion of the process of assessing will ultimately be located in knowledge and experience that goes beyond what a document system can reflect, be it idiosyncratic or platform-based. In this way, it is worth reflecting upon the fact that the idiosyncratic document systems do not *solve* the problem of the platforms' inability to handle complexity, variation, uncertainty or experience, they merely *manage* them. To *document* an *overall assessment* might in itself be an unrealistic aspiration. Put differently, documents pose material challenges to the task of knowledge assessment as envisioned by the education authorities.

8. Documents as Evidence

In this last chapter of the thesis, we follow the documents out of the school setting and into a public space to explore how documents become evidence for verifying descriptions about events and actions at schools. The aim of this chapter is to examine how documents, which we have seen already have multiple purposes within the education system, are also used for the purpose of providing proof of action, lack of action or insufficient action by teachers, school leaders, school organisers or politicians. This chapter differs from the previous chapters insofar as we leave the setting of particular schools and therefore the setting where the documents are produced and consider how they sometimes can become reified as vessels of truth about what goes on within the school setting. In this process, the conflicting attitudes toward documents, the challenging translation of everyday schools activities into the format of a document, and the partiality of documents' truth claims disappear or become 'black-boxed'. Instead, the documents become pieces in the construction of an account about what has, and what has not, transpired at a school.

In doing so, we also bring in a new actor that stands outside the education system, but whose task it is to pay attention to school affairs and who often do so through consulting the documents produced by and about schools: the media. In chapter 2 of this thesis, I briefly introduced the concept of juridification to help frame and explain some of the changes in Swedish school governance. Juridification entails a change in governance that implies that legal reasoning and issue framing becomes more prominent (see for example Rosén et al., 2020). A central part of this process is that schools, including teachers, have become increasingly accountable to the governmental school authorities, such as the Swedish Schools Inspectorate. Within this line of governing, the documents that teachers and schools produce can be understood as having a particular controlling purpose, namely that of evidence or proof of whether or not teachers and schools have fulfilled their educational duty towards pupils. Many teachers referred to the practice of documenting for the sake of covering one's back ('hålla ryggen fri') when describing documentation whose primary purpose was to prove that something had happened or that they had acted correctly. For instance, a few teachers that I spoke to had their own archival system for saving emails between them and certain parents that they thought might take their complaints to the school leaders or the Swedish Schools Inspectorate.

The agencies of the education authorities are not the only actors through whom schools and teachers can become accountable. Journalists and media outlets play an important role in monitoring public institutions and fiscal activity and are in this capacity cornerstones in securing democratic governance. Some researchers have pointed out that media outlets are also key actors in defining and framing issues within the school sector and that there is a pervasive notion of the Swedish school as being in 'constant crisis' (Hultén, 2019; Landahl et al., 2021). The same researchers have pointed out how a school's reputation has become more significant following the marketisation reforms of the early 1990s (see chapter two of this thesis). To illustrate, Swedish newspaper *Dagens Nyheter* recently published an editorial titled 'Welcome to just another ordinary news week in the Sweden of school scandals' (DN Ledare, 2024b). Journalists investigate issues pertaining to the school system at large, pupils' achievement, and work environment, but also issues pertaining to individually named schools (for some recent examples, see Ärlemyr, 2022; DN Ledare, 2024b; Selander, 2024; SvD Ledare, 2024). It is not uncommon for documents to be called upon to verify the claims made by the journalists or by the actors that feature in the pieces. It should be mentioned that the teachers' union magazine *Vi lärare* frequently publishes articles that support the image of a school in 'crisis' (cf. Bergling, 2024d; Olsson, 2024a; Vi lärare, 2020; Wallin, 2019).

This chapter does not offer an overview or an overarching argument about the role of media in shaping school issues or documentation. Rather, it zooms in on one specific case of media attention to explore the role of documents in building and legitimising a convincing narrative about events in the past. The case, a Swedish investigative journalism television program that gained widespread attention in 2022, aimed to expose misconduct and neglect at an identified Swedish school. Documents, as we will see, were crucial components not only for knowing what had and had not happened at the school, but also for evaluating what should have been done.

'Kalla fakta': An Investigative Television Program

None of the schools that I was in contact with were under scrutiny by any school authority during the time of my research (at least to my knowledge). However, in 2022 a Swedish television show called *Kalla fakta* ('Cold Facts') broadcast an episode titled 'The Children on the Fourth Floor' ('Barnen på fjärde våningen'). *Kalla fakta* is a television program where investigative journalism is employed with the aim of scrutinising and exposing politicians, power holders and social phenomena (TV4, 2024). In the episode 'The Children on the Fourth Floor', the journalists describe that they reveal how 'a municipal compulsory school hides away pupils who are in need of extra support. This has devastating consequences for the children and they end up in a life of crime' (TV4, 2022). The episode was nominated for a journalistic award by The Swedish Association of Investigative Journalism (FGJ, 2022) and a Swedish television production award, Kristallen

(SVT, 2022). It was also the target of sharp criticism by the teachers who taught at the school in question (Hedman, 2021). The teachers, through their local union representative, accused the program of giving a false depiction of the school, for not having spoken to any of the school's teachers nor visited the school. The program was broadcast during a period of time when I was collecting data and the teachers that I spoke to about the documentary were generally sceptical towards the program and what they perceived as an unnuanced depiction of how issues are dealt with in schools (none of these teachers had any connection to the school being investigated in the program). My purpose here is not to evaluate the veracity of the claims of either the producers of the program or the counterclaims of the teachers at the school. I do not know any more about the situation concerning these pupils than has been reported by the program and the following media attention, defensive and negative, about the case. My purpose is rather to explicate how documents are featured in telling the story of mismanagement and neglect of pupils in need of special support at a particular school. That is, how documents sometimes feature as time capsules through which we can gain access to comprehensive and unabridged knowledge about an occurrence. In the TV program documents – their quality or lack thereof – are several times used as proof of the school's mismanagement of the pupils who were removed from their classrooms and put in 'the room on the fourth floor'.

'The Children on the Fourth Floor': The Anatomy of a Factual Account

My reason for bringing this episode of *Kalla fakta* to the fore is to explore how documents are used as tools, or references, in formulating truth-claims. My method for doing this resembles that of Dorothy Smith in her acclaimed text '"K Is Mentally Ill": The Anatomy of a Factual Account' (Smith, 1978, the observant reader may already have noticed my appropriation of Smith's title). That is, I try to illustrate how documents are used to transform 'a set of original and actual events into the currency of facts' (p. 24), the facts in this case being the wrongdoings of the school staff.

In Smith's essay, she takes as her point of departure an account of a person who came to realise that her friend, 'K', was mentally ill. This account was relayed to Smith by one of her students who had been involved in one of Smith's research projects. The research project's focus was on how the lay person comes to define someone as mentally ill (Smith, 1978, p. 25). The student had interviewed a person about a time when they thought that someone they knew might be mentally ill. It is the student's write-up of this interview that is the account that Smith bases her analysis upon. Smith's main point is that the narrator's presentation of how she came to know that 'K' was mentally ill was convincing not primarily for the events it relayed, but how these events were organised in the account, the way they related to each other and the way they related to established cultural frames of reference. Smith's point is to illustrate how the 'fact' of K's mental illness is established by uncovering the 'structure of the conceptual model which I make use of in recognizing that [mental illness] is what it is' (Smith, 1978, p. 27). In what she refers to as a social organisation analysis of the account, she illustrates how the reader's recognition of K's mental illness as a case of mental illness is built into the organisation of events in the account. It is done so both through the structure which relates the original events described in the text and 'the authorization rules which instruct the reader/hearer on what criteria to use in determining the adequacy of the description and credibility of the account' (Smith, 1978, p. 50). In my analysis, as in Smith's, the purpose is not to arrive at a conclusion concerning the claims (or counterclaims) made by the stakeholders. I depart from Smith in that I do not take the entirety of the narrative into account. Rather, I focus on the role of documents in producing this account. Smith asks, among other things, 'who is allocated the privilege of definition' of what has happened (p. 33). I expand this by asking *what* is allocated this privilege.

Documents, sometimes even without direct reference to their content, can be drawn upon by the journalistic team in order to authorise their account of the school's transgressions as being factually correct. To follow Smith, actual events are not facts in themselves: 'it is the use of proper procedure for categorizing events which transforms them into facts. A fact is something that is already categorized, already worked up to conform to the model of what the fact should be like.' (p. 35). As we will see shortly, referencing documents is an intrinsic part of the 'proper procedure' which transforms events into facts.

To reiterate, the factual claim that is being presented in the documentary is that 'a municipal compulsory school hides away ('städar undan') pupils who are in need of special support. This has devastating consequences for the children and they end up in a life of crime' (TV4, 2022). The 'hiding away' refers to a small room on the fourth floor where some pupils were sent for specialised education in a small group ('särskild undervisningsgrupp'). The documentary features a few primary interview persons. There are two previously employed teaching assistants ('elevassistenter') at the school who worked with the pupils, a handful of pupils, and one parent of a pupil features to a lesser extent. Early in the documentary we learn that the school has been reported to the Swedish Schools Inspectorate. By the time documents are introduced in the program (about 18 minutes in), the viewer has already been presented with the interview persons' experiences of negligence and mismanagement. These experiences are presented as coherent and consistent, thus aiding in establishing these as accounts of events as they actually happened. When the documents are brought into the account, they are used to authorise the narratives of the interview persons that we have already been presented with. Our interest here is in exploring how this authorisation of the narrative happens. What kinds of documents are referred to? What kind of relationship between document and the event it refers to is necessary for this authorisation to happen? How do documents feature in the social organisation of the account in the documentary?

Part of the reason why documents hold such a privileged position in authorising claims about an event is the relationship that they are often assumed to have to the event that they refer back to. It is assumed that documents reflect truthfully the reality to which they refer. Indeed, they are taken as coterminous with it. This assumption about the documents is what grants them the status of evidence of the occurrence of an event. That they hold this position, in turn, authorises the account of the school's mismanagement so that it can be 'treated by others as *what has happened*' (Smith, 1978, p. 33, italics in original). Consider for instance this excerpt from the program:

> 'We [the journalists] request the student files from the school and the investigations from the School Inspectorate in order to examine how the headteacher has acted during that time' (TV4, 2022, 24:15 min, journalist speaking).

Student files, in this iteration, become time capsules through which the journalists can look back in time and determine how the headteacher has, or has not, acted in a specific period of time. This, of course, has the effect that the documents also have the power to ascribe or deflect blame. If the information they find in the documents supports the claims they aim to make, then the documents are – as true reflections of past events – powerful tools for authorising those claims. In this account, documents also have the additional power of having been written by someone other than the people producing the account. The documents, then, are 'uncontaminated by previous prompting or definitional work which might be interpreted as a source of bias' (Smith, 1978, p. 37).

Another example of this is when the journalists contrast what the school claims with what the journalists have found to be true in the documents:

> 'Outwardly, the specialised education in a small group has been an effort to help the children who need more support, but when we read the internal minutes from the staff meetings at the school it is more about hiding away ('städa undan') the children.' (TV4, 2022, 36:43 min, journalist speaking)

In this section the documents not only have the status of evidence, the evidence is also presented in such a way as to expose someone (who exactly? The passive structure of the sentence obfuscates this) as liars. We never learn in the program who are making the counter-claims, through which medium or even what is meant with 'outwardly' (who on the outside are these claims being directed towards?). We will return to the role of contrast structures and obfuscation of information later, suffice now to take note of them. Here, we will linger shortly on the importance of the *organisation of the narrative* – that is, the way that pieces of information are relayed in relation to each other as well as to the general cultural framework that the presumed viewer/reader/listener has. The quote above continues like this:

> ‘During a meeting in 2017, it transpires that a boy in compulsory school (‘mellanstadiet’) is negatively affected by sitting secluded [from the rest of the class]. Teachers report that he has deteriorated (‘blivit sämre’) during his week in the specialised education group. Simultaneously, there is more time over for educating the other pupils when the boy is not in the classroom. In the meeting minutes it says: “if the other pupils are to get a chance to achieve the goals for the education, then he should be placed in the specialised education group again.”’ (TV4, 2022, 36:53 min, journalist speaking)

When we read this continuation of the quote, it becomes clear that it is crucial that the ‘fact’ of the lies and the ulterior motive of hiding away the pupils has been already divulged to us at the start because when we consider the rest of the narrative on this topic, it is not univocally clear that ‘hiding away’ is what is going on. A different account of the content of the meeting minutes seems possible. For instance, an account that establishes the difficult position of teachers in having to choose between the best practice for the group or the individual. Furthermore, we do not know that the boy would *not* have deteriorated in the classroom. One alternative account could even have described a conscientious teacher who made sure that their pupils were guaranteed their right to safety and peace to study (Education Act SFS, 2010:800 chapter 5) and made sure that a pupil who caused turmoil for the other pupils was removed from that setting. The point is that in organising the events in the account, the citation from the meeting minutes was *preceded* by the presentation of an interpretation made as a factual account, *precluding* other interpretations. If we did not already *know* (that is, had we not already been told) that the meeting minutes had proved that the outward story was false, we would perhaps not as readily have reached and accepted that conclusion.

In correspondence with how the presence of documents is able to *prove* action, a lack of documents is taken as evidence of a *lack* of action:

> ‘The child’s need for support should be assessed and a detailed action programme should be drawn up and followed up. But at [the school] there is often no documentation that the child has been placed in a smaller education group. There is no plan for how to help the child succeed in school.’ (TV4, 2022, 20:38 min, journalist speaking)

Here, the lack of documents is presented as synonymous with a lack of plan of action for the pupils. It is implied that *had* there been a documented plan or a goal, the problem would have been amended. However, later in the program we learn that the assumption about the correspondence between document and reality goes further than merely proving or disproving an event or a version, the *quality* of the document also corresponds to the *quality* of the action: insufficient documentation is evidence of insufficient action. The journalists bring one of the student files they had retrieved, an action programme for one of the pupils who is interviewed in the program, to a Swedish university to show to a professor in Educational Science.

Overall, the professor is unimpressed with how the document is written and its content. The document lacks concrete measures and it has not been evaluated, she tells the journalist. It is, in the words of the professor, a 'scandal' and a hinderance for the boy's development ('det stjälper honom'). The purpose with consulting the professor in Educational Science is clearly to bring authority to their account of the school's mismanagement and negligence. What we should take notice of, however, is that the professor – at least to the viewer's knowledge – has no other access to the events at the school than through the documents (and presumably the journalists' account of the events). It naturally follows, in this account, that insufficient documentation proves that the action to which it referred was equally insufficient.

We might add something here about authority. It is intriguing that we in this case are not presented with any content at all from the document itself. Taken together with the authority of the Professor of Education Science, the authority of the document speaks for itself, even without reference to a single word in the document. The power of documents to authorise an account can therefore be seen as derived either from the document's relationship to the thing to which it refers, a relationship where the former grants direct access to the latter, *or* from the document's relationship to other institutions or symbols of power within our cultural references, such as the judgment of a Professor or a connection to jurisdiction (such as the Education Act).

Equally important, however, is an awareness that the power of documents to authorise an account also stems from the structure of the narrative through which the account is relayed.[52] Dorothy Smith demonstrates how an effective technique for providing a convincing account (that is, an account that pre-empts other accounts of the same events) is the use of contrast structures. Contrast structures are those 'where a description of K's behaviour is preceded by a statement which supplies the instructions for how to see that behaviour anomalous' (Smith, 1978, p. 39). In relation to our case in 'The Children on the Fourth Floor', we have already seen an example of such a structure in use:

> 'The child's need for support should be assessed and a detailed action programme should be drawn up and followed up. But at [the school] there is often no documentation that the child has been placed in a smaller education group.' (TV4, 2022, 20:38 min, journalist speaking)

Here we are presented with the jurisdiction of pupils' right to special support and, directly following, the behaviour of the school staff is *contrasted* to this jurisdiction, implied by the conjunction 'but'. This contrast structure lends authority to the

[52] Dorothy Smith emphasises several times in her text that the production of sociological text and analysis are not beyond the analytic method she presents in her essay. Indeed, a major point in her text is to remind us of the co-productive nature of sociological text. Transforming social action into sociological data must also structure events and ideas in a way as to present them as fact (Smith 1978:23).

account of the school's behaviour as deviant. However, what we really learn is merely that in an unspecified but majority of cases, there is no documentation that states that a child has been placed in a smaller education group. An assumption that can be made from this, then, is that in some cases, the pupil's need to be placed in a smaller education group *has been* documented. Does the presence of documentation justify the placement of the pupil in a smaller education group in this case? The structure of the account is such that questions like this do not need to be addressed.

Another thing that was just hinted at in the previous section is the way that the narrative is organised so that 'items which might serve to suggest the opposite are […] relegated to the background [and] not constructed in the same way. They are merely, as it were, lying about' (Smith, 1978, p. 37). One example is when the narrative focuses on reports from the Swedish Schools Inspectorate. The journalists inform us that the school has over the past decade received 'sharp criticism' from the Swedish Schools Inspectorate for failing to provide support to pupils who have fallen behind. The journalists refer to three instances where parents have reported the school to the Swedish Schools Inspectorate due to failing efforts to aid pupils with special support needs in the period 2011-2018.[53] They also refer to a regular inspection that the Swedish Schools Inspectorate conducted at the school in 2021:

> 'In 2021 the Swedish Schools Inspectorate conducts a more large-scale oversight of the school. The criticism is the same as it has been for at least ten years: [The school] does not provide sufficient help to children who need extra support.' (TV4, 2022, 32:44 min, journalist speaking)

The report is referred to in a way that refers back to the previous information about misconduct that we have been presented with in the documentary. The report is thus referred to in a way that reinforces the veracity of the information we have previously been presented with by the teaching assistants and the former pupils. We are given the impression that the Swedish Schools Inspectorate has presented the school with the same criticisms for an entire decade and that the school has failed to rectify their mistakes. This account is consistent with the other information that we have received throughout the program. The Swedish Schools Inspectorate, being a government agency, through their reports serve as a strong verification of the account given in the program. We assume that the Swedish Schools Inspectorate's critique is in line with the critique that has been presented previously in the documentary, meaning that the Swedish Schools Inspection has found issues with action programmes, specialised education groups and investigations ('utredningar') at the school. This, however, is not the case if we look at the oversight report itself. In the report that the journalists refer to, the summarised assessment sounds like this:

[53] From August 2021 it was no longer possible as a parent to report a school and be guaranteed to have the Swedish Schools Inspectorate investigate it.

> ‘In its inspection, The Swedish Schools Inspectorate notes that there are several shortcomings in the organisation. The inspection shows that the education is not fully adapted to the needs of newly arrived pupils.[54] The inspection also shows that there are *shortcomings in the work with additional adjustments and special support.* The investigation shows that *not all pupils who are in need of support in the form of additional adjustments are given such support and that pupils’ need for special support is not investigated promptly.* The Swedish Schools Inspectorate therefore orders the school organiser to take measures to remedy the deficiencies identified. *In the other areas that the Swedish Schools Inspectorate has examined[55], it has not emerged other than that the school’s work fulfils the statutory requirements.’* (Skolinspektionen, 2021, p. 2, italics added)

The shortcomings that the Swedish Schools Inspectorate have identified are in fact much more specific and limited than we were given the impression of in the documentary’s account. Additional adjustments are just one kind of support that the school is obliged to offer pupils who are at risk of not reaching the education goals. Additional adjustments are, however, *not* the documents that have been discussed the most frequently throughout the program (this is no wonder as additional adjustments are generally given by the teacher in the classroom and teachers have not featured at all in the documentary). The shortcoming in terms of special support that the oversight report refers to is framed as one of *time*, that it takes too long to investigate the need, rather than content of the action programmes or absence of investigations, which has been raised as issues in the account of the documentary. On closer inspection, then, the oversight report does not unproblematically confirm the account that we have been presented with in the documentary. The report actually contains much information that is inconsistent with the account about the school’s mismanagement that we have been presented with. That is, the report assesses that that the school *does* meet the requirements on a number of issues that the journalists have previously stated that the school *does not* do. For instance, the report concludes that: ‘pupils who are in need of special support *are* given support in a way that aligns with what the investigation shows that they need’, ‘special support measures *are* followed up and evaluated’ and that the ‘education is constructed so that all pupils are ensured a school environment that is characterised by safety and peace to study’ (Skolinspektionen, 2021, p. 8, italics added).

At this point, it may be appropriate to reiterate that my aim here is not to evaluate the veracity of the claims made by either the Swedish Schools Inspectorate or the journalists behind the TV program. The Swedish Schools Inspectorate report’s

[54] ‘Newly arrived pupils’ (‘nyanlända’) refer to children who have recently migrated to Sweden.

[55] The areas that were inspected correspond to chapters of the Education Act: The education is adapted to newly arrived pupils’ needs; Additional adjustments and special support; Safety, a calm learning environment and measures for counteracting degrading behaviour. Specialised education groups, one of the areas that the account in the documentary critiques, are treated under the same area as ‘special support’ in the Education Act but it is unclear from the report whether these were under investigation or not.

relationship to the actual events to which it refers is no more complete or accurate by virtue of being a government report. My point is to illustrate how documents are powerful objects of truth claiming, especially when they are related to in a way that reinforces claims that have already been put forward as facts (Smith, 1978). A different social organisation of the account would result in a different view of the factual events emerging. The oversight report might well have been referenced in a way that made a claim that the school does meet the legal requirements to support pupils in need in a majority of cases. As to these different accounts' relationship to the actualities of peoples' – both pupils' and staffs' – lived experiences at the school, it is anyone's guess. What is noteworthy is what kind of access to real events is required in order to make factual claims about an event (of course, access to events in the past must always be mediated in some way as they are never directly accessible) and the way that factual claims emerge from how the story itself is organised more than their relationship to a lived reality out there (Smith, 1978).

That documents stand in as evidence for action, lack of action or insufficient action is perhaps best illustrated in a live chat conversation between one of the journalists and the headteacher at the school. The headteacher had declined to be interviewed in person but agreed to reply to written questions. The viewer sees the written interview as chat boxes that appear over the video that shows the journalist typing. The journalist narrates the dialogue:

> <u>Journalist</u>: So you knew that it was worse for pupils, knowledge-wise, to sit in the specialised education group, which **is documented that you said** [in meeting minutes from a staff meeting in 2017]. But you placed pupils there anyway. Why?
>
> <u>Headteacher</u>: We always depart from the **Education Act**. I emphasised the importance that a possible specialised education group should be well organised. So it's not that pupils automatically perform poorer academically in a specialised education group.
>
> <u>Journalist</u>: That explanation **does not match the quote** from you. You state that things tend to downhill ('gå åt skogen') for the pupils you place in the specialised education group, but that it gets better for the others in the class.
>
> <u>Headteacher</u>: When it comes to the meeting from 17 October 2017, I can't possibly remember exactly who has said what or even which pupil was involved. But in general, I can say that placing a pupil in a specialised education group is not done lightly. **An action programme** is also developed for the pupil.
>
> <u>Journalist</u>: But the **Swedish Schools Inspectorate** has criticised you for not carrying out **proper investigations and action programmes**. When you haven't investigated the need and prepared an action programme for a pupil, how can you decide whether it is right to place the pupil in the specialised education group?

Headteacher: We have listened to this criticism and established much **better routines for investigations and action programmes**.

Journalist: But you have not listened to the Swedish Schools Inspection's critique. I have reviewed the **Schools Inspection's assessments** of how you have handled children who have fallen behind over the past ten years. For ten years, **reports have come in** from worried parents who have seen how their children have been deprived of their education because the school has not given the child the support they need in their school work.

Headteacher: Every time we have been criticised, we have always done our best **to improve our routines**. Obviously, we have not been entirely successful during the years that you mention. What I can say is that today we have a well-functioning student health team that **regularly works with investigations and action programmes, special support** and staff coaching ('handledning').

A second journalist narrates but there is no text box for the viewer to see what the headteacher writes: [The headteacher] admits that pupils in the specialised education group have been sent home but that this has been during the last lesson of the day and not on a regular basis.

Journalist writing again: Such a pupil is entitled to the same education as everyone else. This means that you are in **breach of the Education Act**, regardless of whether you do it regularly or as isolated events.

Headteacher: As every headteacher knows, it sometimes happens that it is simply not possible to cover sick leave. If this happens, pupils are always offered compensation in the form of designated study help ('läxhjälp') and/or holiday school ('lovskola').

(TV4, 2022, 55:00-58:10 min, bold type added)

The written conversation between the journalist and the headteacher continues back-and-forth for another few minutes. The dialogue reads a bit like a battle where each party is armed with documents. In fact, they are even armed with the same documents but reign blows on each other's account by referring to them in different ways. In the broader account of the documentary, however, the journalist has the upper hand as their ordering of events has structured the account up until this moment. The way that these documents have featured previously in the documentary then, informs how the viewer is likely to perceive the dialogue.

Concluding remarks

In this chapter we have explored how documents potentially serve a purpose for actors outside the educational setting to investigate the ongoings inside the educational setting. To use documents as evidence of how events have unfolded in this way relies on some assumptions concerning the documents' relationship to the thing to which they refer, as being one of direct access. The relationship goes further than a mere confirmation of action or non-action; the *quality* of the document reflects the quality of the actions it refers to. This grants documents a particular authority to ascribe or deflect blame as well as to transform events into the currency of social facts (Smith 1978). In fact, documents are pivotal in the construction of a credible account of what had happened at the school in question. What is more, taking inspiration from Dorothy Smith's attempt at creating a social organisation analysis of a factual account, it became clear that the use of documents as evidence also relied on how documents were presented, the context in relation to which other stories were relayed, what they were contrasted to, who wrote them and who granted them authority. In this way, we have looked both at the structure which relates the events and the authorization rules which instruct the reader/hearer on what criteria to use in determining the adequacy of the description and credibility of the account' (Smith, 1978, p. 50).

Most of the document requirements referred to in the account are legal requirements. If a document is absent or insufficient (which is one of the things that the Swedish Schools Inspection controls), there has been a breach in the legally required document demand. Throughout the account above, however, it is also assumed that the task itself has not been accomplished. This assumption is not unique to the account that we were presented with above but is one that is fairly common when school actions and occurrences are being scrutinised. It is part of the mechanism that enables documentation to be done for the purpose of 'covering one's back' ('hålla ryggen fri').

This chapter stands out insofar as it does not draw on any of the empirical data that I have collected for this thesis. It adds a dimension, I argue, through highlighting that documents do not always only travel *within* the education system, they sometimes make it out and into other arenas, such as journalistic, and consequently public, scrutiny. Many teachers and headteachers are aware of this when they document. Mostly, the issue becomes framed as one of 'covering one's back' by documenting *more* than they consider strictly necessary. The idea that quantity is always at the core, however, would be an overly simplistic depiction of what it means to safeguard oneself through documentation. As we saw examples of in the documentary, poorly phrased documents, incomplete documents or otherwise substandard documents can cause considerable havoc despite their strength in pure numbers. One of the headteachers that I interviewed was identified both by herself and her teaching staff as a very cautious document writer.

> It is sometimes problematic with the way that people express themselves in documents when they do not realise that these documents are public.[56] […] If a document is requested and I have to do a confidentiality assessment[57], I can't go in and change anything in the document. I am only allowed to redact… there is definitely room for improvement when it comes to language and it's a development area for the entire school. But because we raise the issue, discuss it and look at examples – 'can we write like this? No, we can't. How can we write instead?' – we have improved the conditions for writing well in documents. This is actually why I ask the staff to document as little as possible… because then there can be no mistakes in how we formulate ourselves (small laugh). (Headteacher, transcribed interview)

The level of awareness of how texts present themselves in contexts beyond local school setting that this headteacher displays surpasses what I have typically encountered among headteachers and teachers. Investigate journalistic efforts such as *Kalla fakta* remind teachers and headteachers of this insight about the public nature of the documents that they produce and the effects of this. Interestingly, documents can in these cases become powerful both in their *absence* and *presence* as well as for the *quality* of their content.

For documents to achieve the status of evidence it requires that actors generally accept acts and events that have been documented as 'having truly happened' and, relatedly, acts and events that have not been documented as 'not truly having happened'. This affects some teachers' documentation practices and it is not unlikely that it affects some of the document demands placed on teachers by the school organisers and school leaders, as the idea of 'covering one's back' suggests. It is fairly rare, as far as I could see during my fieldwork and from my interviews, that teachers or schools are actually held accountable by school authorities or the media. But part of the worry, of course, stems from the impossibility of *knowing* when a document might be called upon as proof that work has been done and been done properly.

[56] 'Allmän handling'.

[57] 'Sekretessbedömning'.

9. Tenacious Documents Revisited

In the opening of this thesis, I described an enduring and concerted effort to fix a problem within the Swedish education system. This problem is framed alternately as an ‘administrative burden’ and a ‘documentation burden’ by the Swedish government, and they wish, as different Swedish governments have wished for the past 13 years at least, to alleviate teachers of this burden. Unfortunately, despite best efforts, general relief of the burden has so far not reached the target groups of these interventions. I have described this as a problem of *tenacious documents*. Documents are, and have been, impervious to efforts to reduce their quantity. To explore this imperviousness of documents it has been necessary to consider not only the criticisms levelled against documentation but also the *allure* of documentation, referring to how documents produce desirable effects, and present and act as solutions to problems. Empirically, however, this thesis has had a strong focus on teachers’ complaints and struggles with documents. It might at first glance seem a contrarian move to explore a *problem* through the *desirability* of this problem and then empirically emphasise disgruntlement and complaint to the extent that the preceding analytical chapters have done. Yet, it is exactly in these instances that we can most productively explore the role of documents as simultaneously coveted *and* detested within the Swedish education system. I argue that it is herein that we find the key to understanding the imperviousness of documents and the tenacity of the ‘burden of documentation’.

Addressing this issue is not simply a matter of identifying ‘good’ documentation practices versus ‘bad’ documentation practices and weeding out the undesirable forms. Such a distinction would rely on normative conceptions of what documents are, what they do and in whose interest they act, which does not allow us to understand the processes through which documents come to be constituted as *both* solutions to problems and problems in and of themselves. This thesis has suggested that this is better understood through a more performative understanding of documents, where documents and the practices that go with them are conceptualised as multifaceted, unpredictable and constitutive of the social relations that they enable and enact. Unfortunately, perhaps, and interestingly, to be sure, ‘good/helpful’ documents were as difficult to distinguish from ‘bad/detrimental’ documents *in practice* as they were in any normative sense. In my material the various uses, intentions, desires and contestations of documents were constantly conflated and mixed. This, too, might seem somewhat counterintuitive seeing as part of the appeal of documents comes from their durability and ability to carry and retain information across spatial and temporal distance. This durability should not, however, be confused with documents being predictable in their application or enactment in specific contexts or even unanimous in what they wish to achieve. In fact, it has been demonstrated throughout this thesis that the same document often serves *multiple purposes* both within and beyond the sites of its production.

My material shows that many of these multiple purposes are in considerable tension and even conflict with one another in the everyday setting of the school. However, they appear as self-evidently co-existing in the way in which the documentation demands are presented through various governing educational agencies and technologies. In chapter five, I explored how documentation practices that in theory are deeply concerned with, and implicated in, the everyday practices of teachers came to be experienced as detached from these same practices by the teachers themselves. To do this, it became necessary to consider the specific kind of model for documentation that nearly all document practices in the Swedish education system are based on, namely that of 'the circle'. 'The circle' is based on an ideational abstraction described by Hirsh (2017) as a cyclical thinking wherein all efforts to handle problems, improve quality and generate change within the organisation should follow an iterative process of asking 'where are we?', 'where are we going?', 'how do we proceed?' and 'how did it go?'. On a theoretical level, then, the model seems to follow the *same* issue throughout its trajectory and serve one overarching purpose in relation to whatever it is applied to, for instance a quality target. On a practical level, however, teachers often experienced either that the work with following the circle was not particularly relevant to their everyday work in the classroom or that they got 'stuck' in the first phase of collecting data on and analysing 'where are we?'. In order to understand why this happened, I argued that we must focus our attention on how the circle in practice is materially accomplished through what I refer to as a *circular document process.* By focusing our attention on the material manifestation of the cyclical thinking we were able to see how different documents came to be produced, merged and moved around in the educational setting, becoming enrolled for various purposes, all through a process that in theory should be dealing with the same thing.

I argued that we, in order to understand the tenacity of documents in the Swedish education system, need to take seriously the strong legitimacy of 'the circle' as the optimal and even self-evident mode of understanding and acting upon one's organisation. I argued that this model to a significant extent receives its authority as the optimal course of action through its strong association with scientific reasoning and method. The significance of the scientificity of the circle was discussed in relation to the practice of knowledge-based governance within the Swedish public sector (cf. Bohlin & Sager, 2011) and Theodore Porter's analysis of objectivity as a moral imperative within public life (2020 [1995]). Furthermore, I suggested that the difficulties of implementing this model in practice – as chapter five shows many examples of – can only be understood if we highlight how the process is materially accomplished through a circular document process. Only then can we see how document purposes multiply as the document moves around in the education system and how teachers sometimes experience that the circle becomes 'stuck' on the first step of the circular document process, that of providing a situation analysis, or asking 'where are we?'.

The following chapter picked up on this issue and zoomed in on how the same document can multiply in meaning, form and purpose within the same institutional setting, in this case a meeting about the well-being and safety of pupils. Here, the specific document of the incident report presented itself as a tool with which to counteract degrading behaviour. However, what *kind* of tool it was and *how* it should be used shifted throughout the discussions among the meeting attendants. The incident report was sometimes discussed in its singular form – for instance as evidence of action being taken, as the result of teachers' work or as data for knowledge production – and at other times in its aggregate form, as statistical overviews of general incident reporting practices at the school. Here, we again made use of Porter's work to understand the school staff's desire to know their organisation through numbers despite the clear failure of numbers to show the teachers anything that they believed or that they did not already know. The tool to counteract degrading behaviour was, then, in fact many tools that had different purposes and problems attached to its application. Throughout the meeting, the incident report was constituted as both obstructive and necessary for the same organisational goal of counteracting degrading behaviour thus demonstrating how documents come to be seen as both coveted and detested.

While chapter six followed a document as it was invoked, referred to, rejected and endorsed through discussions in an institutional setting, chapter seven foregrounded documents by looking more directly at the document artefacts themselves, analysing the materiality of documents with much more detail than in the preceding chapters. In order to understand why the majority of teachers choose to document pupils' assessment *both* in the digital learning platforms and their own idiosyncratic systems (when the former alone is sufficient from an institutional viewpoint), it became relevant to consider what the different systems afford teachers' assessment practices. The practice of (ostensible) double documentation work becomes all the more puzzling when considering that the teachers' and the digital learning platforms' assessment tools generally *share* many of the same material features – such as grids, colour schemes, space for comments and so on. Furthermore, the different assessment tools are even concerned with the same thing: making visible pupils' learning. What differed, however, was *for whom* pupils' learning should become visible and with what purpose. In other words, it became necessary to take seriously the contextual specificities of how artefacts afford. The digital learning platforms strived to make learning visible to many different actors and for many different purposes, such as communication, resource allocation and situation analyses, as well as assessment. In fact, this is how the digital learning platforms advertise themselves and what the municipalities pay for. A teacher's own documentation tool, by contrast, only aimed at making pupils' learning visible for the teacher and with the sole purpose of making an assessment in line with the requirements of the national curriculum. The conclusion that could be drawn from this was that the multiple purposes of the digital learning platforms' assessment tool placed such material demands on the document tool, particularly with regards to standardisation, that it became useless for the *single* purpose that teachers were the most concerned with, namely assessing pupils' knowledge. This chapter demonstrates again how the same document and document system can be understood as a success or a failure depending on which qualities or purposes of the document are being assessed. It adds to the previous chapters by highlighting what kinds of material demands are placed on documents for them to at all be transportable within the education system and legible to actors who do not have first-hand-knowledge of the sites where the documents are produced. To explore this I made use of Bowker and Star's theorising on standardisation and classification (2000) and particularly their call to understand standards as material accomplishments and as concerned with 'visibility issues'.

The first three analytical chapters of this thesis were mainly concerned with the role and trajectories of documents within the education system, and particularly on how these are realised among teachers in their everyday work life. In the last analytical chapter, I argued that we should not settle on considering only the purposes of documents as they were framed and purported by actors *within* the education system. Documents, arguably especially public documents such as those produced in schools, can always potentially serve many purposes, and some unanticipated, *beyond* the institutional setting. It is exactly the properties of documents as durable and able to retain information across spatio-temporal distances that help them serve purposes beyond the setting of their production. From a vantage point within the school building, we could grasp the tension inherent in containing a complex and ephemeral world within the scope of a document. It became relatively easy to see that it is not always evident what, to whom, how and to what extent documents can and cannot, or do and do not, convey the thing to which they refer. As the document moves away from its site of production and its authors, however, this becomes less evident. I illustrated this by analysing an investigative journalism television documentary, where documents were frequently invoked as evidence for in/action and ultimately contributed to making the journalists' account of misdeeds at a particular school a convincing one. Documents could act as evidence in part due to the assumption that the relationship they had to the historical events being described was one of direct access. This alone, however, does not make for a convincing narrative. Mirroring Dorothy Smith's social organisation analysis of a factual account (1978), I argued that documents could act as evidence also because of how they were presented, arranged and contrasted within the narrative of the documentary itself.

Relative to the number of documents that are produced in schools, the number of documents that receive any kind of attention outside the educational setting[58] is very low (that is, if we consider the single document as a target of public scrutiny; in aggregate forms, school documents are constantly analysed in a multitude of iterations). The documentary that I analysed was therefore not chosen because it represents a pervasive use of school documents. Rather, it illustrates one use of documentation that teachers frequently express anxiety about in news reports and interviews with media, almost always invoking the idiom of 'covering one's back' (cf. Bergling, 2024c; Jaara Åstrand, 2017; Wiman, 2024). Documents, in this capacity, come to be used for the purpose of evidence of whether or not action has been taken and to which effect. This is not a primary, or even formally outlined, purpose of documentation, but always a potential application of the documents. The potentiality is in part established through the legal status of the documents as public records, but even more importantly, I argue, it is established through the assumption that documents provide direct access to the things or events to which they refer. Documents can come to act as vessels through which information becomes reified as facts, specifically as accurate depictions of what they aim to represent. Documents can, in these cases, come to play the 'god trick' (Haraway, 1988) of providing an omnipotent view from nowhere on the matters that they refer to.

It is worth reflecting upon the fact that documents as data for knowledge production, as we saw in chapter five was an integral part of the circular document process, actually presupposes the same ontological relationship between documents and the reality to which they refer. In this iteration, however, the 'evidence' that documents provide is not framed within the ominous narrative of litigation mentality, but within the promising, and significantly more appealing, narrative of better, more precise knowledge to base decisions upon, as was demonstrated in chapter six. Once again, then, we find that the same properties of documents make them susceptible to both praise and blame.

What Are They Up Against?

It follows that the issue of the tenacity of the 'burden of documentation' is one without a clear culprit. No wonder the Swedish authorities are struggling to resolve the issue – what or who are they really up against? Neoliberalism? New Public Management? Juridification? Audit society? Shared state-municipal school governance? The Swedish school market? The Swedish Schools Inspection? Parents? While none of these are irrelevant to discussions concerning the tenacity of documents (indeed, quite the opposite), they tend to frame documents as stable artefacts utilised for a particular purpose – for instance evaluation – in a particular

[58] And, one might add, within the educational setting.

setting. What this thesis has sought to demonstrate is that we can broaden and deepen our understanding of the proliferation (and, in the case of the Swedish education system, the tenacity) of documents by paying closer attention to the documents themselves and how they help to create, co-ordinate or confuse action in the settings where they appear. In doing this, I build on a tradition of understanding documents as performative and constitutive of the social setting and relations that they enact (for instance Asdal, 2015; Asdal & Reinertsen, 2022; Hull, 2012b; Jacobsson, 2022; Latour & Woolgar, 1986; Prior, 2003; Riles, 2000; Smith, 2005). Within such approaches, it soon appears that documents are multifarious by nature – their purpose, use and role in the institutional setting cannot be assumed a priori but merit their own analytical attention as accomplishments (often unpredictable, sometimes even uncertain, ones) within the concrete institutional contexts where they appear. Specifically, it has been particularly instructive for my analysis to follow science and technology studies in emphasising documents as *material semiotic artefacts*. This has allowed us to see that not only are the uses and purposes of documents multiple, but the materiality of documents is deeply implicated in the production of this multiplicity.

Multiplicity, however, cannot be the end of our line. To surrender to the inevitability of multiplicity is to concede to what we already know: things are complicated. We should dig a bit deeper to consider the implications of this multiplicity and what it means for the questions that this thesis has addressed. The research questions for this thesis have all been concerned with issues of *how*. The chapters of this thesis, then, have been concerned with the *production* of documentary multiplicity in the everyday school setting. In the final stretches of what this thesis sets out to do, we will consider how the findings and arguments of this thesis can help us address more deeply the question of what the Swedish authorities are up against in their battle against the tenacious documents.

Documenting for Democracy and Domination

> ‘Almost all documentation is born out of good intentions.’ (interviewed teacher in union magazine Vi lärare, by Bergling, 2024b, my translation)

The data that this thesis draws its arguments from supports this interviewed teacher’s claim. It has been a recurring motif in this thesis to understand where and how these good intentions play out in the everyday setting of the school – a setting where there is a push to reduce the amount of these same documents on account of their quantitative excessiveness and qualitative irrelevance. The good intentions, more specifically, have been discussed as closely aligned with treasured ideals of democratic governance. While this thesis has treated Swedish compulsory schools as a particularly interesting case of tenacious documents, the proliferation of documentation in itself is neither new nor in any way exclusive to the domains of education or even the Swedish borders. Indeed, when thinking about the issue of the tenacious documents that the Swedish authorities and school staff are battling against, one needs to consider the education system's position within the public sector of a welfare state democracy such as Sweden. The public sector is designed to give its citizens equal access to essential services and infrastructure, such as education, healthcare, public safety, and social welfare programs. We have seen how documentation within the education system, in this vein, is concerned with things like securing a fair and transparent distribution of resources, a high quality of education, increasing civic participation, making sure that all pupils are given a proper chance to succeed in school and providing equal access to education.

It is impossible to decouple the role, use and purpose of documentation within the education sector from these democratic values and goals. Here, we can follow Asdal (2008) when she writes about documents as potential 'little tools of democracy': documents, as political technologies, should not 'be understood in a context of the microphysics of power, as techniques of domination exclusively, but as tools for public involvement, for democratization and deliberation, as well' (p. 13). But how are these democratic values and goals produced through documents? I have highlighted how practices of standardisation, quantification and statistics achieve a particularly prominent position when the school organisation aspires to reach these goals and demonstrate these values. At the core of this is an assumption about documents' ability to reflect something that can also be found within the walls of the school. That is, they contain knowledge. More specifically, they help constitute the school as an object that can be known to actors who do not have direct experience of the specific place where the knowledge was produced (this echoes Reinertsen's argument about how Norwegian foreign aid became an evaluable object (2016)).

However, documents are *also* required to make the school knowable to the people who *do* have experience from the local setting where the knowledge is produced. In chapter five, I demonstrated how this was assumed and integrated in the circular document process and in chapter six, this mode of knowing was put to test during a meeting about pupils' well-being and safety. It is a mode of knowing (generated from the question 'where are we?') that aims to be overarching, general and the aggregate sum of individual events and observations. In other words, knowing is placed at some distance from the producers of the knowledge (too far a distance, according to some of the teachers in chapter six, yet not far enough, according to the school counsellor). Standardisation, quantification and statistics have been described as technologies par excellence to achieve this mode of knowing. I have drawn extensively on Theodore Porter to demonstrate how knowing through technologies of quantification (which requires standardisation and commensuration, and often results in statistical representation) comes to hold a particularly valuable position within a public institution such as the Swedish compulsory school. By emulating a scientific (mechanical) objectivity, the knowledge produced through technologies of quantification seem to meet demands for disinterested knowledge, detached from the interests and idiosyncrasies of actors within the system itself. A knowledge that reflects the matter of things in a way that seems untainted by human interests and intervention should ideally provide the basis for all action and decision-making at all levels of an institution that desires to provide its citizens with services that are equal, transparent, inclusive and just.

Documents, then, play a significant role in the production of democratic values and goals (such as inclusion, transparency, equality and accountability) through the kind of access that they are taken to give us to schools as knowable objects detached from the interests of the producers of the knowledge. It is, in emic terms, frequently described by school staff as a way of *seeing* one's organisation and what goes on there. Correspondingly, the academic literature that this thesis draws upon emphasises how standardisation, quantification and statistics are also technologies of seeing/visibility. Moreover, the literature points to how the very technologies of visibility affect who and what can be seen by whom, when and where, and highlights that this places these technologies at a complex nexus of power and governance that indeed mirrors the potential duality of democracy and domination that was described earlier.

While the good intentions (in the sense of democratically desirable) pertain to the document practices described in this thesis, it does not mean that they are automatically realised through these documents. Through paying attention to the local settings that the documents co-produce, it has been demonstrated that the same document can do many different things in different settings and to different effects. To help us think a bit further with this, we will take a look at how one of the headteachers that I interviewed framed what they described as an important piece of the puzzle for understanding the issue of documentation in schools. A core problem, they argued, is that the Education Act and other legal frameworks regulate schools at the level of the *individual* pupil while the budget uses the *group* as norm. During our interview, the headteacher elaborated on this:

> 'Actually, this is the big dilemma for schools today: it is that the pupil, parents and the legal framework for education are focused on the level of the individual while all the conditions are provided at a group level: physical locations, staff, resources and other conditions. And never shall the two meet, so it is important that we communicate about it. I talk about it at parental meetings: "you have expectations upon us in this way, we have expectations upon us in relation to these preconditions". *Talk* to the teachers. I don't have to go around pretending that we are able to provide one-to-one teaching to every pupil who needs it. I mean, which pupil would *not* benefit from it? […] Our conditions are provided at the group level. This means one adult, 27 pupils, one room. This is the basic premise. Then we of course have a little bit extra depending on how we decide to spend our money. There is a group room here and there. But that is not the general line. And sometimes it's as if people have a hallelujah moment when you say this, even though everybody already knows about it, really.'

The tension that this headteacher describes is, in one way, a tension between two central governing documents that schools are required to adhere to: the Education Act, on the one hand, and the budget,[59] on the other. The Education Act (SFS, 2010:800) was formulated in such a way that it would strengthen the rights of individual pupils and clearly outline the duty of the education institutions to provide equal access to education of high quality to all pupils (see chapter two of this thesis). It very explicitly aims to realise and secure some of the democratic ideals that public institutions should adhere to. What this headteacher reminds us of is that the Education Act does not act alone but acts under certain *conditions*. Specifically, the headteacher points to the document of the budget as providing these conditions. Moreover, in relation to the Education Act's goals and aims, the headteacher argues that the conditions of the budgets should be understood as restraining and controlling the ways in which they *can* work towards providing what the Education Act mandates.

This headteacher's problem formulation of (and solution to) the tension between the budget and the Education Act can function as a springboard for deepening our analysis of the inherent overarching tension between documenting for democracy and domination. To begin, it highlights how documents, documentation practices, and documentation demands do not act on their own, but are always realised in particular places and under particular conditions that influence their application.

Furthermore, I wish to pick up on the verdict that 'never shall the two meet', where it is mainly the demands of the budget and the Education Act[60] that are being referred to. What I suggest is that we take this line of thinking with us into our exploration of the tension of documenting for democracy and domination. *This* tension, however, cannot be clearly translated into a tension between two different governing documents – the Education Act as a political technology of democracy and the budget as a technology of domination or restraint. Rather, we should consider how these, and other documents, are *both* implicated in the production of democracy *and* domination. And, as the headteacher claimed, 'never shall the two meet'. It might seem contradictory to claim that the two are one and the same *at the same time* as one claims that they are in constant tension with one another. How can two things that are one and the same, never meet? I argue, in line with the main approach of this thesis, that this is possible if we do not see these things as properties that documents either have or do not have, but rather as accomplishments under specific socio-material circumstances. Furthermore, this tension – with its irreducibility and omnipotence – might be at the core of what the Swedish education authorities are up against when they are trying to reduce documentation.

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[59] The budget for an individual public school is regulated to some degree by the state, to a larger degree by the municipal organiser and to some degree by the headteacher.

[60] She mentions other actors, such as parents, but these almost invariably make their claims and their case with reference to the Education Act.

This takes us on to the last point of the headteacher's reflections, which is the solution she provides. To address this issue, the headteacher argues, it is paramount to not hide or explain away this tension but rather the opposite: the tension should be foregrounded and communicated. Put differently, we should treat this as a tension that is best worked *with* rather than *against*. It simply cannot be solved. A similar move, I suggest, would greatly benefit both social scientific analyses of documentation in public institutions more generally and our understanding of the issues of the tenacious documents in the Swedish education system more specifically.

In doing so, however, it is important to keep in mind that the tension does not exist primarily on an ideological or ideational level but is *socio-materially produced*. The headteacher also points us in this direction by focusing on the material conditions under which they are expected to provide education. In this thesis, however, I have demonstrated how one can work *with* this tension by foregrounding documents as material semiotic artefacts. If we understand documents as material semiotic artefacts, and teachers' engagement with them as socio-material, then it follows that the tension must also be of such a character.

Moving Forward

The analyses and arguments about the pervasiveness of documentation within the education system that this thesis bring forth are based on an ethnographic view from within the walls of individual schools. It was a natural place to begin my queries about the tenacious documentation burden in Swedish schools. After all, it is from within these walls that the complaints are reverberating, union surveys are responded to and experiences of the 'burden of documentation' are relayed. It is also here that many documents are produced and are meant to act or have an effect. It is, in short, where the problem itself materialises the most clearly. What has been evident throughout this thesis, however, is that documents are mobile little things. Documents move around, engaging in some considerable shapeshifting as they do so, and are reframed and reconfigured throughout the way (cf. Asdal, 2015). While they may pose as 'immutable mobiles', they are often anything but. All the preceding chapters have hinted at these document travels – they leave, go off to do something else somewhere else and sometimes they come back in a different form than they left. These places that they go, and what they do there, remain unexplored aspects of the issue that this thesis presents and one that merits more attention.

It has been suggested that a key motivation for the local and national education authorities to have access to and process the documents that are produced in schools is so that they can gain an insight into the organisations that they are responsible for. The recurring metaphor of 'seeing' invites future research to explore this desire for visibility more deeply. In doing so, I would suggest an approach to visibility that does not contend to only ask *what* we see through documents, and thereby risking framing seeing as a passive endeavour, but ask *how* local education authorities see through documents. In this way, we do not risk making assumptions about what is seen in documents based on the content of the document or the particular technology that it represents (such as quantification). Rather, one might explore how visibility *is* co-produced, focusing both on the civil servant employees and the document tools they engage with in order to know, see and make decisions regarding their organisation. A study that follows these lines of inquiry would both build on the practice-oriented or ethnographic approach to documents that this study has applied and contribute to studies of organisational visibility that conceptualise visibility as 'not just as an informational phenomenon, but also as being socio-material and performative in practice' (Leonardi and Treem 2020 in Justesen & Plesner, 2023). It would also contribute to our understanding of the role of visibility for organisational management (cf. Flyverbom et al., 2016; Justesen & Plesner, 2023).

Lastly, as a closing observation and potential opening up for further research we might raise an issue that this thesis does not deal with, namely that this thesis has been almost entirely silent on the matter of *who* are being documented. Documentation has been treated as rather innocent with regards to the things that are being documented, which are almost invariably things about children. Their performances, their results, their struggles, their misdeeds and their collective efforts. Most of these documents are motivated with reference to the pupils' best interest and to protect their rights, which contributes to the air of innocence that these practices often carry with them. A Foucauldian-inspired scholar of governmentality would be quick to refute such auspices of innocence, of course, and possibly highlight how power is exercised through these document practices, how selves are shaped and deviance controlled. It appears, then, that the tension described above as an overarching tension between documenting for democracy and domination, pertains as much to the pupils whose lives are being documented.

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