The Politics of Teacher Professionalism: intraprofessional boundary work in Swedish teacher union policy

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ABSTRACT Taking the latest reform of Swedish teacher education as a point of departure, the aim of this article is to analyse the way Swedish teacher unions construct a knowledge base for teaching as a strategy of professionalisation. The analysis shows that the unions construct such a knowledge base from opposing points of departure. Their professional ambitions are, thus, challenged by processes of intraprofessional boundary work complicating the construction of a unanimous ‘voice’ of teachers in Swedish education policy debates. This intraprofessional struggle over the meaning of teacher professionalism underlines the political nature of the use of professionalism in the transformed welfare sectors of today. In this respect, the article also underlines the importance of tradition in discussions of what is to be considered a professional teacher. Despite decades of political ambitions to unite Swedish teachers into one single profession, the historical differences between two separate teacher identities continue to fundamentally affect the policy positions of the teacher unions – a development that the recent reorientation of Swedish education policy seems to reinforce. As a result, the usefulness of talking about Swedish teachers as a single profession in the future may be questioned.

Introduction: the political nature of teacher professionalism

The aim of this article is to critically discuss the impact of a recent teacher education reform on the way Sweden’s teacher unions argue for how a scientifically founded knowledge base for the education of Swedish teachers – and the teaching profession as a whole – may be conceived. By doing so, it will attempt to provide some thoughts on the future development of teaching as a ‘professional’ occupation in Sweden. Since the deregulation and decentralisation of the Swedish education system was completed in the mid 1990s, strategies of professionalisation have become the major policy objective of the Swedish teacher unions, making the question of what to base such professional claims on important to investigate.

Typically, professions are often defined by their close relationship to a specific body of scientific knowledge. Brante (2011) defines them as ‘science-based occupations’ and Svensson (2010, p. 146) claims that professions are defined as occupations that ‘administer a certain type of knowledge in a collegial form of organization with political legitimacy to perform a certain social assignment’. It is, in other words, their possession of socially valuable, but occupationally controlled and protected, knowledge that awards the professions their traditionally high-status position within the social division of labour, not least within the structure of the traditional welfare state (Clarke & Newman, 1997). As central partners in the organisational settlement of the welfare state system, the professions offered solutions to social needs or problems that were not responsive to political or bureaucratic answers alone. The importance of the professions for the welfare state was thus significant, as they were considered ‘indispensable partners in the great national task of
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social reconstruction and, within limits, ... were to be trusted and encouraged to apply their expertise for the public good’ (Clarke & Newman, 1997, p. 7).

However, as this kind of ‘welfareism’ was challenged by a ‘new managerialism’ (Gewirtz & Ball, 2000) spreading across the world in the wake of economic crises from the 1970s onwards, the preconditions for this kind of (welfare) professional work became severely challenged. The agenda of new public management (Hood, 1995), aimed at the transformation of extensive welfare bureaucracies into smaller and more businesslike organisations for the provision of social services (Brunsson & Sahlin-Andersson, 2000), effectively eroded the trust relations so central for the autonomy of professionals within the traditional welfare sector. As a result of this destabilisation of the place for professions within the public services, brought about by the importance given to increased accountability within the new public management agenda, the concept of ‘professionalism’ was hijacked by empowered managers using it as a ‘discourse of organisational change’ (Fournier, 1999). By exploiting the desire of most occupational groups to be considered ‘professional’, such managers could align the meaning of the concept of ‘professionalism’ with an organisational logic normally considered the opposite of the traditional way of understanding the meaning of the concept (Svensson, 2010). As a result, this kind of ‘organizational professionalism’ (Evets, 2009) transfers autonomy from the individual practitioner to the organisation and its management, and, in an indirect way, functions as a way to control employees and the way they regulate themselves in accordance with the desires of the ‘professional’ organisation (Fournier, 1999; Alvesson & Wilmott, 2002; Muzio & Kirkpatrick, 2011). Paradoxically, Fournier (1999, p. 280) argues that: ‘as the professions are being threatened by various trends of organisational, economic and political change, the notion of ‘professionalism’ is creeping up in unexpected domains’. In other words, the resulting increase in the use of professional terminology, inherent in processes of social transformation such as the deregulation of public services, has made the question of what is to be considered a profession, or ‘professional’ work, much harder to answer. As argued by Lindblad and Lindblad (2009), it has become a decidedly political undertaking.

In a classic study of American teachers, Lortie (1975) argued that teachers were not to be considered professionals, partly because of the lack of a well-defined and unanimous knowledge base from which to defend themselves in relation to parents, school leadership, politicians and the general public. Foss Lindblad and Lindblad (2009, p. 763) claim that there is no evidence that the situation for teaching, as described by Lortie (1975), has changed in any fundamental way, despite ‘an invasion of a professional terminology within common language, educational research journals and policy texts from the 1980s and onwards’. Instead, they argue, it is important to view the discussion of teacher professionalism as part of larger trends in society. In the current context, they contend, ‘the professionalizing talk of teaching is taking place in times of educational restructuring and tends in several ways to be sharing some of the restructuring characteristics, such as accountability, transparency and evaluation’ (Foss Lindblad & Lindblad, 2009, p. 769). In other words, the increase in the use of professional terminology in relation to teachers on the part of political authorities may have different, more organisationally inclined motives than those guiding the professional aspirations of teacher unions. Defining the meaning of teacher professionalism, consequently, becomes very complicated, as it is negotiated through processes of boundary work between different actors promoting their own versions of what a professional teacher should be.

In what follows, another aspect of the complexity in deciding what is to be considered the foundation of teaching as a profession will be highlighted, as focus will be given to how Sweden’s two teacher unions engage in intraprofessional boundary work as they react to a teacher education reform presented in 2008 and implemented in 2011. In order to do this, and to place the teacher education reform in its proper context, the article will first present a historical review of some central trends in Swedish education policy and the historical relationship between the unions. After that, as a kind of theoretical backdrop, a discussion of the importance of knowledge and boundary work for claiming professional status will be conducted before the analysis of the unions’ reactions to the reform in question is presented. Finally, the article will close with a discussion of the possible implications of such intraprofessional boundary work for the future development of the teaching profession in Sweden.
The Swedish Teacher Unions and a Brief History of Swedish Education Policy

Swedish teachers are organised in two separate unions, originating in the historical separation of grammar and elementary school teachers. The Swedish Teachers’ Union (Lärarförbundet or STU) is a historical amalgamation of different teacher groups based in the elementary school tradition (Persson, 2008). It has approximately 230,000 members comprising teachers primarily working in preschools, preschool classes (six-year-olds) and grades one to six of the compulsory school system, vocational teachers in upper secondary schools and some other teacher groups. The STU is affiliated with the Swedish Confederation of Professional Employees, together with unions organising, for example, nurses, police officers, civil servants and local government officers.

The other teacher union, the National Union of Teachers (Lärarnas riksförbund or NUT), is a descendant of the Swedish Union of Grammar School Teachers, and currently has a membership of around 90,000 teachers primarily working as subject teachers within upper secondary schools, in grades six to nine of the compulsory school system, and as study and careers advisors. The NUT is affiliated with the Swedish Confederation of Professional Associations, alongside unions organising economists, architects, military officers, university teachers and medical doctors, to name a few.

In her analysis of teacher identities in Sweden in the late 1800s and early 1900s, Skog-Östlin (2012) argues that the differences between the two major teacher categories at that time were large enough to claim that they were based on two decidedly different sets of teacher identity. In a way, there was no single teaching occupation, but rather two quite distinct occupational groups constructed in different social and historical circumstances: elementary school teachers and grammar school teachers. At the start of the 1900s, the Swedish public education system was a parallel one, divided by social class. State-run grammar schools provided education for the upper and middle classes, while the working class and farmers were referred to locally managed elementary or vocational schools (Rothstein, 1986; Richardson, 2010; Ringarp, 2011).

Skog-Östlin (2012) claims that the construction of the elementary school system and its teachers – who were locally trained and employed – were central parts of the ‘modern project’, aimed at social transformation. For the elementary school teacher, the fostering of children – a central mission within the ‘modern project’ – took precedence over transferring specific subject knowledge to pupils. As part of a wider movement for social change, elementary teachers worked actively for the transformation of the education system into a more democratic and equal one, based on a liberal or social democratic ideological position. This ‘activist’ trait was manifested in the early unionisation of elementary teachers (in the 1880s) and in the fact that many such teachers engaged themselves politically and obtained central positions within the political and administrative system. In this way, the elementary teacher corps came to identify themselves as a kind of civil servant, not least because of the relatively large influence they acquired over the development of the organisation of the Swedish school system (Persson, 2008; Skog-Östlin, 2012).

The state-employed grammar school teachers, on the other hand, identified themselves with a completely different set of fundamental values. Being university-trained, the focus on subject knowledge as the primary skill, and mission, of teachers was emphasised over the fostering of children – something that was deemed necessary only to facilitate the effective transfer of such knowledge. Skog-Östlin (2012) argues that the grammar school teachers saw themselves as defenders of tradition and the cultural heritage, and, as a result, resisted much of the agenda of social transformation championed by the elementary teacher corps. As a result, grammar school teachers were more reluctant to unionise (in the early 1900s), as subject associations were seen as a more natural way to organise than on the basis of occupational belonging in a wider sense. Consequently, despite being in possession of a relatively high social status, the grammar school teachers did not obtain the amount of influence over the direction of educational reforms enjoyed by the elementary teachers. Skog-Östlin (2012) claims that, as the previously completely separated school organisations became more closely associated with each other during the 1900s, the changes were almost completely based on the agenda of the ‘modern project’ supported by the elementary teacher organisations, forcing the grammar school teachers to adapt continuously to a situation they did not support.

After the end of the Second World War, one of the guiding principles of Swedish education policy was the replacement of the parallel school system with an organisationally unified compulsory school system. In order to try to erase the class divisions in society, of which the old
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parallel school system was a central part, reforming the organisation of education became a central strategy for realising such ambitions (Lindensjö & Lundgren, 2000). After having been debated in the 1940s and tried out during the 1950s, the unified compulsory school system was finally introduced in 1962. The reform was primarily supported by the political left and the elementary school teachers’ organisation, who wished to close the status gap between themselves and grammar school teachers. The political right and the grammar school teachers’ organisation, on the other hand, wanted to defend what they considered to be the high knowledge standards of the old grammar schools (Richardson, 2010). Once again, the political dominance of the modernist agenda of the elementary teachers’ union (and their political allies) was underlined (Ringarp, 2012).

Following the economic recession of the late 1970s, which ended a long period of unhindered economic growth in Sweden, criticism was raised against the large-scale bureaucracy of the Swedish welfare model from both the political left and right. Social democrats argued that the extensive school bureaucracy had decreased the ability of citizens to exercise democratic control over the education system and that, despite good intentions, schools did not succeed in their compensatory mission and, thus, failed to realise the equality goals that had been so central for the establishment of the compulsory school system. The political right, on the other hand, wishing to limit the scope of the state in general, voiced criticism concerning the high cost, low efficiency and administrative rigidity of the extensive school bureaucracy (Lundahl, 2002). As a result, during the 1970s and 1980s, steps were taken to gradually commence a process of decentralisation of Swedish education, most obviously in the 1989 decision to transfer the responsibility for education and all school staff to local authorities (Ringarp, 2011, 2012). Prior to this decision, both of the teacher unions were hesitant towards it. However, after some political manoeuvring, the STU accepted the reform, as it considered it to be the last major chance of equalising the status differences between its members and the old grammar school tradition (Ringarp, 2012). As a result, the NUT was forced, once again, to accept and adapt to a reform that it had actively and resolutely tried to resist.

During the 1990s, as yet another economic recession hit Sweden, the speed and extent of the decentralisation and deregulation of the education system increased. This decade saw extensive reforms in the form of a break-up of the state’s monopoly of education, as a system of state-funded free schools was established based on a voucher system, and a new national curriculum based on goal-steering and evaluation by results was implemented. However, the unification agenda continued to assert its influence as the upper secondary education system was reorganised into 16 broader programmes with a universal curriculum in a number of core subjects, and preschools were incorporated within the education system and given a national curriculum of their own (Lundgren, 2002).

Unification was also a central ambition for a reform of teacher education instigated in the late 1990s, which was the only part of the education system that was still under state authority. Richardson (2010) argues that the organisational transformations of the 1960s required reforms of the education of teachers for the new school system. Since then, teacher education has been reformed a number of times: in 1977, various kinds of teacher education were incorporated into the higher education system; in 1988, a reform was implemented unifying the education for teachers working within the nine-year compulsory school; and, finally, in 2001, more or less total unity was created as preschool teachers and upper secondary subject and vocational teachers were incorporated into a unified teacher education system leading to one single teaching degree for all teachers – with different specialisations, but comprising a shared component for all student teachers on the theory and practice of teaching (Beach, 2000; Richardson, 2010).

The developments of the 1990s would also have an important impact on Sweden’s two teacher unions and the idea of teachers as professionals. According to Lindblad (1997, p. 137), the concept of teacher professionalisation was imposed on Swedish teachers as part of the overall deregulation reform agenda and, thus, had nothing to do with ‘teachers’ independent and organized professionalization projects’. However, as Lundström (2007) and Persson (2008) argued a decade later, both of the teacher unions had embraced a ‘professional discourse’, making professionalisation a central policy objective of both organisations. The political imposition of professionalism inherent in the reforms of the 1990s, in other words, also meant the start of a new direction in Swedish teacher union policy and a rapprochement between the teacher groups, which was made obvious by the establishment of the Teachers’ Board of Collaboration and the adaptation of policies for professionalisation. Further evidence of this new policy direction was the
formulation and signing of a set of ethical principles for teaching as a way of starting to lay a foundation for teaching as a ‘true’ profession. The external imposition of professionalisation, consequently, seemed to spark the initiation of an internal process of strategies for professionalisation within both teacher unions that would, a few years into the new millennium, reach a hegemonic position (Lundström, 2007).

As the social democrats lost power in the national elections of 2006, the incoming centre-right government implemented a series of reforms that would take Swedish education policy in a new direction. Being very critical of the entire educational project of the social democrats – centred on the ideas of progressivism and unification – the new government initiated reforms that, for the first time since the 1960s, aimed to increase differences within the Swedish education system. Upper secondary education was reformed by increasing the difference between theoretical and vocational programmes; a system of certification for teachers was introduced, separating preschool teachers from other teacher categories; and a new reform of teacher education was implemented, replacing the symbolically important single teaching degree introduced in 2001 with a system of different degrees for different kinds of teachers. An important idea behind these reforms was that specialisation would increase the expertise of different teacher groups, thereby contributing to the processes of professionalisation deemed necessary for increasing the social status of teaching as an occupational choice for the most talented Swedish students.

It is against this background that the present article will analyse the unions’ reactions towards the latest teacher education reform. Special focus will be given to how the knowledge base for teaching and the relationship between teacher education and the world of academia are conceived. Before that, however, a section on the relationship between professional education, boundary work and science for making professional claims is needed to provide a theoretical backdrop to the analysis and subsequent discussion.

Professional Education, Boundary Work and the Significance of Science

As was argued above, professions are awarded political protection over a certain jurisdiction (Abbott, 1988) based on their possession and control of ‘a body of abstract codified knowledge obtained in some kind of university or university-like institution’ (Smeby, 2012, p. 49). Freidson (2001, p. 17) argues that a governing thought behind the concept of ‘profession’ is ‘the belief that certain work is so specialized as to be inaccessible to those lacking the required training and experience, and the belief that it cannot be standardized, rationalized or ... “commodified”’. Thus, the importance of the process of socialisation occurring during professional education is emphasised, as this body of knowledge is acquired by the novice through academic studies and professional training. This combination of academic studies and professional training – what Smeby (2012), using Ryle’s (1949) classic definition, terms ‘knowing what’ and ‘knowing how’ – is what distinguishes professionals from, on the one hand, craftspeople (possessing practical knowledge or skills) and, on the other hand, academics (possessing theoretical knowledge for its own sake). Underlining the continuing importance of higher education for the professions, Smeby (2012) nevertheless argues that there is no consensus concerning the reasons why this kind of education is so central for professional groups. Counter to the argument of the importance of its socialising function aimed at qualifying future professional practitioners, arguments have also been raised claiming that professional education serves, primarily, as a way for occupational groups to monopolise credentials as experts, which are needed in their struggle for status and income (Larson, 2013), and as a ‘means of regulating the admission to privileged positions in occupational life’ (Smeby, 2012, p. 50).

The establishment of control over a professional jurisdiction, however, is not only about constructing and claiming exclusive rights to a specific body of knowledge; it has as much to do with defending its boundaries in relation to other professions, clients and laypersons (Abbott, 1988; Hanlon, 1998; Fournier, 2000; Evetts, 2013). Thus, Fournier argues that such boundary work is dependent on the constitution of an ‘independent and self-contained field of knowledge’ as the basis upon which professions can build their authority and exclusivity; and the labor of division which goes
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into erecting and maintaining boundaries between the professions and various other groups.
(Fournier, 2000, p. 69)

In accordance with this, Foss Lindblad and Lindblad argue that the best way of accomplishing this boundary work successfully is to base one’s jurisdictional claims on a scientific foundation, as [the legitimating power of ‘science’ cannot be underestimated in contemporary societies where no welfare state institution or professional can act with authority without some sort of license from the knowledge-producing machinery of science. In a broad sense, science (or scientific knowledge production) has become the hallmark of quality. Or to put it differently, science has become the symbolic sign of intellectual authority. (Foss Lindblad & Lindblad, 2009, p. 755)

In other words, for the unions’ aspirations towards a professional status for teaching to be legitimate in the world of today, they need to be founded on a knowledge base that is firmly placed within the boundaries of science and simultaneously owned exclusively by teachers themselves, which makes the construction of teacher education of central importance for the professional projects and, thus, the political ambitions of the teacher unions.

Union Reactions to the Teacher Education Reform of 2011

This section contains an analysis of the unions’ reactions to the latest Swedish teacher education reform. The material underpinning the analysis consists of the unions’ referrals to a Public Commission report (SOU 2008:109) suggesting how a new teacher education system could be constructed. The suggestions of the commission were, after the referrals had been considered, turned into a governmental Green Paper, which was presented before Parliament in 2009. Before going into the analysis, some notes on the purposes behind the need to reform Swedish teacher education, as stated in the commission’s report, will be reviewed.

The overall reasons for the need for a new form of teacher education are described as follows by the commission:

The present teacher education programme, with a single teaching qualification, dates from the reform of 2001. In several evaluations, the education programme has been criticised for a lack of sufficient scientific grounding, excessive freedom of choice for students and the absence of important areas of knowledge ... The programme has difficulty attracting applicants and the percentage of students dropping out of the programme is high. (SOU 2008:109, p. 23)

The basic suggestion aimed at improving this situation was to increase specialisation by replacing the single degree with two new degrees comprising a number of sub-specialisations.[1] The ‘general teaching area’ (common for all student teachers) established in the 2001 reform would be replaced by an ‘educational science core’ that was clearly adapted to the specialisations within the programme and consisting of eight clearly defined areas of knowledge deemed to be of central importance for professional teachers. Another central aspect was the enhancement of subject knowledge for all specialisations. As expressed by the commission:

In primary school teachers’ subject education, the emphasis is placed on the learning of basic reading, writing and mathematics skills, but the education will also give skills in other relevant subject areas, depending on specialisation. For secondary school teachers, the attention given to their teaching subjects will be substantially enhanced and focused compared to the present situation ... secondary school teachers’ subject studies will be equal in terms of academic merit to those of other students. (SOU 2008:109, pp. 27-28, original emphasis)

The commission also suggested that the entry requirements for the new teacher education programme be raised and that all universities wishing to provide the new teacher education programme must apply to and be evaluated by the National Agency for Higher Education for every kind of specialisation they wished to supply. Other measures needed in order to strengthen the scientific foundation of teacher education are increased national funding for educational research in a wider sense, the establishment of specific subject-didactic centres, and the strengthening of school-based training by making it a separate course within the teacher education programme.

As will be evident below, there are different opinions on how much the commission’s suggestions really differed from the reform implemented in 2001. However, as has been argued
above, the commission’s report is important at a symbolic and political level, as it is part of a reform programme redirecting the course of Swedish education policy at a more general level. As is obvious from the very brief discussion of the commission’s suggestions, it is not the intention of this article to evaluate or analyse the reform in itself, but rather to use it as a point of departure for an analysis of how the unions argue with regard to the knowledge base of teacher education and its relationship to the wider field of academia in the current political context.[2]

Overall Views on the Need for Another Teacher Education Reform

The first sentences of the referral from the NUT underline the union’s very positive view of the commission’s suggestions in general. They read:

The National Union of Teachers welcomes the commission’s report on a new teacher education programme. It is the absolute conviction of the union that substantial changes are needed in order to achieve the desired quality improvements within teacher education and schools. The National Union of Teachers would like to underline that the commission, in a very commendable way, delivers suggestions for necessary and appropriate changes of the system of teacher education. (National Union of Teachers, 2008, p. 1)[3]

Overall, the NUT stresses the importance of more specialised teachers for changing the current situation of Swedish education.[4] It considers a central strength of the report to be that it is acknowledged that teachers working within different parts of the education system have different tasks to perform and, hence, are in need of different kinds of teacher education.

The NUT is also positive towards the commission’s suggestion for implementing a system where teacher education institutions must apply for examination rights for every kind of teaching degree, from the National Agency for Higher Education, in order to be allowed to supply teacher education programmes leading to those degrees. Furthermore, the NUT looks positively on the increase in state governance of teacher education implicit in the introduction of more specified degrees. It supports the ambition of the commission regarding a future concentration and specialisation of teacher education to fewer universities in order to increase the quality of every type of teacher education by making it available only at universities capable of providing the expert knowledge needed for every single teaching degree (National Union of Teachers, 2008).

The strong support for the commission’s suggestions present in the referral from the NUT is not mirrored in the introductory statement from the STU. Instead, the opening section of the STU referral is focused on rejecting large parts of the suggested system of teacher education and questioning the overall need for yet another reform of teacher education:

The Swedish Teachers’ Union rejects the commission’s suggestion of two different teaching degrees and supports one common degree for all teachers. The Swedish Teachers’ Union also rejects the return to a teacher education based on age groups and the priority of subject breadth over subject depth for teachers working in preschools and the early years of compulsory school. Furthermore, the Swedish Teachers’ Union is very critical towards the fact that all teacher education is not leading to an advanced-level [second-cycle] degree ... Consequently, the Swedish Teachers’ Union claims that the main part of the commission’s suggestions, aimed at improving the quality of teacher education, is possible to implement within the framework of the present [reform of 2001] system of teacher education. (Swedish Teachers’ Union, 2008, p. 1)

Despite being critical of the overall need for a general reform of the entire system of teacher education, the STU supports the ambition of the commission to force universities to apply for the right to supply teacher education from the National Agency for Higher Education. Overall, the STU is strongly opposed to the diversification of teaching inherent in the commission’s suggestions, as well as what it considers to be the decrease in subject studies for teachers working within the early years of the education system (Swedish Teachers’ Union, 2008).

These brief sketches show that there are fundamental differences not just with regard to the unions’ general reactions to the commission’s suggestions for a new teacher education system, but also in terms of how they view the future development of the teaching profession in Sweden as a whole. Turning now to the focus of this article – the way the knowledge base of teaching is constructed in the unions’ referrals – these opposing views will be further accentuated.
Against the background of the critique of the teacher education system established by the reform of 2001 as being ‘unscientific’, strengthening the scientific foundation of Swedish teacher education is a central focus, and point of departure, for both teacher unions. The NUT claims that: ‘the suggestion for a reformed teacher education system highlights the importance of a solid scientific foundation for teacher education’ (National Union of Teachers, 2008, p. 2). In accordance with this, the STU argues that:

The lack of quality of teacher education programmes, observed in evaluations by the National Agency for Higher Education, has originated, to a large extent, in its weak scientific foundation. Therefore, it is of utmost importance that the suggestion of increased funds for teacher education research is implemented. (Swedish Teachers’ Union, 2008, p. 3)

Although they share the same point of departure, the answers to the challenge of constructing a scientifically grounded knowledge base for the professional aspirations of the unions are decidedly different. In what follows, the unions’ views on the structure and content of the ‘educational science core’ of Swedish teacher education, and their opinions on research and postgraduate studies in relation to teacher education – as they appear in the referrals – will be discussed.

For the NUT, it is essential that the educational science core is closely associated with the central teacher competencies presented in the commission’s report. Focusing on its major argument for more clear specialisations within teacher education, the NUT writes:

The National Union of Teachers concurs that there exist core competencies that all teachers must possess. Some of them are identical for all teachers regardless of the type of school, subject or age group, whilst others are explicit for one or a few teacher categories. (National Union of Teachers, 2008, p. 3)

The NUT argues that the educational science core, unlike its 2001 predecessor, should consist of a fixed content centred on the key competencies of teachers as developed by the European Union (National Union of Teachers, 2008, p. 4). It is thought that the fixed nature of this content will correct the situation of the 2001 system of teacher education, where individual universities possessed extensive freedom to decide how the ‘general teaching area’ was to be constructed, resulting in large differences between teacher education programmes. In its referral, the NUT presents the following as constituting the topics that need to be covered within the educational science core:

– Educational history, the preconditions and organisation of the education system, the foundations of democracy.
– Curriculum theory and general didactics.
– Children’s development and learning, learning disabilities and special needs education.
– Social relations, conflict management and leadership.
– The importance of language, reading, writing, mathematics and aesthetics for learning and pedagogy.
– Information and communications technology.
– Assessment and grading.
– Evaluation and development.
(National Union of Teachers, 2008, p. 4)

However, the NUT argues that: ‘the subject courses included in the subject teacher education programme must be coordinated, in terms of content, with the ordinary university courses of the specific subject’ (National Union of Teachers, 2008, p. 2). In this way, the NUT argues for a teacher education anchored within the framework of the academic system, as teachers (or at least subject teachers) are to study their subjects in an ‘ordinary’ academic way and then, within the separate courses of the educational science core, study and apply the didactics and other relevant competencies as described above, and practise them during their placements.

The STU’s reaction to the content of the educational science core is decidedly different. A central point of departure in the STU’s argument is that the education of teachers must be centred on subjects that are specific to teacher education. It claims that: ‘one step towards specific teacher education subjects is an increase in the demands for a central role of didactics to be integrated
within all subject studies’ (Swedish Teachers’ Union, 2008, p. 5). The general idea is that all subject study courses are to be infused with a didactic perspective, constituting the very point of departure for all subject studies within teacher education. As a result, the STU is critical of the commission’s suggestion for a fixed educational science core, arguing that:

Several parts of the suggested components, like curriculum theory, children’s development and learning, assessment and grading, and evaluation and development, require, in large part, a close relationship to a subject or some kind of teaching element to become meaningful for the student teachers. Those are parts that should be included in the subject-didactic parts of the education, in order to increase the possibilities of contextualising the content of the educational sciences ... As a result, 30 academic credits (half of the suggested credits) of the educational science core should be integrated within the teacher education subject studies. (Swedish Teachers’ Union, 2008, p. 6)

The STU suggests that the remaining part of the credits that comprise the educational science core should be dedicated to ‘the foundational parts of the professional practices of teaching that constitute a common base for all [student teachers], regardless of profile’ (Swedish Teachers’ Union, 2008, p. 6). In opposition to the idea championed by the NUT – that teacher education should, as far as possible, be organised in line with other academic programmes – the STU highlights the uniqueness of teacher education as a central point of departure for its views on the future of Swedish teacher education, claiming that:

Teacher education must be allowed to develop on its own terms and from its own needs. For example, the subject studies within teacher education must depart from the needs of the teaching profession. Specific research programmes and postgraduate education programmes must, therefore, be constructed in close cooperation with teacher education programmes and professional practice. These efforts are often met with resistance within the traditional environment of academia, as extensive parts of the subject and knowledge structures of teacher education do not fit naturally into the faculty or discipline structure of the university. (Swedish Teachers’ Union, 2008, p. 5)

In order to build a framework where this kind of teacher education and research can be constructed, the STU argues for the development of national institutes for subject-didactic research – something which is suggested in the commission’s report. As was argued above, the need for a stronger scientific foundation for teacher education is an important point of departure for both unions. In order for this to become possible, the STU argues for the need for large investments in educational research. Furthermore, a central problem for the quality of Swedish teacher education, as expressed in the commission’s report, is the relatively low number of teacher educators holding a PhD degree, which constitutes a decisive problem for strengthening its scientific foundation. Following on from the argument of teacher education being a very specific activity, the STU states that teacher educators should have conducted their postgraduate training within ‘areas relevant for teacher education’ (Swedish Teachers’ Union, 2008, p. 15), underlining the importance of creating opportunities for teachers to pursue postgraduate education that is closely connected to their professional practice and for giving teacher educators increased possibilities to conduct research within their place of employment.

The NUT agrees that the scientific foundation of, as well as the research conducted within, teacher education must be strengthened. In accordance with the STU, it argues that:

all universities awarded the right to provide teacher education programmes must also be awarded increased funds in order to, in the long run, increase the number of teacher educators holding PhD degrees, as well as increase the opportunities for teachers already holding such a degree to be able to conduct research within the framework of their employment. (National Union of Teachers, 2008, p. 12)

Consequently, there are obvious tensions between the unions in their referrals to the commission report suggesting a reform of Swedish teacher education. In the concluding section, the differences and similarities made obvious in the unions’ reactions to the report’s suggestions will be highlighted in order to discuss the intraprofessional boundary work taking place between the two Swedish teacher unions on the question of what, in fact, constitutes the knowledge base of the teaching profession.
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Concluding Discussion: intraprofessional boundary work in the unions’ referrals

In summary, with regard to the relationship between teacher education and traditional academic structure, the NUT underlines the importance of keeping the subject courses of teacher education very close to the general academic subject courses provided by disciplinary-based university departments. The STU, on the other hand – placing central importance on the construction of subjects that are specific to teacher education and resolutely grounded in a didactic perspective – stresses the difficulties for teacher education programmes within a traditional academic structure. As a result, it argues that the uniqueness of teacher education in relation to classic academia requires a structure that is independent from that which organises other types of university education. In this way, the NUT constructs an image of the knowledge base of teaching as consisting of complementary parts, while the STU advocates a knowledge base that is founded more on an idea of integration. This is most notable in the way the unions’ referrals describe the role of didactics. For the NUT, general didactics is one part of the educational science core. It views it as something that complements more traditional subject studies – a kind of tool kit, if you will, that is needed to connect theoretical subject skills with the practice of teaching. For the STU, on the other hand, the didactic perspective is at the very heart of teaching, resulting in the view that all subject studies within teacher education must depart from and be entirely integrated with didactics, in order for student teachers to become competent professional practitioners.

As was argued above, teacher education (as many other professional education programmes) is characterised by the conflict between what is normally referred to as theory and practice – between ‘knowing what’ and ‘knowing how’ (Ryle, 1949). From the unions’ referrals to the commission report suggesting a reform of Swedish teacher education, it can be argued that the two unions are trying to build a knowledge base for teaching that is able to integrate these two dimensions, but from different points of departure. Based in its history, going back to the university-trained grammar school teachers, the NUT constructs a knowledge base for teaching centring on an idea of subject expertise – of ‘knowing what’ as a precondition for being able to teach. The STU, having a different historical legacy and with members who are primarily teachers working within the early years of the education system, presents a version of teacher education that is very closely aligned with the overall ideas of the 2001 reform, centring on the role of didactics as the primary expertise of all kinds of teachers – ‘knowing how’ to teach as the knowledge base separating teachers from other occupations and, thus, rewarding them with a position among the professions.

From a more general political point of view, it seems obvious that the reorientation of Swedish education policy instigated by the centre-right government has shifted the balance of political influence between the unions. There are striking similarities between the commission’s report and the arguments of the NUT, which is very positive about almost all aspects of the new reform. Not surprisingly, the STU is very critical of the suggested reform and argues that the necessary changes, in terms of increasing the scientific foundation of teacher education, could as easily have been made within the one-degree system of 2001. It is also evident that the historical differences between the unions are continuing to affect their policy positions, and that the rapprochement of the mid 1990s did not manage to overcome them in any substantial way.

Fournier (2000) claims that, in order to establish a position as a profession, the aspiring occupation must establish control over a specific knowledge base and defend its boundaries against rival occupations and others wanting access to the professional jurisdiction in question (cf. Abbott, 1988). In the case of the Swedish teacher unions, two problems may be observed in creating such a jurisdiction. First, the knowledge base argued for by the two unions is, in many respects, departing from different views of what constitutes the foundation of teaching and how the professional education of teachers, whether for reasons of socialisation or restricted access, is to be understood in relation to the academic world in general – a connection that is normally considered to be essential for any occupation wanting to be considered professional (Brante, 2011; Smeby, 2012). Second, the boundary work taking place in relation to the professional aspirations of Swedish teachers is complicated by the existence of intraprofessional boundary work, where two organisations of teachers are engaged in a political struggle over the meaning of what a professional teacher, fundamentally, should be.
Foss Lindblad and Lindblad (2009) argue that ‘the professionalizing talk on teaching’ has become naturalised within contemporary Swedish education policy. Despite the differences of what such professional claims may be founded on, the teacher unions are united in their determination to pursue strategies of professionalisation as the way to increase the social status of teaching. As professionalisation, normally, is associated with a knowledge base founded on some kind of scientific base, both unions, despite their differences, argue for the importance of increasing the scientific foundation of teacher education if it is to become regarded as a truly legitimate, high-quality academic education programme. In this sense, it is interesting to note the quite limited discussion of the actual content of such a knowledge base present in the unions’ referrals. Despite the question of how to frame the role of didactics, or whether the content of the educational science core is to be integrated with subject studies or not, the individual parts making up the content of the educational science core are not discussed in great detail at all.

In conclusion, it may be argued that the future development of teaching as a profession in Sweden seems complicated. Despite decades of political efforts, it appears that the historical differences between the unions are hard to overcome, resulting in processes of intraprofessional boundary work that seriously complicate the efforts of the unions to launch a solid professional project. Furthermore, the multiple meanings given to the concept of professionalism within contemporary education debates underline the very political nature of such an enterprise. As the unions are divided and struggling for political support, Swedish education policy is deprived of a clear voice on behalf of teachers, resulting in a situation where the unions may be played out against each other by educational policy makers wanting, above all, to increase the control of the work of teachers by the implementation of reforms that are publicly presented as increasing the professionalism of teachers. Consequently, the question of whether there are, or should be, one or two (or more?) teaching professions in Sweden must be asked. From the discussion above, it seems that the political ambitions of creating a strong and unified teaching profession in Sweden still have some work ahead. The current reorientation of Swedish education policy, exemplified here by the latest teacher education reform, has, obviously, not made such efforts easier.

Notes
[1] This was changed to four different degrees in the actual Green Paper that was presented to Parliament in 2009.
[2] For a more thorough investigation of the content of the education reform of 2011 from a number of perspectives, see, for example, Sjöberg (2011).
[3] All quotations from the NUT and STU referrals are my translations.
[4] The situation referred to has, very generally, to do with a public image of Swedish education being in a state of crisis, mainly because of the worsening results of Swedish students in the Programme for International Student Assessment evaluations. In this context, the low status of, and decreasing number of applicants to, teacher education is considered a major problem if the negative trend in results is to be improved.

References
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