

# THE CRITICAL ROLE OF SCHOOL LEADERS IN AMBITIOUS PEDAGOGICAL STRATEGIES

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## Introduction

Supportive leadership, organizational culture, and collegiality are crucial for the professional development of teachers' digital skills (Schrum & Levin, 2016). School leaders also need competence development to support teachers in digitalizing schools (Håkansson-Lindqvist, 2015; Vanderlinde & van Braak, 2010). However, school leaders often lack education on how to effectively support digitalization efforts. Blossing and Liljenberg (2019) highlight the importance of critical reflection in leadership to avoid an overly instrumental and formal approach that may hinder meaningful learning environments. Håkansson Lindqvist and Pettersson (2019) call for further studies on the organizational challenges of digitalization in schools. Grönlund (2014) emphasizes the significance of successful implementation in achieving desired outcomes. Selwyn (2017) raises important questions about personalization, commercial influences, and equal participation in digitized education, emphasizing the need for conscious decision-making. These complex questions require reflection and consideration.

Given reflective recommendations for digitalization, there is yet another added level of complexity when curriculum integration is called for as thematic pedagogy. Thematic pedagogy, also known as thematic teaching or interdisciplinary teaching, is an educational approach that integrates various subjects or topics into a cohesive theme or project. Instead of teaching subjects in isolation, thematic pedagogy emphasizes the interconnectedness of knowledge and provides students with a holistic understanding of the topic. There is considerable rhetoric around thematic pedagogy regarding curriculum integration to support, for example, meaningful learning that combines schooling with lived experiences aimed to help students make connections among different subjects and to encourage them to analyze, evaluate and synthesize information from different sources (Alleman and Brophy 1993). However, there is also a risk that such overarching goals sacrifice depth of content in favor of covering a broader range of topics (Brophy and Alleman 1991).

In the following study we report on preliminary results stemming from the voices of various groups of professionals in a school that uses a combination of digitalization, flexible rooms, and thematic pedagogy and share similarities with curriculum integration as a pedagogical model.

## Aim

The purpose has been to develop an understanding, through mutual collaboration between teachers and researchers, of how the flexible spatial and digital frameworks and resources offered by the school affect teachers' instruction and students' learning in thematic pedagogy. The guiding questions have primarily been focused on the didactic aspects: WHAT content is offered, WHO is offered the opportunity to participate, and HOW is content and participation offered.

## Method

The methodological approach for the collaborative project, with a focus on theme work, is based on design-based research methods (DBR: design-based research), which aim to practically and theoretically develop an understanding of teachers' and the organization's challenges by designing, analyzing, and refining innovative changes in instruction in authentic classroom environments (McKenney & Reeves, 2012). Through a DBR approach, teachers and researchers have the opportunity to systematically and meticulously build understanding of and study the consequences of the introduced changes in the school's learning environment.

The challenge in this specific research lies in the awareness of the pedagogical conditions in the instructional situation, which require reflection and experimentation in authentic settings, and that these exploratory practices are carried out as an ongoing process over time. It is not about a quick fix or managing instructional situations by solving potential problems with rules and guidelines, but rather recognizing the complexity of instruction. In real teaching practice, "problems" constantly change shape and are therefore not easily identifiable (Schön, 1983). By viewing instruction from a design perspective and considering students as active participants and creators, instruction is not about exposing students to knowledge but creating opportunities for them to explore and interact with various potential knowledge resources, such as texts, videos, and peers.

According to the Swedish Education Act of the Swedish National Agency for Education (2011), education should be based on "scientific foundations and proven experience" (Section 5). This means that teachers and school leaders should base their professional practice on research and systematically explore and test their own activities.

## The Case

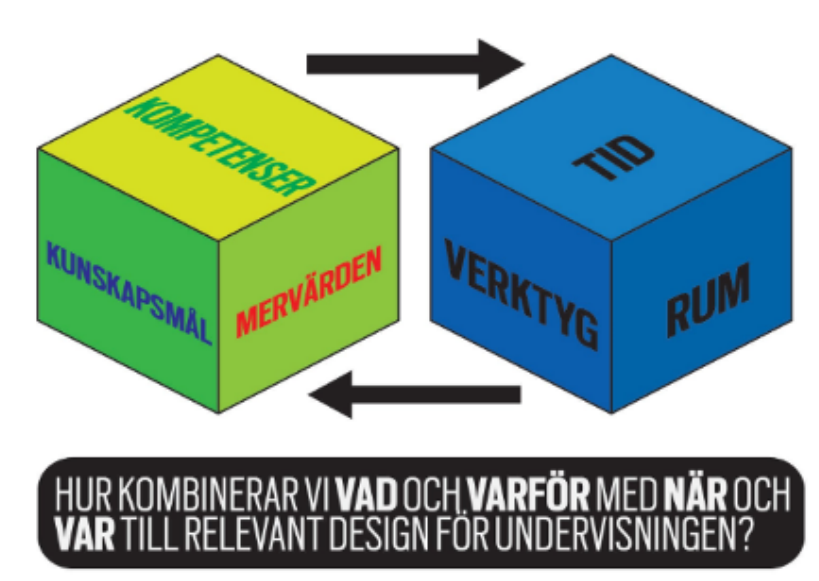
The following research practice is characterized by starting from the expressed needs for new knowledge from professionals such as teachers or principals. It is distinguished by the entire research process, from initiation to implementation and

reporting of key results, occurring in close collaboration between researchers and school professionals.

Initially, we started the design work together with teachers and researchers by identifying the challenges in instructional practice that teachers encounter. The common understanding was primarily directed towards working with thematic work in the school's flexible spatial and digital learning environments. We then examined how to co-plan instruction and introduced a previously developed model for instructional design in digital contexts to concretize the design work - Tanketärningarna, a model for didactic design (Sofkova Hashemi and Spante, 2016) (see Figure 1).

**Figure 1**

*Instructional Design Model: Tanketärningarna (Design Dice). How do we combine “what” and “why” with “when” and “where” for relevant design for teaching?*



The workshop-driven work was carried out in respective teacher teams and began with a so-called rapid prototyping as a way of familiarizing themselves with the "Design Dice" (Tanketärningarna). The teacher teams planned for future instructional design by addressing the six specific categories in the dice: 1) Knowledge goals; 2) Competencies (or skills); 3) Time; 4) Space; 5) Tools; and 6) Added value. The staff gathered in stages so that the lower grades collaborated as a whole but sat in groups of established work teams when the model was discussed and used for the didactic planning of the theme. The same approach was used for the middle grades and high school.

Starting with rapid prototyping, we proposed and planned for future theme work using the "Design Dice" as a meta-model for didactic planning. The subsequent workshop focused on discussing experiences from the implemented theme and using them as a foundation for the next theme planning. Throughout the workshops, the work teams generated feasible thematic ideas for each stage of the school's work. Reflective collegial conversations during these workshops provided insights and influenced subsequent themes, creating a developmental movement. The workshops also emphasized the importance of reviewing organizational conditions for themes.

## Results

It was noted that planning themes was easier for teacher teams than analyzing implemented activities, raising the question of the relationship between planning and analysis in the school's thematic work.

This is an ongoing development process that began with tight collegial planning and then found a didactic model that teachers can work collectively with during the theme period, without the need for frequent planning meetings. The teachers emphasized that they develop their respective professional competencies in the work teams and have continuously become better at leveraging each other's competencies and strengths. They also became more aware of how essential student participation is to make a theme work as well as possible. It was clear that the workshop work on the design of the theme in the collegial groups raised professional questions as well as critical questions about organization and time resources.

In addition to the usual learning goals, the school has the goal of training students to increase their abilities to "meet the challenges of an increasingly digitized world" (quote from the school's website). These abilities are sometimes expressed as 21st-century skills, which are also referred to as the 4Cs - communication, collaboration, creativity, and critical thinking.

The concepts aim to strengthen the social and cognitive abilities that today's students are expected to need in the job market but which schools are assumed to have difficulty providing. This thinking can be found in many schools that want to renew and develop teaching and learning. The reasons for this development are several. There is political governance, for example, through national digitalization strategies and curriculum writings, but there is also influence from market forces that want to sell both software and hardware to schools.

However, a central idea behind the ambition to work digitally in schools is still that the school should be inclusive and provide all students, regardless of socioeconomic background, with the same opportunities. In school, students who lack sufficient technology, space, or support at home can be compensated for the unequal access to technology and study situations at home. One important pedagogical approach in this school to help students reach their ambition was manifested in the school's effort regarding thematic pedagogy.

We have seen an ongoing development process that started with tight collegial planning and then found a didactic model that the teachers could work with collectively during the thematic period, even without these frequent planning meetings. The teachers highlighted that they developed their respective professional competencies within the work team and continuously became better at utilizing each other's skills and strengths. They also became more aware of the importance of student participation in order to make the theme work as effectively as possible. It was clear that the workshop work on the design of the theme within the collegial groups raised professional-driven questions as well as critical questions about organization and time resources. The thematic work, which is a prominent part of the school's profile, requires dedicated time for planning and consensus on what the thematic work should entail. The teacher's role is affected (subject expert, facilitator), and it seems to be easier to implement at the primary and middle school levels than upper secondary level.

An overall result is that the theme-based activities have evolved throughout the duration of the collaborative project. However, among teachers, development coordinators, lead teachers, and school leaders, there appear to be different expectations and understandings of what theme work is or can be, which has consequences for the execution of the themes. Is theme work a project in itself, integrated learning, subject infusion, or primarily a way to work on values and ethics? Should theme-based activities focus on knowledge acquisition with subjects contributing their time, or should themes primarily be focused on the moral education mission? We have seen examples of both. And who determines the direction of theme-based activities? Teachers? School leaders? Here, too, we have examples of both bottom-up and top-down management. The school has constantly adjusted how themes should be organized. One repeatedly expressed emotion during workshops was frustration, and particularly among the upper secondary level teachers.

There is a clear requirement from the school leadership that all stages should work with themes. Our analysis of the collected data shows that implementing theme-based activities seems to be the most challenging at the upper secondary level. Two scheduled sessions per week are allocated, with 5-7 teachers serving in 6 student groups per teaching team. Students work on pre-planned tasks available in Loops

or Google Classroom. Since the tasks assigned to students do not always align with the subject expertise of teachers in each student group, the necessary solution is to package the content and tasks tightly, making students essentially self-directed (at least for disciplined students). In cases where teachers lack subject expertise, their task becomes coaching students or functioning as a facilitator rather than utilizing their pedagogical competence, potentially resulting in suboptimal student learning. Several subject teachers also express frustration over conducting theme sessions outside their subject expertise and perceive it as a form of de-professionalization. Another frustration expressed is the sense that valuable class time is lost...

*...it becomes very fragmented... // ...so it's about consuming a tremendous amount of instructional time for the students... // ...I'm used to having control over what we do, and it's a situation where you have to think differently. What I have to rely on is that others are driving parts of my teaching as well. But when I do it myself, I know exactly how to structure it to include as many students as possible and keep track of it, knowing whom I can challenge and whom I need to assist... (teacher, upper secondary level)*

One possible explanation for the perceived frustration is that the organization and conditions at the upper secondary level differ in various aspects from the lower stages. School subjects are becoming increasingly specialized. Teachers at the upper secondary level interact with significantly more student groups each week and have less instructional time with each group. They are subject specialists and often identify strongly with their subject, whereas teachers at the lower and middle stages are more generalists and spend most of their time with "their" class. Additionally, assessment and grading discourse is stronger at the upper secondary level. At the same time, several upper secondary teachers express that it is enjoyable to work in teams during theme-based activities - it creates a sense of camaraderie and unity among colleagues as well as towards the students.

As critical friends to the school and during the process we could clearly see that there was a mismatch between school leaders' hope regarding thematic work, and teachers' practical experiences on how it did work with their students. Despite increasing development, there was also a growing frustration about teachers regarding how thematic pedagogy was organized. Furthermore, there were different opinions on what thematic pedagogy was. Yet again we see a project where there is a need to rejoin the level of leadership with the level of practical teaching. One might wonder, why is this still an issue? Is perhaps the growing market push in the Swedish school system an engine for the increased difference between the said and done? We don't know, but we need to investigate the phenomena even further and in more depth before talking about pedagogical models that have severe difficulties

to become manifested in actual practice due to non-supportive frames of possibilities despite good intentions.

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