Insurance and Assurance: teachers’ strategies in the regimes of risk and audit

PER LINDQVIST, ULLA KARIN NORDÄNGER & JOAKIM LANDAHL
School of Human Sciences, University of Kalmar, Sweden

ABSTRACT This article deals with how the increasing use of notions such as ‘risk awareness’ and ‘blame’ in relation to school affects the daily work of Swedish teachers. With the help of empirical excerpts from documents and focus group interviews, the authors provide examples of how the introduction of the risk society and audit cultures encourages the creation of new strategies for coping. Two of these concern the mediation of ‘safe school’ images and preventions in order to avoid future blame. The authors depict them as strategies of assurance and insurance. The increasing handling of these strategies seems to draw attention away from relations to students and actual time spent on teaching. When considering an action, teachers seem to balance the risk of attracting blame against the didactic potential. Finally, the possibility of practices which reflect more positive risk logic is discussed.

Introduction

On the home page of the Times Educational Supplement (Britain’s leading publication covering the world of education), there was a link to a chat page called ‘The Staff Room’ where teachers could exchange recommendations, experiences and views.[2] On 19 April 2006, the following question was submitted to the page:

Myself and a few colleagues have decided to organize a school trip for yr [year] 10 and maybe 11 to New York. Take in Broadway etc. Does anyone have any advice, experience that you may feel would be useful? Has anyone been on such a school trip and can advise on anything that went well in terms of activities. Teacher/student numbers etc.

A few hours later, the teacher received the following reply:

This is a career-ending move and you are absolutely ‘stupid’ taking kids of that age to New York. Take in Broadway etc. Does anyone have any advice, experience that you may feel would be useful? Has anyone been on such a school trip and can advise on anything that went well in terms of activities. Teacher/student numbers etc.

Do not go! This may be the end of your teaching career. Something unexpected may happen and, most importantly, you are the one who people will want to hang if the unexpected occurs. This is how to best summarize most of the replies the teacher – enthusiastically planning an excursion for his pupils – received over the following days.

The core of the advice from the teacher’s virtual colleagues is, as we see it, typified by the words ‘blame’ and ‘risk analysis’. The questions, hypothesis and empirical examples of this article deal with how the increasing use of notions such as ‘risk awareness’ and ‘blame’ in relation to school affects the daily life and work of teachers. With the help of empirical excerpts from documents and focus group interviews with Swedish teachers, we provide examples of how the interaction between the societal fear of the non-descript and changed forms of control and regulation of teachers’ work encourages the creation of new strategies for coping.
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From an analytical point of view, at least three distinct strategies that teachers develop in order to deal with risk and avoid blame can be discerned. The first strategy concerns risk as an objective phenomenon. This strategy contains preventive measures which ensure that daily life at school can go on in a safe and secure way, and includes, for example, making sure that the swings in the school yard are properly fastened and that children wear helmets when cycling. The other two strategies can be tied to more subjective risk assessments. They concern, on the one hand, the mediation of promotive images which, in different ways, suggest that school life is characterized by security, and, on the other hand, preventive strategies in order to avoid future blame. In this article, we will focus on the two latter strategies. We have chosen to depict them as strategies of assurance and insurance.

In the empirical material, a risk practice with defensive characteristics can be discerned, where the focus is on what may go wrong and who, in such a case, may be blamed. In the discussion, we debate the possibility of introducing practices which reflect a more constructive and positive risk logic, a logic that is not just based on individual flaws but where it is possible to generalize separate events to the system as such (Reason, 2000). The balance between managing risk as both a development potential and a cautionary principle is also discussed.

At the present stage, the study is exploratory. The intention is to tie theoretical notions regarding the transformation of society to comparatively unstructured, empirical examples where teachers talk about this reality, or where documents describe it to us. The research product may be likened to a ‘montage’, where several photographs are placed beside each other with the intention of creating a composite image (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 4). When entering the empirical field, our intentions have been twofold: firstly, to identify and illuminate empirical examples of the theoretical assumptions about the growth of the risk society and the neo-liberal transformation of education and, secondly, to generate new and more finely tuned hypotheses on if and, if it is the case, how these assumed transformations have affected teachers’ view of their profession. Through a process that is theoretically controlled, yet empirically anchored, we want to try to discern the strategies of the field and put them in relation to possible theoretical instruments of analysis. In this way, our effort is not entirely hypothetically inductive – which we hope it will be during the next phase, when we will collect quantitative data.

With the intention of collecting empirical support, we have conducted six email interviews (Kroksmark, 2006), two in-depth, face-to-face interviews and six focus group interviews (Cohen et al, 2007). All levels of the Swedish primary school system (students from the age of 6 to 15) are represented. A content analysis (Bergström & Boréus, 2000) of the Internet home pages of 50 schools and 30 selected teacher–parent advisory boards has been performed. National newspaper articles related to the field have also been used as empirical examples.

The Risk Society

Modern societies are characterized by a division of labour where certain professional categories are assigned a specific responsibility for minimizing risk. According to the Swedish Education Act (Swedish Ministry of Education, 1985) and the Work Environment Act (Swedish Ministry of Employment, 1977), such a responsibility rests on the school. The teachers of our study seem very aware of this. They constantly return to the question of responsibility during conversations. For example, at one school the teachers have discussed how they should respond to children wanting to climb the trees in the school yard during breaks:

Teacher 1 (focus group): Everybody knows that climbing trees is a good thing. But what should it look like? Are they allowed there? How high may they climb? There, we often have sort of, we are afraid that they will hurt themselves. Who is responsible? That is a word we often bring up. Who is responsible?

Teacher 2: Yes, what happens if something happens? Am I to blame in that case?

Along with responsibility come obligations. However, teachers find it difficult to know who the responsible party really is. The fear of the non-descript returns: What is risky? Who is responsible? Who should be blamed? The teachers say they have asked their head teacher, ‘but we have never received a proper reply really. Only that the school is responsible. But it is still somewhat …’ (Teacher 4, focus group).
Beck (1992) introduces the hypothesis of a new form of society where danger has become invisible and diffuse, rather than visible and obvious. The starting point of Beck’s line of reasoning is the nuclear meltdowns of Chernobyl and Harrisburg. These accidents marked the moment when danger became risk by being assigned new qualities. The damage that can be caused is no longer limited to a certain place and the damage as such is as invisible as it is irreversible. From an analytical point of view, one should therefore separate the concepts of ‘danger’ and ‘risk’. This shift can also be ascribed to the fact that ‘risk’ is easier to relate to a scientific vocabulary, according to Douglas (1992). The concept of ‘danger’ does not suggest that the phenomenon can be implicitly calculated or in some other way predicted in the way that the use of ‘risk’ does.

Risks are based on interpretation and they do not exist until someone gains knowledge about them. Through this knowledge they can change, become smaller, larger, be exaggerated or downplayed, and are thus to some extent open to social definition and construction (Lindqvist & Nordängér, 2007). According to this perspective, risk management always fulfils certain social, cultural and political functions, and the key socio-political positions are taken by those who convey messages – i.e. the media – and those who define risks – i.e. the experts. Risk situations create new dependencies. We are forced to rely on the information we are served and on the experts, and become increasingly incompetent in questions related to our own situation. If danger requires security systems, risks require systems that create trust (Furedi, 1997).

According to the logic of the risk society, a diffuse threat, along with a fluid responsibility, creates a fear among teachers of finding themselves in a situation where they have to answer in public for their actions. Most of the teachers interviewed have never been in a situation like that. However, they refer to cautionary examples – in particular, the Swedish ‘Landskrona case’ from 1998, where four teachers were brought to trial in connection with the drowning of two children during a school outing. This case received a lot of media attention and headlines such as ‘The Teachers Had Coffee – Our Daughters Died’ (Ohlsson, 1998) appeared in the newspapers. ‘To end up in the newspapers, that would be horrible’, one of the teachers participating in our study argues (Teacher 2, focus group). The fear that teachers experience is thus not only related to the possibility that something terrible might happen – for example, a child falling down from a tree and hurting itself – but also to a general fear that the professional group will be singled out for its shortcomings. In other words, risk assessment is related to blame (Douglas, 1992), which suggests that it is important to try to understand on what grounds blame can be attached to teachers and the strategies they develop to deal with this possibility. How do teachers guard their work? Which preventive strategies of insurance are used to avoid criticism and what promotive strategies of assurance are set in motion to (re-)establish trust?

The Audit Culture

In order to understand the growth of both preventive and promotive strategies, it is necessary to view the situation from more perspectives other than the introduction of the risk society. Explanatory models can also be found in the changed forms of control and regulation of the public sector. We thus want to take a trip back in time, to the wake of the oil crisis of the 1970s and the economic crisis that the West suffered as a consequence of this. It is during this period that state intervention in the economic system is questioned. State investments in education and social welfare systems are now being increasingly considered as both expensive and ineffective. The legitimacy of the state is questioned and strong demands that it withdraw are voiced (Hargreaves, 1994).

Apple (2007) has studied the transformation described above in relation to the educational field and describes a number of political, economic and cultural forces that have produced what he refers to as the ‘conservative modernization’ of the educational sector. He specifically points out the neo-liberal forces as dominant in this reformation. A controlling principle for this line of reasoning is economic rationality, i.e. that all operations must be cost-effective and that individuals always seek to maximize economic profit. According to the arguments of economic rationality, publicly funded schools can now be described as ‘black holes’ into which money is poured to dissolve into smoke. Contrasted with this, an image of the school as a (quasi-)market is introduced, where the public are encouraged to act as consumers and where the guarantee of quality and
democracy builds on the idea that the free choice of consumers is always the foundation for a fair and effective distribution of resources. To promote the school becomes one of the new missions for teachers. To assure that it is safe and secure becomes central when advertising it.

New market-influenced models for the regulation and organization of work, what has been termed ‘new public management’ (Busch et al, 2001), is now being introduced. Control of the professionals, which used to be an internal matter, is transferred to the taxpayers, or the ‘consumers’. The new forms of external and internal revisions build on the idea that individuals and organizations are responsible, and this responsibility is made obvious through a demand of accountability. Different professions are forced to open up, to seem more transparent in the face of external review. A new practice involving ‘verification rituals’ (Power, 1997) appears, where different forms of documentation of the work that is being done become important. These practices tend to become so integral to the thought and behavioural patterns of the professionals that one begins to talk about self-auditing practices (Power, 1997), or what Strathern (2000) calls ‘audit cultures’.

New public management and its forms of inspection become universally accepted. New national systems for testing are introduced, quality indicators appear, the results of schools are publicized and compared, and the inspection of schools becomes increasingly aggressive. The most recent Swedish example consists of the government’s report regarding a more rigorous school inspection (Swedish Ministry of Education and Research, 2007), which suggests that all inspection reports should become more easily accessible to the public and that a scale consisting of four grades should be used to grade schools. The impact of this new type of scrutiny can also be gauged from the increasing numbers of registered complaints to the Swedish National Agency for Education, from 495 in 1998 to 1174 in 2007.[3]

Distinctive of the new strategies is, however, that they – apart from checking the students’ results – rest on indirect control. In other words, you do not get to enter the store and must rely on window-shopping. The focus is on controlling the internal control systems of different organizations rather than a direct scrutiny of how the organizations actually function (Munro, 2004). Behind this lie economic and practical factors. Thorough and exhaustive reviews are very expensive and take a long time to accomplish. The inspector’s job becomes a lot easier if the organization can present evidence that there is an internal and self-regulating control system and that it is operational. In this case, the inspector only needs to inspect the quality of the control system. In the focus interviews this becomes obvious. For a school not to seem deficient, a formal system for the production and archiving of various action programmes must be in place:

Teacher 2 (focus group): Documentation is for the school in the future ... This is something Maria [the head teacher] has stressed frequently. We must be able to go back and see: what did we do for this boy? Now, when he is in eight grade. Did we do something to ...? Teacher 3: Yes, there is an element of that. I mean, when the people from the National Agency for Education were here, they looked at the annual report and saw that someone hadn’t passed. Well, where have you documented the actions you took in relation to this? And we went in and began to look for it, and fortunately we had a written ... so we were saved.

Strategies of Assurance

The promotive strategies that create trust/assurance have no direct relationship to danger as such. Instead, they turn outwards, towards an imagined audience, with the intention to show that responsibility has been taken. One of the key issues for risk management in schools is thus, through convincing advertising, to create trust, i.e.:

...confidence in the reliability of a person or system, regarding a given set of outcomes or events, where that confidence expresses a faith in the probity or love of another, or in the correctness of abstract principles.(Giddens, 1996, p. 34)

It is possible to distinguish between a number of different techniques that are used by teachers and schools, and which may have the function that trust is re-established and a kind of ‘school staging’ is thus developed. Internet home pages show that safety systems such as crisis groups, safety groups and peer support groups often feature prominently and that school presentations often
contain the description ‘safe school’. Weekly newsletters are sent out containing information that makes the school’s activities seem transparent, allowing the parents to see ‘what is going on in school’. School corridors display descriptions of the school’s rules and regulations at a height suitable for grown-ups and on the classroom walls there are certificates from courses in ‘life knowledge’. The list can undoubtedly be made very long. What is demonstrated to the observer is that there are good reasons to have faith in this school, that you can safely leave your child there.

The precise techniques that are used probably differ from school to school and teacher to teacher. One method which appears to be used systematically is to demonstrate different types of systems for increased adult presence among pupils at all times and places, what McWilliam & Singh (2004) describe as ‘safety in numbers’. This is a tendency that to some extent diverges from how schools have previously organized social life in school. Traditionally, the school has been a place where one adult (the teacher) is surrounded by and responsible for a number of pupils. The teaching profession has been described as individualistic (Lortie, 1975), which in this case means that the teacher has been relatively isolated as an adult. In addition, there have been situations when pupils have been left without adult supervision: for instance, in the school yard.

The presence of many adults is pictured by the teachers as important when schools have to perform as a trustworthy place. At one school, teachers discuss their increasing presence in the school yard during breaks. While there was only one teacher outside during break in the past, there are now two teachers, along with ‘assistants’, i.e. the assistants of children with special needs. According to the teachers, this development did not occur as a result of the teachers’ assessment of how the safety needs of pupils could best be satisfied. Nor do they seem to feel that this is something that the pupils demand. To the question ‘How are things in the school yard ... in terms of teacher presence and such?’, the teachers answer:

*Teacher 3 (focus group):* There are more teachers now.
*Teacher 1:* A lot more, compared to when you started out [laughs].
*Teacher 2:* Yes, there is an increase from one to at least two teachers and I do not know who decided this.

It is possible, of course, to consider the increased teacher presence in the school yard as a security system. In other words, increased awareness of an objective danger leads to an increased presence of teachers. However, in most cases the real reason is described as something completely different:

*Teacher 2 (focus group):* But there is that with parents. I mean, to have parents questioning what you do takes its toll, right. You don’t want them to question you. I mean, we could answer them by saying that we do supervise the children, that we watch over them and that this is our level of ... but we don’t do that. We don’t place some...
*Teacher 1:* No, we try to do some more.
*Teacher 3:* We don’t have a firm stance on that but become even more accommodating. Well, let’s have even more teachers on break duty. I think that’s what happened.

At another school, teachers have similar experiences. At this school, an additional system has also been introduced: teachers on break duty wear bright neon-coloured ribbons over their shoulders:

*Interviewer (focus group):* These bright-yellow ribbons ... have you had problems with other adults in the school yard? Weird adults?
*Teacher 10:* No, but so that the kids know, is it a parent accompanying his or her child or is it ... what is it?
*Teacher 12:* Yes, I think so, because it shows ... and then parents can ... because we have had criticism ... a lot from parents ... that there are no adults outside.
*Teacher 9:* Yes, but there have been ... spies. And to some extent it has been to show that there actually are ... that we are outside.
*Interviewer:* You have had spies here?
*Teacher 10:* Mmmm.
*Teacher 12:* Yes.
*Interviewer:* Seriously?
*Teacher 10:* Mmmm.
*Teacher 12:* Yes. Parents who have sent other adults here ... to check up ... spy.
*Interviewer:* If you had an adult supervising the school yard?
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Teacher 10: If there are adults outside? Now you can tell!
Interviewer: So you could say that these ribbons are also to show parents.
Teacher 12: Yes, you could say that.

A function of the yellow ribbons is thus said to be that they signal to the children that the people who are wearing them are teachers at the school, but an underlying motive may be that the teachers are also advertising their presence to external observers. Through the ribbons, being on duty during breaks has become an important element when advertising the school. Having adult supervision of the school has become an integral part of the image of the safe school. Now you can spot a teacher on break duty from several hundred meters away!

The strategies of assurance are about creating trust, primarily among parents, making them feel that the educational business is safe and sound. These are strategies directed toward the present situation. They revolve around the issue of how the school appears and they fulfil the function of diverting criticism and scepticism regarding how things are currently done at the school. However, the strategies employed by teachers are not only related to the present. The teachers also seem concerned about what has not yet occurred. There is a fear of being criticized in the future for various shortcomings. To deal with this, teachers develop what we call strategies of insurance.

Strategies of Insurance

To document school activities in various ways has become an increasingly important part of the work of teachers. Almost 70% of Swedish teachers say that the demands for documentation have increased (Sohlberg et al, 2007). Documentation can be perceived as a conscious pedagogical strategy motivated by the ambition to follow and understand the learning of pupils, or inform pupils and parents of the learning process of pupils. However, if the phenomenon is considered as embedded in neo-liberal forms of inspection, another reason appears. In this case, documentation can be seen as a preventive strategy of insurance for safeguarding oneself and one’s organization against the risk of future blame.

What most characterizes written documentation is that it remains permanent. It can thus protect a teacher from being attacked in the future, an attack that, for example, may take the form of being reported to the Swedish National Agency for Education. One of the schools that were studied actually has experience of this. The school was reported and the teachers were forced to answer for both what they had done and what they had neglected to do in a certain case. As competent ‘risk analysts’, they had had the foresight to document the case. This documentation was called upon as a form of evidence material during a dispute regarding what the school had actually done:

Interviewer (focus group): When the report was filed, concretely, what happened next? You were somehow obliged to show that you ... were not the guilty party?
Teacher 23: We had documented ... essentially everything. Every little detail. When it started to happen we began to write everything down. Every day. Every child. We looked through these things a little. Then, we wrote a report back. We sat down and discussed it with the school nurse and everything.

Thus, a culture of documentation was in place even before the report was filed. ‘Essentially everything’, including ‘every little detail’, had been documented, and this information could then be used when the school defended itself against accusations it believed were false. After the school was reported, the use of documentation had become even more pronounced:

Interviewer (focus group): The fact that you had taken down ... it was very fortunate then ... now that you had to send in ... but do you end up thinking that ... more always ... you really should write this down?
Teacher 23: Absolutely.
Teacher 24: It is absolutely that way.
Teacher 26: It’s that way 100 per cent. You are much, much more diligent. Because if something happens you have ... I have saved ... a diary on my computer, you could say. The minute something happens, I write.
Interviewer: You didn’t do that before?
Teacher 26: No. That’s when we started. Keep notes – that way you have something to show people! That’s what they told us.
Interviewer: But do you write about all children?
Teacher 26: Yes. Now you do.

Again, it is clear that insecurity regarding what can be considered a risk goes hand in hand with the audit culture. Everything can constitute a risk and who has responsibility is not clearly defined. The teachers’ conclusion is that everything must be documented. This turns out to be a sensible assessment. In a legal handbook for Swedish schools entitled ‘A More Secure School’, under the heading ‘What Is to Be Documented?’ is the following information:

It is difficult to know beforehand what may be of importance. Because of this, it is important that all measures are documented. In case compensation for damages is argued for in court, it is important that the school can show that it has taken all measures that can possibly be required of it. (Herlin & Munthe, 2005, p. 160)

The expressions of the teachers show that the documentation within the formal control systems (such as action plans) is completed with informal documentation for insurance purposes at all the schools that were studied, even if it takes different forms. Most teachers make notes on their calendars; one teacher keeps a diary; and another has begun to take down notes, whereby she, among other things, writes down the date of conversations with parents and what was said during these conversations and archives the notes in folders. The feeling that almost everything can constitute a risk and that almost anyone may file a report can reasonably be considered to increase the tendency to document, especially when this strategy has proven useful in relation to an actual report being filed against a school. However, this is not quite true in all cases. Not all teachers document in this way, nor do they document all pupils. Instead, they seem to have developed selective behaviour. They ‘intuitively’ sense which parents constitute a potential ‘threat’ and therefore spend more time on documents related to certain parents and their children. Thus, risk is used to constitute or maintain cultural differences (Douglas, 1992). According to one teacher: ‘We are talking about a minority’ (Teacher 3, focus group). Regarding this minority, the documentation can be more substantial and may include, for example, that telephone conversations are written down after their conclusion or that encounters in the school yard are recorded afterwards:

Teacher 18 (focus group): I can say that I have had delicate phone conversations or meetings and run-ins. I do not document but I always take private notes, if I suspect that this mother has a switchblade in her back pocket. In these cases, I take notes on a pad by the phone and then I put the note in a folder with the name of the pupil: talked to mother S on that particular date. We agreed on the following. And it may not stand in any context.
Teacher 19: But you can still prove that you have had a phone call if something comes up. This is not something we file in an archive, of course, but as a mentor you have plenty of such notes all the time. And it is for your sake too.

The documentation that is taken with the intention of preventing blame in connection with pupils’ lack of fulfilling their goals can be perceived as another strategy of insurance. In the national curriculum for Swedish schools, it is prescribed that teachers have the responsibility to make sure pupils fulfil their goals. In connection to the lower grades, this responsibility becomes clear in relation to nationwide tests (mandatory for mathematics and Swedish in grade three and mathematics, Swedish and English in grades five and nine). To accomplish this, reporting of individual study plans for all pupils is prescribed and, if remedial teaching is required, action plans are to be drawn up. As with the school discussed above, where the archived action plans function as evidence, documentation becomes a way for teachers to show that they have done everything in their power:

And in fifth grade I can sense a kind of pressure, during nationwide tests. That you don’t end up ... A certain percentage can fail, but not more than that. Then, it’s ... it would become somewhat personal if I have a lot of pupils who fail, unless the class is perceived to struggle at an early stage. But if I failed with a great many, of course I would take it personally. (Teacher 1, focus group)
We have seen that formal documentation, such as the establishment of an action plan, can provide the teacher with protection against future blame. This protection can be upgraded, however, by making the documentation into a contract that allows the teacher to transfer some of the responsibility to the parents. During the interviews, the teachers argue for such a procedure:

**Teacher 24 (focus group):** Another aspect with this action plan is that it clearly states who has the responsibility for different things. Here, the responsibilities of the parents and those of the pupils are clearly outlined. I think this is good, because it is so easy to criticize the school. Have you done this or that? Then you can show them, but what was it that they were supposed to do?

**Teacher 25:** I write that we offer your son/daughter classes in his or her native language for cultural or private reasons. Then, the mother or father might say, 'No, he is not in need of such classes. He should focus on Swedish.' 'Fine,' I say, 'sign here that I have offered this to you', and then I save it.

Also in relation to grading, the teachers present arguments that indicate strategies of insurance. In the grading practices of the higher grades, there seems to be a certain anguish connected with giving the 'fail' grade (cf. Wedin, 2007). Such anguish is not only a result of the demand in the Swedish national curriculum that all pupils shall pass, but also the fact that teachers are aware of what a fail means for the future study of the pupils. From the perspective of our study, it is interesting to note that teachers argue that extensive documentation is needed as a form of support in case they are thinking of failing a pupil. This leads to a situation where teachers are reluctant to hand out this grade, as it will lead to some form of scrutiny. To give a low grade you have to be able to support your case well:

I also think that more people are afraid to fail pupils. Because if you do, if you fail someone – what happens next, what will this lead to? So that I think that this is probably the greatest difference today compared to 10 years ago. That you have more, sort of, behind you, in some way. (Teacher 7, focus group)

Above, we have discussed how the interaction between the introduction of the risk society and neo-liberal forms of scrutiny can result in strategies of insurance that to a great extent are aimed at protecting one's own back in case of future blame. Perry (2006) argues that these forces have also had a reductive effect on the professional autonomy of teachers. In our empirical data we can find support for this argument. For example, teachers feel that the consumers show less trust in their professional ability to grade pupils. For many reasons, such a development may be perceived as both desirable and inevitable, but we can also see that it may have a deteriorating effect on the services provided by teachers. Perry (2006) argues that the consideration of the interests of the consumers has encouraged a more responsive professionalism but has also contributed to a professionalism where external parties are perceived as opponents and where the professionals take action to insure themselves against future blame rather than in view of the needs of the clients. More effort is directed towards taking the necessary precautions than towards the professional 'mission' (Piper et al, 2006).

During one interview, when teachers are discussing the importance of 'keeping their back free', a natural science teacher furnishes an enlightening example of the above:

**Teacher 28 (focus group):** Well, in subjects that involve experiments you need to be more careful. If you see a group where you know that, in this case, it is not a good idea to use acids, then you don't use acids. You perform a demonstration in front of them instead. I can feel like that. The same, I think, when they are supposed to use gas. Then you make sure that you mix the groups so that they do not risk setting fire to the gas hose, causing a nuclear meltdown in the classroom. In these cases you are very ... Well, I don't know what it was like before. I have not been a teacher for that long. But I think it has happened a number of times before and you have seen teachers reported. Same thing when you leave the classroom to get something. I teach natural science and they have soldering irons. Sure, they can burn themselves, but I am not willing to leave the classroom. I don't want people to say that, sure, she left the classroom and then someone got burned. So you stay in the classroom. I think that people have become much more conscious of this. You don't want anyone to say that no teacher was present when it happened. **Interviewer:** But you would like to do more laboratory work? You would like to do more things? **Teacher 28:** Well, sometimes I feel that there are things I avoid doing, because I have the wrong
When considering an action, the risk of attracting blame is balanced against the educational potential. The pupils' possibilities to learn seem, in these cases, to be of lesser importance. In the same way as the teacher eager for a trip to New York, several of our teachers describe how they are forced to consider a variety of risk scenarios. In these conversations, we can see signs of a 'precautionary principle' (Sandin, 2004) spreading and that the development potential, which is actually a part of finding oneself in the risk zone, is becoming diminished.

Discussion

As you know, security is mortals' chiefest enemy. (Macbeth)

Like the clearing of one's throat before a speech, this article could be introduced by a passage in which the authors – in order to safeguard themselves against the risk of being misunderstood – display an awareness of the fact that schools can be an unsafe and insecure place for pupils. Such a politically correct introductory text could, for example, direct attention to the fact that bullying and harassment exist in schools and that there are unsuspecting or even malicious teachers who violate their pupils, or that the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child is an important document. However, we chose to avoid such a beginning. Instead, our focus is on teachers and their management of risk, or more precisely on how a changing society forces teachers to invent new ways of thinking and acting, and how such ways may affect the work they do. At the same time, we want to call attention to the fact that risk is not always something negative, that it also includes a positive potential. The word 'risk' comes from the Portuguese verb meaning 'to dare'.

Giddens (2002) argues that risk is really a perilous game where dangers are balanced against future possibilities. In other words, to be in the risk zone does not only mean that one is subjected to danger, but also that one is situated in a zone of possibility and development. According to Dewey (1997), all thinking entails an element of risk taking because it arises from unknown situations and demands an intrusion into the unknown. Teaching is thus a risky business since no one can estimate the result of such an uncontrollable process, according to Biesta (2005). He writes:

To engage in learning always entails the risk that learning may have an impact on you, that learning may change you. This means, however, that education only begins when the learner is willing to take a risk. (Biesta, 2005, p. 61)

Risk thus has a positive logic and can be perceived as a dynamic force, a catalyst for change. Beck (1992), Douglas (1992) and Giddens (1996) argue that we must take advantage of the positive risk logic and raise a finger of warning at the negative logic of the risk society – a logic which is characterized by defensive strategies, where external experts make judgements, scapegoats are singled out, and the focus is shifted from risk taking to risk minimization and risk avoidance.

From the empirical examples, there is reason to assume that the negative logic is cemented as neo-liberal forms of scrutiny with harsher demands regarding the transparency of the profession growing in schools. Risk management now appears as an embedded segment of our institutions, including the school system. We cannot escape it, whether we want to or not. Schools and teachers are forced to find strategies that allow them to appear as competent risk analysts. The question is how one can handle the balance between the defensive precautionary principle of negative risk logic and the dynamic potential of positive risk logic.

All school personnel no doubt agree that pupils and their parents should feel that they have been assured that all the proper security measures have been taken. Most teachers also agree that there is reason, within reasonable limits, to hold them accountable for their professional conduct. What must not be forgotten is that even at the best of schools, errors and mistakes will occur. It is impossible to avoid all mistakes as long as teachers are human beings, as long as teaching is about interaction between people and as long as actions are based on the judgement of individuals rather than on objective evidence. In an inspection system that is becoming more and more aggressive, the searchlight is increasingly directed on the individual teacher. Perry (2006, p. 160) argues that a culture of 'naming, blaming and shaming' has become an integral part of the school system and of
the rest of society, where the media often play an important role. Blame is directed towards the professionals on the front line rather than against the institution. In our interviews, the teachers express a concern that they will be singled out in the media: 'To end up in the newspapers, that would be horrible' (Teacher 2, focus group). We can also see within other sections of the welfare services how the individual-centred scrutiny gives rise to collective traumas among professionals (Munro, 2004; Wolf & Serumhus, 2004).

How does one find a passable way for schools that are prepared to consider risk and assume responsibility for what they do while at the same time desiring to take risks and remain dynamic? Reason (2000) can perhaps offer a suggestion. He argues that the organizations themselves must assume a 'proactive' approach and redirect the scrutiny from individuals and towards the system – to 'take human error as a starting point for inquiry, not as a satisfactory explanation in itself' (Munroe, 2005, p. 380). This demands a more positive reporting culture so that recurring problems are discovered internally and measures can be developed and negotiated within the context (as they are within the Swedish health-care system) – a kind of internal transparency. Instead of viewing past errors in isolation or as personal failures, attempts should be made to generalize them and turn them into collective concerns, where the professionals appear as experts within their own field and where the framework and conditions that dictate daily life at schools can also be critically examined.

External scrutiny that builds on the notion of transparency of a profession can have a deteriorating effect on complex expert systems. The knowledge of teachers is, to a great extent, tied to persons and contexts. This knowledge cannot be translated into a scientifically 'precise' language and thus it cannot be fully understood by someone outside the context (Lindqvist & Nordånger, 2007). In other words, there is an epistemological gap that separates those who practise the expert system and those who observe and review it from the outside – or, an expert system can never be made completely transparent with the intention that outsiders shall be able to scrutinize if and how it works. Even so, the neo-liberal audit regimes rest on the ideal of full transparency and translation of different professional practices. Tsoukas (1997) argues that such translation processes undermine rather than strengthen the trust that is necessary for the expert systems to function. The more information regarding the expert system's internal functions that external observers try to obtain, the less likely they are to trust the practices taking place in the expert system; the less the professionals are trusted, the less likely they are to take advantage of the complex expert systems. Within audit cultures, what can be measured, predicted and documented receives priority. The knowledge inherent in expert systems is often of a completely different type. There is an obvious risk that such knowledge is devalued or marginalized as audit regimes continue to spread.

The Swedish school has, according to surveys that have examined the attitudes of pupils, never been perceived as secure as it is today. In response to a questionnaire conducted by the Swedish National Agency for Education (2006), 96% of all Swedish schoolchildren in grades seven to nine state that they 'always' feel secure in school, and in a report produced by the Swedish Teachers' Union (2007), almost 90% of all parents interviewed feel that the school of their own children works 'well'. In other words, there is still significant trust in what lies close at hand. However, when parents were asked how 'the Swedish school in general' works, only 61% of all parents think that it works 'well'. Thus, more than one-third of all parents think that the Swedish school functions poorly. A similar pattern occurs in the USA, as shown by Ginsberg & Lyche (2008). These reports present several images of the same school, and it is obvious that it is the general picture presented by the media which triggers the greatest lack of trust. McWilliam (2003) has, in her studies, shown that such a lack of trust leads, among other things, to the teacher moving his or her focus from a direct relationship with the pupil to a gathering of information regarding this person. Paradoxically, the will to ensure the quality of the school through external scrutiny and transparency leads, in the long run, to teachers becoming so occupied by their assurance and insurance strategies that they no longer have time for their pupils. The main character of the learning process, the person who is supposed to be protected, is thus alienated, which prompts the question of whether the project of learning itself may be considered too risky and insecure in the school of the future.
Safety has become the fundamental value of our time. Passions that were once devoted to a struggle to change the world (or to keep it the same) are now invested in trying to ensure that we are safe. (Furedi, 1997, p. 1)

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Notes

[1] The order of these authors is arbitrary and equal responsibility is assumed.

References


PER LINDQVIST and ULLA KARIN NORDÄNGER are both Associate Professors in Education in the School of Human Sciences at the University of Kalmar, Sweden. Their main research focus revolves around teacher education and teachers’ work, lives and knowledge. They are presently engaged in a large research project concerning teachers’ practical knowledge and its integration into teacher education.

Correspondence: Per Lindqvist and Ulla Karin Nordänger, School of Human Sciences, University of Kalmar, SE-391 82 Kalmar, Sweden (per.lindqvist@hik.se; ulla-karin.nordanger@hik.se).

JOAKIM LANDAHL is a Senior Lecturer in the School of Human Sciences at the University of Kalmar, Sweden. His research interests include modernization, teachers’ work and disciplinary problems in schools. Along with Per Lindqvist and Ulla Karin Nordänger, he is involved in the study on how the introduction of the risk society and audit cultures affect the work of teachers.

Correspondence: Joakim Landahl, School of Human Sciences, University of Kalmar, SE-391 82 Kalmar, Sweden (joakim.landahl@hik.se).

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Correspondence: Per Lindqvist and Ulla Karin Nordänger, School of Human Sciences, University of Kalmar, SE-391 82 Kalmar, Sweden (per.lindqvist@hik.se; ulla-karin.nordanger@hik.se).

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