

# Partnership between school and university

**Olle Holmberg**

My speech comprises two parts. First a short introduction saying something about our concept of teacher education at Malmö University; then the main issue – partnership between school and university based on concrete examples of a new era of cooperation and partnership.

Teacher education in Malmö has 8 000 students if you include every student attending our faculty, and 4 500 students if you only count full-time students.

In the year 2000, the Swedish government presented a bill on a new system of teacher education to the Swedish Parliament. All teachers, from pre-school teachers to upper secondary teachers, would have a similar basic competence on which they would build specializations depending on age profile or subject-area needs. Consequently, one integrated teaching degree was to replace eight previous teaching degrees. The bill, which was passed the same year, included close cooperation between schools and schools of education.

In Malmö we have developed a special concept of this new teacher education – we have had substantial leeway to interpret the intentions of the reform. This specific concept only exists in Malmö. It has two distinguishing features: the way of organizing learning theory and cooperation with schools.

We have major subjects (up to 180 ECTS) and minor subjects (together up to 90 ECTS). Major subjects are new profession-oriented subjects. You can describe them as a merger or amalgamation between traditional academic subjects and “teacher

knowledge" that is to say that broader knowledge a teacher needs to be able to educate pupils in the school. In a major subject such as Religious Science and Learning this means that the study of religion and religious beliefs is treated along with pedagogy, methodology, sociology etc. A similar broadened scope for what is studied is found in major subjects such as Mathematics and Learning and Culture, Media and Aesthetic Forms of Expression.

What the new system attempts to bring about is above all the disappearance of the old division between subject knowledge on the one hand and learning and teaching on the other. In Sweden like in so many other countries, these dimensions have often been studied separately. Now we have created a new arena for profession-oriented integrated subjects and we are building new master courses and doctoral courses on this foundation.

In some aspects we have learned from the dentists. Not many years ago, future dentists had most of their training at schools of medicine. They choose among courses together with students who were going to be doctors. Then they went into a special room dressed in a white coat starting to torture people with a drill. That was their clinical work. As you can see a dentist's training was also divided into two knowledge areas. In due course, the Faculty of Odontology created profession oriented subjects by amalgamating subject theory and clinical experiences.

In teacher education we also have minor subjects. The students have a considerable freedom to make choices when it comes to minor subjects. They can study these subjects together with other students aiming at other professional careers. When you are studying a minor subject you are not necessarily relating it to school, pupils and learning. The main part of the teacher knowledge is acquired in the major subject.

## **Partnership – partner schools**

I am going to provide some background to our ideas about student teachers' school placement and a short outline of our concept.

A. Criticism. We have had a critical discussion about teacher education for several years now – at a national level – and in the Malmö region. This criticism gives a sort of political argument for changes in teacher education. You can divide this criticism into two parts. Schools and local authorities – that is teachers, head teachers, politicians – point out that teacher education is too weak when it comes to giving students practical skills useful in the classroom. On the other hand, the departments of the University of Lund criticize teacher education for being too practical and too weak when it comes to academic skills - theory, subject, research. They are probably both right. We need to be more practical, be more in contact with the living life in the classrooms, more in contact with the contradictions there and with the non-perfectionism there, the non-ideal teaching processes existing there. On the other hand, we must also be more theoretical, more actively seeking theories that can explain what happens in school and in learning processes. Perhaps teacher education is too abstract – and ought to be more theoretical – and more practical!

The criticism coming from the local authorities, the municipalities, was the most influential. The Swedish Association of Local Authorities even suggested in the late 90s that the legal right to examine student teachers should be moved from the university to an independent institute outside the university. This would have been the first step towards moving teacher education from universities and higher education to municipalities. In the summer of 1998, the Minister of the School brought this discussion to an end by stating that teacher education should stay at university level. However, what happened in this discussion demonstrates discontent among those who receive our students as teachers. In the south of Sweden the criticism from local authorities was very hard. We had to do something about it, had to bring teacher education in closer contact with schools, had to start to cooperate in a

more serious way.

We also – and I think this is very important – had a new situation concerning how teacher education institutions were governed in a new decentralized system. In the old days, teacher education was governed by authorities in Stockholm and when the institution at the local level was criticized by the local community you could always refer to Stockholm: “We cannot do this and we cannot do that. It has been decided in Stockholm. You have to talk to them.” In other words, we could avoid criticism. This is not possible any more. You have to discuss with the local community. You may decide for yourself now, you must not ask Stockholm. Decentralisation has given teacher education a new responsibility towards the surrounding community.

B. If you look back, in Sweden, how can you describe the relation between teacher education and school? This relation has a long tradition and it still occupies the minds of many teacher educators. I have thought about four characteristics in this relation.

1) The relation has been a normative one. Teacher education has been an ought to-education, you ought to do this as a teacher and you ought to do that. Here in our seminars - that was the general idea - we educated good teachers, with good humanitarian minds, good methods and so on. These teachers should then influence the school with their good new progressive ideas. The light from teacher education should bring truth to skeptics in schools. I am aware of the religious overtone.

You can even talk about a kind of dichotomy between civilization (teacher education) and nature (school). And nature was wild and dangerous. You were taking risks of young student teachers ending up in bad company when they met their school. You therefore had to choose these supervisors carefully – so that their ideas were the same as those represented by the School of Education.

The time has come to challenge this notion of consensus and norms without losing all of it. A vocational education must be normative in some ways.

2) The relation has been unequal when it comes to power and influence. It was teacher education up here – and the school down there. We formulated all problems, we administrated students' school practice, we used schools as necessary training arenas, but we seldom discussed education as a whole with schools and local authorities, and we never were strongly impressed by suggestions from schools. Teacher education was our concern; schools were merely there to serve us.

Teachers, headmasters and local politicians were very aware of this lack of balance and used every opportunity to criticize "those people" working in teacher education and the institution itself.

3) The relation was built on a specific conception of "theory" (teacher education) and "practice" (school). Theory came first, practice later. Students had to grasp theory first and then apply it in a practical situation. In such a conception schools have the role of training ground for all the bright theoretical ideas produced in teacher education.

There are many problems with such a concept. I will just put forward a practical one. Many students can be so engaged in verifying a specific theory that they are not capable of seeing practice in its whole, in its complexity, in its impurity (I used to talk about "the dirty reality"). Sometimes I think that teacher education avoids going into the practice in an open way because if we do, we cannot apply all the ready-made models, all the methods and theories we are used to.

4) The relation was based on a very fundamental idea of older teachers as models for young students: You could learn how to be a teacher by looking at the activities performed by an experienced teacher. This is an idea of heritage. Traditions and

competences are transferred from one generation to another in a rather uncomplicated way. However, this is not an easy operation today. We have a weakening of traditions in every area of life. It is more difficult than ever to copy and transfer ways of thinking and doing from one generation to another. It goes for parents – and it goes for teachers.

It follows that you have to have another objective for students' learning processes at partner schools. Students have to learn to reflect on what is happening in "classrooms" almost regardless of how able the teacher is. Therefore Teacher Education in Malmoe does not choose schools, teachers/supervisors and so on because they are especially capable or especially progressive. We cooperate with "ordinary" schools – and "ordinary" is in this perspective not a negative concept.

### **How we do it**

Our students "work" at a "partner school" 20% of the time during most of their periods of studies. Of course they have some visits to other schools, to other learning environments, mainly to be able to get perspectives on their own school.

We have made our choices: Our students "work" in the school (we do not talk so much about "practice"). Our students stay in one school. Our students have no specially appointed supervisors (or should not have); they work together with existing teams of teachers at our partner schools. Our students no longer bring any assignments to their partner schools in order not to interfere with the ordinary teaching. Our students are not alone as teacher students at the partner school. They have many fellow students at the same place of work. They are visible at the school; they make a substantial contribution to the school work force.

You can of course choose to do things differently. You can for example have a system where the students change schools regularly in order to come in contact with

different contexts, socially and culturally. But every choice has its advantages and its disadvantages. We think that our choices match our concept of what matters in teacher education.

I would like to suggest two key words in our concept of partner schools and students' contact with practice. I will discuss the first key word only briefly and the second one more extensively.

### **Depth**

The students are at the same school during a long period of time in order to come beneath the surface of the culture of the school. They have to acquire profound knowledge of the context, of pupils, teachers, habits etc. to really get to understand the conditions of the teacher profession.

The students are also more likely to be needed in the daily schoolwork if they are present for a long time. One example: One of our lecturers told me some years ago that one of her students had called her asking if she could participate in a project at her partner school. Some of the teachers there had formed a project concerning girls who acted out all their feelings in a very destructive way and they had noticed that the student was interested in that subject area. May I? asked the student. Of course, said Karin. The interesting thing about this little story is not the project itself, but the fact that the teachers from the school invited the student to participate. They had not done that with a more temporary visitor.

Being needed in the work at the partner school is good for the students' learning process towards becoming teachers.

### **Mutual benefit**

Naturally teacher education needs contact with schools. For teacher education it is

of course important to enable students to come so close to concrete activities with children and young people that they are able to "read" what happens or seems to happen in schools, without these activities being "rigged" in any way. It is these lively but also contradictory activities occurring in school that make theoretical reflection necessary. Consequently, from this perspective the benefit is obvious.

Now I want to discuss the benefit for the school. Without mutual benefit I do not think that we can come closer to each other – school and teacher education. Instead teacher education continues to be an affair for a few individual supervisors – and not for schools.

If you were to widen the issue you can therefore talk about a common interest in educational development and you can formulate the basic question like this: How can teacher education offer support to municipalities and schools in their work on educational development? What practical benefits could schools have for teacher education – today – and not only in the future when students come back after finishing their teacher training?

Here a few practical remarks on this topic:

1. The students can be resources in the teaching process. They must not necessarily stand in front of a class. They can support individual pupils, supervise groups, contribute to the planning in the work team of teachers, do some research concerning planned projects and so on. Naturally they take their instructions from the school.
2. The students can function as bridges between generations in school, between teachers (the average age of whom is quite high in Sweden) and the pupils. ("When I was a pupil I didn't like when the teacher did this or that. Can't we do it differently?").
3. The students can be bridges to teacher education and to Malmö University. Through the students, the university becomes visible in the school. And we

use this visibility. We have series of seminars for example where partner school teachers are invited, we have lectures and so on. With mail direct to the school and the head teachers, it is easy to maintain contact . We have more and more cooperation in the area of research where problems emerge from practice and are formulated by teachers in school. We have for example a research project in cooperation with the city of Malmö – “Studies in the school of heterogeneity and many cultures”.

4. All students have to write a dissertation of 10 credit points – that is 10 weeks’ of hard work. Since the student is familiar with a certain partner school and its culture, it is natural that the student works with a project that concerns the school. This is a tremendous resource for educational development – and it is hardly used today.
5. Teacher Education can move its most excellent courses out into schools and enable some of the staff there opportunities to participate along with student teachers.
6. Special funds are set aside for the municipalities’ work with teacher education and students in practice. This money goes from the state level to teacher Education and directly out to the local authorities. Sometimes, however, the local authorities asked us to keep the money and use it for inservice training of teachers, even at the level of Masters courses.
7. Finally – but most importantly – teacher education along with schools can participate in the public debate concerning one of the most central political issues: education, the running of schools, results, development. Together teacher education and schools can build a critical public arena, and be each other’s critical friends. Such a local arena is particularly important in a highly decentralized school system.

This is the basic foundation upon which we are building other cooperation projects together with schools and local authorities. The keyword in this relation is trust, mutual trust. Now we are establishing new projects in teamwork with municipalities, projects that we could not have imagined six or seven years ago. Just one example among many:

In a project called Think-tanks we have agreements with 26 of 33 municipalities in Skåne, the dynamic county in southern Sweden. The general idea is this: In discussion with municipalities and schools we focus on a number of problems dealing with school development. Each problem is formulated close to practice, then elaborated and finally put into a think-tank containing teachers from school, researchers from our university and other wise persons from other areas in society – together about seven-eight persons. A think-tank is funded by municipalities interested in the problem. The task for a think-tank is to go into the problem, analyse it, reflect on it, give some national and international research perspectives on the problem – and propose some measures that the municipalities can use in the short run to improve their education - and at the same time propose some research projects and point out where you can get the funds to carry them out. Perhaps a think-tank works half a year and in the end reports back to the municipalities.

There are of course differences between the municipality and the university when it comes to dealing with problems and this fact has influenced the construction of the think-tank. The municipality/school has the full responsibility to make sure that the circumstances for learning are beneficial, that the pupils really are learning what they are supposed to learn and that they are reasonably happy with their stay at the school. This responsibility is immediate and constant. You cannot delay any action if something turns out to be dysfunctional. This need to act often results in very little time to really reflect on problems. You are forced into speedy solutions using superficial analysis and popular ways of thinking. The university has of course not the same responsibility, researchers work long-term and in-depth and someti-

mes problems have no direct relevance for a school or a group of teachers.

In this context the Think-tanks are projects at "half distance": there are no fast solutions with a minimum of reflection, instead there is more profound analysis – but not so profound that it requires several years of research to arrive at preliminary results and recommendations.

This is an example of a future closer cooperation between the school and the university dealing with a problem that exists in all European countries: how to improve the school system and the learning outcomes with the opportunities that exist in a decentralized system.