

9-1-2002

# Role of High School Teachers in Swedish Psychology Education: A Phenomenological Study

Torsten Norlander

*Karlstad University, at.norlander@mailbox.swipnet.se*

Alexander Blom

*Karlstad University*

Trevor Archer

*Göteborg University, Trevor.Archer@psy.gu.se*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://nsuworks.nova.edu/tqr>

 Part of the [Quantitative, Qualitative, Comparative, and Historical Methodologies Commons](#), and the [Social Statistics Commons](#)

---

## Recommended APA Citation

Norlander, T., Blom, A., & Archer, T. (2002). Role of High School Teachers in Swedish Psychology Education: A Phenomenological Study. *The Qualitative Report*, 7(3), 1-17. Retrieved from <https://nsuworks.nova.edu/tqr/vol7/iss3/7>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the The Qualitative Report at NSUWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Qualitative Report by an authorized administrator of NSUWorks. For more information, please contact [nsuworks@nova.edu](mailto:nsuworks@nova.edu).

---



**Qualitative Research Graduate Certificate**  
*Indulge in Culture*  
Exclusively Online • 18 Credits

**NSU**  
NOVA SOUTHEASTERN  
UNIVERSITY

**LEARN MORE**

NOVA SOUTHEASTERN

## Role of High School Teachers in Swedish Psychology Education: A Phenomenological Study

### **Abstract**

A descriptive, qualitative analysis of in-depth interviews involving six high school teachers of psychology was carried out in order to ascertain the factors contributing to the outcome of education in the discipline. The Empirical Phenomenological Psychological method (EPP-method) was used. Eighteen categories of "meaning units" were derived from the analysis of the interview materials and are described together with representative quotations taken directly from the raw material. Didactic image but also school leadership, governors, politicians and students all influenced content, organisation and teaching of the psychology course, which is viewed not only as an autonomous subject in its own right but also a necessary preparation of young people for the realities of adulthood.

### **Keywords**

Didactic, EPP-method, Psychology, Teachers

### **Creative Commons License**



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-Share Alike 4.0 License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/).

# **Role of High School Teachers in Swedish Psychology Education: A Phenomenological Study**

by  
**Torsten Norlander, Alexandra Blom, and Trevor Archer<sup>±</sup>**

*The Qualitative Report*, Volume 7, Number 3 September, 2002

---

## **Abstract**

A descriptive, qualitative analysis of in-depth interviews involving six high school teachers of psychology was carried out in order to ascertain the factors contributing to the outcome of education in the discipline. The Empirical Phenomenological Psychological method (EPP-method) was used. Eighteen categories of "meaning units" were derived from the analysis of the interview materials and are described together with representative quotations taken directly from the raw material. Didactic image but also school leadership, governors, politicians and students all influenced content, organisation and teaching of the psychology course, which is viewed not only as an autonomous subject in its own right but also a necessary preparation of young people for the realities of adulthood.

**Key Words:** Didactic, EPP-method, Psychology, Teachers

## **Introduction**

The Swedish system of education is identified by a strong centralizing tradition whereby different goals of education and rules not only for local Boards of Governors but also for teachers' training are defined with great attention to detail. An effort has been initiated, however, although still in its cradle, to create an increased decentralization within the Swedish school affairs. Earlier studies have demonstrated how teachers' training functions as a conservative determinant of teachers' work (e.g., Hatton, [1997](#)). Against this background, it was considered necessary to study how teachers, imprinted by the centralization tradition, develop didactic and personal relations in order to be able to compare these, in the future, with teachers imprinted with more decentralized relations. Not least important in this context is the integration of teachers into qualitative studies (Shkedi, [1998](#)), in order to obtain a deeper understanding.

Under the law governing the Swedish school system each pupil has a right to an equal level of education, independent of gender, geographical location as well as social and economic circumstance. Furthermore, democratic principles are emphasised within the schools: "School activities shall be formulated in accordance with basic democratic values. Each and everyone active within the school shall safeguard the respect for every person's self-esteem and respect for our common environment." (Skolverket, [1999](#), p. 9). At high school level, the requirement for students to influence how the education is formulated is also present.

According to the school laws, it is postulated how many hours shall be assigned to each discipline or course on each respective educational program. Under most programs, psychology is assigned forty hours that are presented usually during the final (third) year of high school. According to the course outline for psychology (Skolverket, [1994](#)), the objective for the discipline is reviewed, what competence students must have at the end of the course, grading criteria for the marking "Passed" and "Passed with credit" and finally comments relating to multidisciplinary interactions. The goal for the psychology course shall be: "The goal of the course is that students acquire knowledge regarding different psychological perspectives, theories and models as well as their application. The course shall provide too guidelines about different areas of knowledge. Of these above demands the first-mentioned is of special dignity." (Skolverket, [1994](#), p. 1).

Arfwedson and Arfwedson ([1991](#)) focus upon those questions constructed by didactics. These questions are: What? Why? And How? They have written: "Before teachers enter the classroom they must have decided first *what* they intend to deal with in the education, have some reason *why* that particular topic is important, as well as having thought out *how* they themselves and the students shall tackle the topic." (Arfwedson & Arfwedson, [1991](#), p. 19). The answer to these didactic questions provides *in reality* the education itself. It is important that the teachers illustrate a didactic globality since it is likely that a learner-centered education is influenced by many factors other than technical ones as Tabulawa ([1998](#)) in a completely different cultural environment (Botswana). There, the teachers' classroom procedures were modulated by the teachers' assumptions regarding the nature of knowledge and the ways it ought to be communicated, their perceptions of students, and the goal of schooling.

Andersson ([1999](#)) postulates that the students' autonomy is greatly limited within the Swedish school system and that ingrained attitudes often control teachers. Teachers demand better performances from students judged to be in the highest level. Unfortunately, the reciprocal relation is maintained for the least successful students: teachers expect worse performances from these. There may exist too a tendency to have less to do with the worst students in order to reduce stress and negative emotions under test feedback sessions, as shown in a North American study (Stough & Emmer, [1998](#)).

A comprehensive study has been carried out by Jonsson ([1995](#)), described in "Studies on youth and schooling in Sweden". This project is known under the title "Life's project" ("Livsprojektet") and has extended for several years during which pupils, from 14 to 18 years of age, have been interviewed about different aspects of school life. One result that emerged was that 18 year olds, despite their civil status, were not allowed to participate in matters of any dignity in school. The right influence to decision-making limited in the main to control of class savings or the destination of the next class outing. According to the students, they were not allowed to decide upon important issues such as textbooks or the content of courses.

In the investigation, the students' attitudes to the school were registered also. One third experience school as something positive but as many experienced school as something negative, exemplifying that it was boring, monotonous and that the teachers did not care. Of the latter third (negative), 90 percent considered that the textbooks were most often boring. Another interesting result that emerged was that about 40 percent agreed with the statement: "Very little of what

occupies us interests me. Almost the same proportion agreed also with the following statement: "Within the bounds of school work we seldom treat matters concerning real life." The need for a "folkloristic approach" (Hamer, [1999](#)) is evident, i.e. where the teacher grasps responsibility for communicating that which has to be taught in such a manner that it becomes meaningful for all the pupils in each one's special situation, rather than viewing teaching as an opportunity for fulfilling the teachers' personal identity projects (Convey, [1999](#)).

The purpose of the present study was to examine a collection of Swedish high school teachers' notions upon the psychology discipline and its didactic. It was considered important to study how teachers, imprinted by the centralization tradition (the present Swedish tradition), develop didactic and personal relations in order to be able to compare these, in the future, with teachers imprinted with more decentralized relations (perhaps how it will be in the future). The Empirical Phenomenological Psychological method (the PEP-method) with its concentration on outlooks-on-life and personal views was selected as method for the qualitative analysis.

## **Method**

### **Participants**

Six active psychology teachers from different high school educational programs comprised the interviewees. The starting point was to interview at least one person from each of the three main approaches within high school: the theoretical, the applied and the adult educational programs. Each of the participants had worked in the teaching profession for many years. Each had been teaching from 20 to 30 years and had accumulated a great deal of experience. The teaching subjects that each also had varied: most had social sciences or some discipline within social sciences. Among the interviewees were two women and four men and all the participants worked in high schools within the province of Värmland, Sweden.

### **Procedure**

Prior to the primary meeting, the interviewees were informed about the purpose of the investigation and approximately how long the interview was expected to last. Each was allowed to choose the time and place for carrying out the interview. This approach was chosen to ensure the comfort and security of each so that each interview could accomplish as much as possible. All six interviewees chose to hold the interviews at the school that employed them. Some interviews were carried out in the teachers' staff room, others in a separate group room at their respective school. The deep interview technique was chosen as the method of data assembly (Kvale, [1997](#)). A guide for interviews with open-ended questions and issues that influenced several different areas pertaining to the teachers' views on the psychology discipline was applied (e.g., "what are your thoughts on the situations you encounter the pupils"; "what are your ambitions with your teaching in the psychology discipline"). The interviews were all recorded on a tape-recorder following permission from each of the interviewees. Prior to the start of the interview, each teacher received a contract and was informed verbally also about its contents namely that everything arising out of the interview was ensured complete confidentiality. Each interview took on average slightly more than one hour to complete.

## **The Self of the Researchers**

There were three researchers, one is professor in psychology (Archer), one is associate professor in psychology and also lecturer in didactic (Norlander) and one was a student attending courses for future teachers (Blom). It was the student who conducted all the interviews.

## **Analysis of the Material**

Since the purpose of the study was to provide information about conceptualizations of meaning a phenomenological approach and methodology was both important and necessary. A phenomenological approach takes as its point of departure each individual's own experience of the particular phenomenon under study (see e.g., Bengtsson, [1998](#)) and seeks to identify both similarities and dissimilarities within and between phenomena (Bjurwill, [1995](#)), with regard to "what" and "how" these occur. There are a wide variety of methods for phenomenological research within psychology (e.g., Giorgi, [1997](#); Lemon & Taylor, [1998](#)) that are moderately similar in that each implies an inductive thematic process of analysis, in order to obtain theoretical insights. Thus, the Empirical Phenomenological Psychological method or EPP-method (Karlsson, [1995](#)) offers a more concrete and straightforward analysis that presents the assembled data in a more concentrated form (see Norlander, Gård, Lindholm, & Archer, [in press](#); Pramling, Norlander, & Archer, [2001](#); Pramling, Norlander, & Archer, [in press](#)). This method, applied here, pursues an analysis in five steps. These five steps ought not to be conceived as strict rules to be followed but rather should be adapted according to the phenomenon under study and the condition of the material.

### **Step 1.**

The researcher reads the material repeatedly until a robust image of that material has been achieved. This reading of the material takes place with focus upon relevant psychological phenomena but without the purpose of testing the eventual validity of any particular hypothesis.

### **Step 2.**

'Units of meaning' or MUs are distinguished. The text is divided into smaller parts whereby these MUs are identified every time some 'switch in meaning' regarding the phenomenon under study occurs. It must be noted that these units are not to be considered elements but rather as integrated parts of the whole context of the text.

### **Step 3.**

MUs are interpreted with regard to their psychological meaning. The implicit horizons of the text (see Gadamer, [1960/1997](#)) are rendered explicit. Here, the language of the participant (interviewee) is reformulated to a scientifically applicable language that is independent of any special psychological theoretical commitment.

### **Step 4.**

MUs are combined to make a 'situated structure' in the form of a synopsis. These synopses may look quite different depending upon the phenomenon that is being referred to. The description must seek to make clear the 'how' (noesis) and 'what' (noema) of the phenomenon.

### **Step 5.**

This 'situated structure' is converted to a 'general structure', under the condition that this conversion is achieved without any loss of meaningfulness or to 'typological structures'. Here, the researcher may lay the empirical material aside in order to reflect at a more abstract level. The result of the analysis is presented in the form of qualitatively different themes, which may be explained and exemplified with reference to citations derived from the empirical material.

### **Reliability and Validity**

A test of reliability was carried out whereby two judges were used. The judges were assigned the task of categorizing eight categories that were chosen randomly. From these categories a further random selection of five "meaning-units" from each category was made. Judge 1 received a 75 percent concordance with the categorization obtained, whereas Judge 2 received an 83 percent concordance. The total reliability measure thus became 79 percent. Therefore the necessity of knowledge pertaining to context was verified. The lack of contextuality appears to be one of the pitfalls associated with attempts of this type to measure reliability (Theman, [1983](#)).

The type of validity applied has been defined as communicative validity, consisting of the researcher's ability to communicate and motivate the results, judgements derived through argumentation in a situation of common discussion (Bernstein, [1991](#); Kvale, [1997](#)). It is critical that the premises and standpoints are made explicit. In the present study, this necessity was accomplished through the process of explaining, developing and exemplifying every category with quotations derived from the raw empirical material.

Thus, the relevant criterion affects the degree to which the researchers succeed in communicating their categorization rather than whether or not other researchers may have similar categorizations (Doverborg & Pramling Samuelsson, [2000](#)) (i.e., that the research is inter-subjectively communicable and testable.

## **Results**

The eighteen categories resulting from the analyses are presented here. The number of "meaning-units" (MUs) was 314. In the presentation below a markedly shortened description of the categories is rendered, which is followed by a few citations the interviews associated with each category. The exemplars are randomly gathered from the pool of MUs since our primary interest is not individually answers (Karlsson, [1993](#)). Further, the categories are presented in a randomized order and not after importance or any other strategy.

### **1. Textbooks and guidelines are the points of departure for teaching (MU 21)**

Teachers use textbooks or guidelines, as well as the local or basic course outline, as the structure for teaching.

**Example:** "Of course I have a structure for teaching and I use that book, Martin Levander, and I will absolutely have a course text as structure for the pupils" / "then I have in fact cut out and glued, so obtain some potpourri of one, three, four, five different textbooks that we've used" / "I use Levander, Psychology for High school as a textbook." / "Then I have of course started with that thick book that you see lying under the tape-recorder, the Psychology book, that is some sort of a basic text. Then we have these guidelines that we have align ourselves with, since they are the frameworks." / "here as I have organized the teaching the closest thing to a course outline that we have exists only in my thoughts and this in some way must be the base for the subject."

## **2. Instructions from school leadership influences teaching (MU 26)**

Teachers receive instructions and rules from school leaders, course outlines, etc., that he/she must safeguard during teaching. These factors control many aspects of how the discipline of psychology is shaped, often in a negative direction.

**Example:** "And one can also consider it to be a little remarkable as the A-course in psychology is of course ... it should be the same, it is of course a problem generally, and its the same thing in the economy discipline and the thing that it should be the same course but of course in practice it is not and it is serious I think because politicians have decided that they should receive the same course over different schools so one must have similar demands" / "Yes, I think I can describe things as they are. Nowadays there isn't anything ... I have no account from which to buy textbooks, but rather its nil and its been nil for many years" / "We have to deal with crises that the High school Board of Governors has decided we shall have, crises, that I cannot ignore, and I think its good, it's a reasonable part" / "we have of course had gigantic groups in psychology, over forty, that is quite, well, twenty is just about right. Well, this has been in the last few years and it is really onerous, but as you know there is no ceiling for how many pupils you can have. So that's how it is" / "I allocate gradings according to the criteria and it says there what is necessary for Passed and Very Good."

## **3. The teacher decides upon the content of what is taught (MU 44)**

The teacher is the one who decides which issues should be included in what is taught in the psychology discipline. He/she decides also upon other aspects such as grading, test content, lessons, etc.

**Example:** "but then I work a lot with stencils which I think is reasonable" / "Always lessons, yes. So I have a class with two lessons a week, so its always time for lessons then and tests of lessons, yes, I can have that. I usually say that we're going to have at least one test of lessons but not more than ten" / "I have never had tests of lessons in all my life. I have been a teacher for more than thirty years but never given lessons. Never given lessons and consequently never lesson tests either" / "I use articles from newspapers and journals that I think are informative" / "One uses a lot, of course ... I have a whole set of files with social psychology exercises. When



we study differential psychology then we use different tests of different sorts, yes, that I have worked a lot with and so have a lot of"

#### **4. The teacher's own interests are reflected in what is taught (MU 9)**

Those areas that the teacher personally considers interesting or has extra knowledge about through earlier experiences often influences what is taught.

**Example:** "but I usually start off with differential psychology, that's how its been. Here, in the book the differences between people are dealt with and that is due to my having worked at FOA (Swedish Defence Organization) upon it, I worked as a test psychologist there for a while so I thought I knew most about that. And then later I usually take up social psychology because I've also worked on that, as social psychologist and test psychologist" / "I think myself that there is a force in behaviorism and I take that up in psychology of course" / "social psychology, to be able to function in groups. But this has always been relatively strong. And I think that is pretty good because I like it too. It's possible that that's my way of controlling things".

#### **5. Teachers maintain a dialogue with pupils during teaching (MU 19)**

Teachers maintain a dialogue with pupils during the course of teaching in the classroom. Teachers discuss too with students singly upon matters affecting them, such as gradings or truancy.

**Examples:** "Yes, some sort of dialogue [---] as it can best be accommodated both the pupils and I think, educational dialogue so to speak" / "In fact I usually make it clear in the beginning when I first have the classes, which gradings I set, and here too we generate a discussion about how gradings are set, what is good for them to know about" / "then I have talks with them singly and tell them that I've weighed all the possibilities and consider that one shall have just two alternatives [---] / "Well yes, I don't know if there is a good collective name for this, I have so to say many different forms, but what fits me very well is that form of dialogue in the classroom where I throw out some form of 'red herring' also to see whether they take the bite" / "then I speak to the pupil in question and find out what's going on, for example whether its truancy or a good grade or some such thing".

#### **6. Students contribute and influence teaching (MU 24)**

The teaching is formulated following student influence. This occurs to greater or lesser extents but leads to the situation whereby students contribute to and influence the consequences of teaching in psychology.

**Example:** "Then they're allowed to choose, the pupils, if they want even larger tests or if they want to present a paper" / "well it was not I as teacher who decided that we should continue without textbooks but rather I discussed it with the class, 'what do you think we should do? 'shall we try without (a textbook)?" / "I then present these different alternatives and describe what one can do, and then they say that 'we can't really choose, why don't you choose'. Yes, I say I know exactly what it is I want to have, I know exactly what is most interesting of all this but its not I

that matters. And you need to know it now for when you do know what its all about it will be too late for your part. I can of course tell you about how others have chosen ... in some way we arrive at something we can put together" / "Here we have a majority vote, is how we do it" / "...and I ask the class, we have a little planning period in the beginning of the course where I try to suggest what I think will be suitable and then I say 'you have half-an-hour to discuss things with each other, if you think this could be something then you have a chance to write down what you think that we need to change. If so, then you come in with an alternative solution that you have discussed and I shall try to adapt that to what I have myself thought out and so we shall see where we end up. It's a small negotiation between the class and myself."

## **7. The students work independently or in groups (MU 23)**

Independent work takes place during lessons whereby the single student or a group of students select a particular topic to work on.

**Example:** "I take up the issue of abnormal psychology and then I've allowed group work where they can choose a disorder for example in a group and present this to the others later" / "but in this class there are thirty-two pupils and they have a special topic that they may choose themselves but it does have to have relevance with what we've dealt with in some way, so they choose the topic in this way and have time allocated for this. Then the thing is to choose the topic first and then acquire the necessary literature, checking the authors. Then I like them to write a theory part of two and a half pages but then do a field study of a couple of pages. The field study must relate to the theoretical part, so if someone's writing about schizophrenia then I want them to do the field study in the form of an interview or questionnaire or a test of knowledge" / "Yes, then they choose their own areas, timely areas, it's usually abortion issues, the right to live or not, euthanasia or that type of issue that they write as a factual article and then there's their own notions that can be a problem, what. These three points tend to occur within the problem of ethics, I've experienced many times. Oh, then they present their contributions, discuss them and receive questions from the other pupils, so to say, 'what did they ground their ideas on?'" / "The pupils do the investigations themselves as well themselves and appreciate this a great deal".

## **8. The pupils consider that certain areas within psychology are more interesting than others (MU 16)**

Within the discipline of psychology there are areas that appeal to the students more than others.

**Example:** "Yes, perception and needs and emotion and stress and abnormal behavior they consider exciting, they consider they will have those" / "Social psychology is usually unkindly treated, its always so sad and we ought to have more of that but they seem that developmental psychology sounds more exciting when they hear the headings development and crisis" / "To take a practical example, problems, teenage problems or something they can solve. They think that's very interesting" / "the children at child and leisure care are very interested in all sorts of disorders, those occurring, almost like an epidemic. These are anorexia and bulimia and I don't know what, Asperger's syndrome and ..." / "Oh, specially social psychology where I have a whole lot of exercises and sort of learn-to-know-yourself exercises and things like that that are much appreciated"

## **9. Films and TV-programs are used in education (MU 12)**

As aids to teaching, teachers use films or recorded TV-programs that treat some topic within psychology.

**Example:** "Eh, I show a few video films and such-like" / "I record a TV program and so on and then show it" / "I don't know if you've seen those films with the misses Elliot, misses Jane Elliot, brown and blue eyes. That's what we usually see" / "Then I have something, 'Julia's Phobia', about a girl suffering from a phobia of pigeons on Sergel's square in Stockholm. That's good." / "We watch some TV program where the experiments have been performed, or a film, or something like that".

## **10. Psychology as a discipline should be a challenge to students (MU 8)**

The discipline of psychology should not just give students exact answers but rather induce an understanding that the world and the discipline is more complex than such.

**Example:** "I want psychology to make a hole in their image that everything is so expected, that there is a simple answer to everything" / "I usually say something like this that a good teacher should not give all the answers to all the questions but rather induce more questions from the class than they started out with, so that they can work it out themselves" / "I view it in this way, that is I see it as a main task to puncture any absolute certainties" / "set things rolling in their minds" / Then its clear that one can never obtain all the answers to all the question, but one can get a few".

## **11. Psychology deal with knowledge about divergence of ideas (MU 14)**

It is important to understand that there are many schools of thought and diversification of notions within psychology. These are often very different and do not often represent the same viewpoint.

**Example:** "Oh, I present a view different standpoints. I want them to try to understand the fundamental different between these standpoints" / "I carry on a lot so that they will understand that psychology is not just one notion but a whole net of notions and school of thoughts that sometimes oppose each other markedly" / "In psychology there can exist more than one answer that may all be correct" / "To be able to view events from more than one aspect is rather amusing, I think" / "and what one does now, rather than what was done earlier, is to emphasize the psychological perspective and present more about Freud, for example, and more about humanistic psychologists and such, i.e. the different perspectives" / "This development something that has emerged latterly, that is the emphasis on different schools of thought".

## **12. Psychology optimizes learning about oneself and others (MU 21)**

Through the study of psychology students may achieve a greater understanding of their own persons and behavioral repertoire. He/she may also achieve insights into others' lives and through this have a better understanding for other people.

**Example:** "Yes, it provides a good understanding of people and self, for example, that is important for one to be able to do if one is to cope" / "Knowing whether or not one possesses normal abilities may be obtained from the acquisition of self-insight, or whether there may be something strange with oneself, and so on" / "one may coach oneself to develop an improved empathic ability" / "There is a lot of talk about developing social knowledge in order to be able to cope with any profession and be able to function successfully in group settings" / "Yes, it is about being able to develop self-insights and being able to cope with fame as well as criticism, and so on, so one can cope with an occupation, and it's important that one's able to do this or as its importance in the continuance of one's own life" / "Yes, knowledge of oneself and others ..., and develop a few thoughts and so on. Contemplations about why one behaves in a certain way in certain situations ..., that one feels as one does and behaves"

### **13. Psychology only receives a restricted number of teaching hours (MU 23)**

In the course outline psychology is assigned forty hours of teaching and is in relation to other disciplines a relative small discipline. Many consider this too restricted so that they are unable to complete a sufficiently desirable extent of teaching.

**Example:** "No, one cannot achieve the necessary extent of psychology when the number of hours is so restricted" / "Unfortunately I must say that we accomplish very little in the way of experimentation in the ordinary sense, just a couple. On such a short course it would take too much time, so we have to be careful" / "If one then intends treating the different theoretical standpoints to all this, and then do it within forty hours, or sorry forty lessons, that's the issue" / "It is that there are so few hours, it's much more difficult to get to know a class in psychology then" / "The time assigned, forty hours, is clearly too restrictive and could easily do with many more hours on the discipline"

### **14. Psychology is an interesting and necessary discipline (MU 16)**

Psychology is described by the teachers as a discipline that both they themselves and the students consider exciting and amusing. They consider too that it is an important discipline that is required.

**Example:** "and it's fun teaching psychology because there's a gravity to it. I mean just dependent on the age with self-searching and all that, then it's a gratifying discipline to have in fact, I think" / "But psychology is an amusing discipline to have I think. It is interesting and one learns a lot" / "Then I think that it is an important discipline and everyone ought to study it" / "I have evaluations from each course when each is finished and in nine cases out of ten there are appreciative remarks. And I take that as a sign that it makes sense what we are doing" / "If one comes from secondary school one has not had the discipline psychology and when one then begins then one starts to think 'it's really great!'"

### **15. Certain students have more difficulties with psychology than others (MU 12)**

Certain students have greater difficulty than others in coping with psychology whereas for others it's much easier. This consideration pertains both to single students and to groups of students, often within different programs.

**Example:** "I had the economy program previously, now they don't study psychology any longer, there I had substantially more that failed [...] and in fact I have a class now where I'm going to have ten, no more, thirteen failed maybe, in a class of twenty-five." / "Then I have one from Iraq who has great difficulty with language and then of course Levander is very difficult for him" / "The N-classes are usually more proficient, I get better means there than in the S-classes, generally that's the case" / "It is clear that one has to adapt oneself but the difference becomes larger on HP and the other programs, that is because it becomes more elementary" / "If one may speak in slightly more general terms, it is that the pure sciences do not misunderstand much but they are more motivated and perhaps, if one can say so, more gifted students perhaps."

## **16. Setting grades is difficult (MU 13)**

Setting grades upon students is experienced as difficult and problematic by the teacher.

**Example:** "It is always difficult to set grades" / "Ouch! No, if we say it like this, I don't like setting grades, I have never done so I have never learnt to like it and feels that it's good. I think this business of setting grades is a necessary evil part of the teacher's job" / "but it is so much more difficult today to set grades with the new system. I think it is quite difficult to see, 'pass' is also difficult as someone may lie between 'fail' and 'pass' since the difference is quite broad".

## **17. Cooperation between teachers occurs but not continually (MU 8)**

Cooperation between teachers, both with regard to teachers within the same discipline and others from different disciplines, does occur to some extent but is not applied to any great extent.

**Example:** "We have very little collaboration with other disciplines, so to say, that lies outside of one's own area, Swedish to some extent, Oh... yes, it is probably Swedish and religion and perhaps sometimes social sciences that we can contribute, but cooperation, no, there is little of that I would state. Yes, I can state that. We don't have any teamwork either" / "Of course we talk to each other and exchange [views] and so on but we don't do anything together, perhaps sometimes, sometime" / "so there are very great difficulties to work in a teacher team when one is in addition under such a time pressure so it doesn't work in that way".

## **18. Further education within psychology is often one's own further education (MU 5)**

The teachers receive a certain amount of further education through the school but they themselves most often seek out the relevant courses and literature in order to improve themselves.

**Example:** "I receive some further education but one does have to make enquiries a bit and in addition I have to educate myself further, well since I can't avoid reading so I get further

education steadily myself. There's always one or two books on my bedside table which are a bit psychological... so it ongoing steadily and continually although I don't go out and achieve certificates. I can say that its mostly private further education in psychology, but I read a lot and I'm a member of a book club" / "Such that the education has been acquired by my attending courses in psychology, I've not been denied attending courses. But I've collected quite a lot of points in psychology now but it is ...that I myself have acquired it one can say. Then I'm studying at university at present" / "There is not much further education, no. No, not organized by the school and so on. There isn't. I study books, I check whether there is something [relevant] on the TV and anything on some channel that one can record".

## Discussion

Through the application of the EPP-method, the investigation has resulted in eighteen different categories. These different categories provide a certain amount of information when described singly but can provide even more if one views them as a wholeness whereby one can compare them with each other.

In order to be a teacher, one has to comply continually with certain didactic questions the answers to which are decisive for how the teaching may be formulated. Arfwedson and Arfwedson (1991) take, as recounted above, up the following didactic questions: *How* ought education to be carried out? *What* ought to be included in a teaching course? *Why* ought students to be taught in that manner? These questions provide the point of departure for discussion on didactics. A further question may be drawn into the discussion: *Who* makes the decisions concerning education and for *whom* is the teacher teaching?

### Who and Whom?

Many of the categories deal with who or what decides the content of psychology teaching. According to the categories, there are several different 'players' that decide about and influence the discipline. The teacher himself/herself appears to be the 'player' that affects decisions to the greatest extent (Category 3, *The teacher decides upon the content of what is taught*). This category produced the greatest number of meaning-units, an indication of the power of decision wielded by teachers over the discipline. Instructions and rules from the school leadership, politicians, course outline, etc, influences teaching too, even if not to the same extent as the teacher (Category 2, *Instructions from school leadership influences teaching*). Finally, the students themselves occupy too a certain right of decision, albeit varying from teacher to teacher, regarding the content of what is taught (Category 6, *Students contribute and influence teaching*).

As outlined above, a broad public criticizes contemporary schools from several different directions. Both Andersson (2000) and Jonsson (1995) have drawn attention to the limited extent of students' right of decision indicating that their involvement ought to be reinforced. Through these categories (above), a similar but much more positive picture is derived. The teacher takes decisions regarding education to the greatest extent as the studies referred to indicate. In Jonsson (1995) student democracy often dealt with decisions involving matters of relative insignificance, such as the destination of school outings, whereas the teachers' descriptions in the present study indicate that students contribute both to content and procedures. It must be borne in mind that the

present categories are based on the teachers' postulates about students that, may or may not be corrected versions.

For *whom* the teaching is given does not appear directly available from the study but Category 15 (*Certain students have more difficulties with psychology than others*) deals to some extent with the question. The interviewed teachers observed differences between the students and student groups they taught. For these teachers, certain students or groups of students showed more difficulties with psychology as a discipline than other students who learned more within the discipline. Christie (1972) discussed the tendency through which theoretical subjects achieve greater status than practical ones. In Category 15, can one discern such tendencies through which the teachers praised students in the pure science classes: "If one may speak in slightly more general terms, it is that the pure sciences do not misunderstand much but they are more motivated and perhaps, if one can say so, more gifted students perhaps." Students studying the more practically oriented economy program do not receive the same admiration but conversely according to teachers achieve rather poor proficiencies.

## **How?**

Which methods do the interviewed teachers apply? According to the present study, there appears to be a mixture of procedures available. Educational dialogue offers an oft-used method through which teachers maintain a continual dialogue with the students in the classroom throughout the course of teaching (Category 5, *Teachers maintains a dialogue with pupils during teaching*). Teachers too seem markedly interested in the communications between teachers and students. Another category with a great number of meaning-units is Category 7 (*The students work independently or in groups*). These procedural differences appear common occurrences in psychology and in these cases one is often allowed to select which one chooses to apply. Group work and independence was a recurrent theme among the interviewed teachers.

Teaching psychology appears to be markedly subject-segregated and there doesn't appear a tremendous degree of collaboration with other disciplines (Category 17, *Cooperation between teachers occurs but not continually*). This finding must be quite remarkable since the course outline for psychology emphasizes precisely the importance of collaboration between the different disciplines. The teachers themselves postulate during the interviews that they are constrained by the course outline that one ought to be able to question. According to Category 9 (*Films and TV-programs are used in education*), films and TV-programs are commonly used in psychology teaching.

## **What?**

One does not achieve a concrete picture of what is taken up within psychology even though several categories pertain to this issue. Course books and controlling documents (Category 1, *Textbooks and guidelines are the points of departure for teaching*) as well as instructions from the school governing body (Category 2, *Instructions from school leadership influences teaching*) is postulated points of departure for the education. These two categories demonstrate the marked power of centralist traditions within education. Since course books are used to a significant degree, one may assume that the teachers too apply much of what occurs in the different course

books. What occurs in the course books varies somewhat but there are several ingredients that are oft recurring.

Jonsson (1995) in their study concluded that 90% of those pupils contending that school was boring also considered that the course literature was so too. The teachers in the present study seem to a great extent to utilize course books, which induces one to reflect whether or not this penchance is completely motivated? Since so many subjects in the Jonsson (1995) study considered that the literature was boring, it seems possible that these ought to be applied to a lesser degree. Andersson (1999) has discussed the so-called 'cultural heritage' that is transcribed to the pupils and questions what ought to make up this heritage. With regard to the content of the course books one may question too *what* ought to be included and *who* ought to make the choice.

According to the responses emanating from the interviewed psychology teachers, it seems necessary to draw attention to the various notions and viewpoints that exist within psychology and how these may differ and be distinguished from each other (Category 11, *Psychology deal with knowledge about divergence of ideas*). The category certainly produced many meaning-units, which demonstrates that this issue is something that the teachers consider important. They wish students to be able to make comparisons between the different directions and develop an understanding of what they represent.

From the material obtained above, a picture emerges of what can be included in the psychology teaching of the interviewees. However, there is a great deal one is not cognisant about that which *in reality* is taken up even if it is stated that the contents of teaching vary to a certain extent between different teachers (Category 4, *The teacher's own interests are reflected in what is taught*). The subject matter treated during teaching may therefore depend upon those areas that the teacher himself/herself considers interesting or that the teacher has specialized knowledge upon.

It is stated too that students are allowed to take part and be engaged in the formulation of the psychology discipline. Both Categories 6 (*Students contribute and influence teaching*) and 7 (*The students work independently or in groups*) deal with precisely this aspect. As pointed out above, several studies have indicated that student involvement and right of decision is limited which appears tangential, at least partly, to the situation as perceived by the teachers.

## **Why?**

The teachers participating in the study have an ambition that their psychology education may have implications for students' further academic prowess within the discipline. The largest category treating this consideration was presented by Category 12 (*Psychology optimizes learning about oneself and others*). The interviewed teachers hoped that having completed the course in psychology the students might have achieved not only an improved self-insight but also a better understanding of others. However, psychology as a discipline ought to offer also a challenge to students (Category 10, *Psychology as a discipline should be a challenge to students*). Teachers even attempted to alter students' understanding of the world and that through the study of psychology they may achieve a greater understanding that there does not exist any universal or eternal truths about the world. The world is much more complex than that. Teachers



wished that students could obtain an understanding for different, perhaps divergent, standpoints (Category 11, *Psychology deal with knowledge about divergence of ideas*).

Category 8 (*The pupils consider that certain areas within psychology are more interesting than others*) is a somewhat large category that deals with students' attitudes to the content of psychology. In this case, certain areas are more popular than others and it appears as if the interviewed teachers have placed some weight upon what the students are interested in: "To take a practical example, problems, teenage problems or something they can solve. They think that's very interesting"

## Conclusions

The didactic image of the psychology discipline is amongst other things that teachers bear as the main influence upon teaching, but the school leadership, the governing board, local politicians and even students affect the discipline. Content is influenced by several different control documents, persons and factors. The course book plays a large part in the choice what is eventually taught. The course outline is of central importance too as well as both the teachers' and students' interests. Teaching is given at several different levels wherein the dialogue between teacher and student is essential. Group work, single student work, film- and TV-exhibitions give the impression of being common ingredients. The need to understand oneself and others, to challenge as well as accumulate knowledge about different psychological standpoints is the reason why students ought to study psychology. As presented in the present study, the discipline of psychology gives the impression also of providing a subject that many within the schools, both teachers and students, consider to be interesting and that also treats relevant topics that affect young people. Unfortunately, in the eyes of teachers the subject, by virtue of its limited status, remains somewhat neglected as evidenced by the paucity of teaching hours assigned to it.

As is evident, much focus has been laid upon similarities in the material rather than on differences. Future studies should investigate for example possible differences in regard to gender, age and experience. Further research ought also to examine whether or not the notions obtained also gain expression in other aspects of the teachers' life, in their communication with each other, their language, etc., as well as performing follow-up studies of this type in different cultures.

## References

- Andersson, B-E. (1999). *Spräng skolan* [Blow-up the school]. Jönköping: Brain Books.
- Arfwedson, G., & Arfwedson, G. (1991). *Didaktik för lärare* [Didactics for teachers]. Stockholm: HLS förlag.
- Bengtsson, J. (1998). Fenomenologiska riktningar i sociologin: vardagsforskning, existensfilosofi, hermeneutik. [Phenomenological directions in sociology: everyday research, philosophy of existence, hermeneutics] In J. Bengtsson, *Fenomenologiska utflykter: Människa och vetenskap ur ett livsvärldsperspektiv* (pp. 13-60). Göteborg: Daidalos.

Bernstein, R. J. (1991). *Bortom objektivism och relativism: Vetenskap, hermeneutik och praxis* [Beyond objectivism and relativism: science, hermeneutics and praxis] (Övers. G. Sandin). Göteborg: Röda Bokförlaget.

Bjurwill, C. (1995). *Fenomenologi*. Lund: Studentlitteratur.

Christie, N. (1972). *Om skolan inte fanns* [If there was no school] Stockholm: Wahlström & Widstrand.

Convey, A. (1999). Listening to teachers' stories: Are we sitting too comfortably? *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 12(2), 131-146.

Doverborg, E., & Pramling Samuelsson, I. (2000). *Att förstå barns tankar: Metodik för barnintervjuer* [Understanding the thoughts of children: methods for the interview of children]. Stockholm: Liber.

Gadamer, H.-G. (1997). *Sanning och metod (i urval)* [Truth and method] (Transl. A. Melberg). Göteborg: Daidalos. (Original work published 1960).

Giorgi, A. (1997). The theory, practice, and evaluation of the phenomenological method as a qualitative research procedure. *Journal of Phenomenological Psychology*, 28(2), 235-260.

Hamer, L. (1999). A folkloristic approach to understanding teachers storytellers. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 12(4), 363-380.

Hatton, E. (1997). Teacher educators *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 10(2), 237-258.

Jonsson, B. (1995). *Studies on youth and schooling in Sweden*. Stockholm: Institute of Education Press.

Karlsson, G. (1993). *Psychological qualitative research from a phenomenological perspective*. Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell.

Kvale, S. (1997). *Den kvalitativa forskningsintervjun*. [The qualitative research interview]. Lund: Studentlitteratur.

Lemon, N., & Taylor, H. (1998). *Caring in casualty: The phenomenology of nursing care*. In N. Hayes (Ed.), *Doing qualitative analysis in psychology* (pp. 227-243). Hove, UK: Psychology Press.

Norlander, T., Gård, L., Lindholm, L., & Archer, T. (in press). *New Age: Exploration of outlook-on-life frameworks from a phenomenological perspective*. *Mental Health, Religion & Culture*, 5.

Pramling, N., Norlander, T., & Archer, T. (2001). *Moral Expression in six-to-seven year-old children's stories in Sweden, Hungary and China: A Phenomenological study*. *Childhood*, 8, 361-382.

Pramling, N., Norlander, T., & Archer, T. (in press). *Conceptualization of the unknown by 6-, 9- and 14-year-old children: In search for a 'heffalump'*. *Childhood*.

Shkedi, A. (1998). *Teachers' attitudes towards research: A challenge for qualitative researchers*. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 11(4), 559-577.

Skolverket. (1994). *PS200 - psykologi*. Stockholm: Svensk facklitteratur.

Skolverket. (1999). *Regler för målstyrning Gymnasieskolan. [Rules for the goal-directed high school]*. Stockholm: Svensk facklitteratur.

Stough, L. M., & Emmer, E. T. (1998). *Teachers' emotions and test feedback*. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 11(2), 341-361.

Tabulawa, R. (1998). *Teachers' perspectives on classroom practice in Botswana: Implications for pedagogical change*. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 11(2), 249-268.

Theman, J. (1983). *Uppfattningar av politisk makt. [Interpretations of political power] (Dissertation, Göteborg)*. (Göteborg Studies in Educational Sciences, 45). Göteborg: Acta Universitatis Gothoburgensis.

### **Author Note**

<sup>+</sup>Torsten Norlander, Ph.D., Ph.D. is Associate Professor at Department of Psychology at Karlstad University. He can be contacted at Karlstad University, Department of Psychology, SE-651 88 Karlstad, Sweden. His email is [at.norlander@mailbox.swipnet.se](mailto:at.norlander@mailbox.swipnet.se).

Correspondence regarding this article should be addressed to Dr. T. Norlander.

<sup>+</sup>Alexandra Blom, B.S. is high school teacher at a school in Karlstad. She can be contacted at Karlstad University, Department of Psychology, SE-651 88 Karlstad, Sweden.

<sup>+</sup>Trevor Archer, Ph.D., is Professor at Department of Psychology at Göteborg University. He can be contacted at Göteborg University, Department of Psychology, Haraldsgatan 1, SE-413 14 Göteborg. His email is [Trevor.Archer@psy.gu.se](mailto:Trevor.Archer@psy.gu.se).