LEARNING OBJECTIVES

MAGNUS HULTÉN

RJ 2024

FAILURES?

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Learning objectives

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Translated by Clare Barnes

Riksbankens Jubileumsfond
in partnership with Makadam förlag

MAKADAM FÖRLAG
GÖTEBORG & STOCKHOLM
WWW.MAKADAMBOK.SE

Failures? is Riksbankens Jubileumsfond's essay collection for 2024
Editor: Jenny Björkman
Editorial board: Andreas Bergh, Ingrid Elam,
Sven Anders Johansson

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Graphic design: Johan Laserna
Image p. 14: Olga Enger, Shutterstock

ISBN 978-91-7061-989-2 (pdf)
ISSN 2000-1029

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Foreword: Failures?

"Try again. Fail again. Fail better." Samuel Beckett's words are now legendary. There seems to be no crisis, setback or adversity from which it is impossible to learn. Failure carries its counterpart – success – within. Listen to the countless biographical radio programmes about fiascos that turn to triumphs, Google for failures, see how self-help books are structured. Perhaps it has always been this way – or is this a consequence of our era's accelerating demands for success, growth, advancement and evolution?

The American historian Scott A. Sandage, who researched the cultural history of failure in the US, claims that failure has become personal since the mid-nineteenth century – you don't just fail, you are a failure. He even talks of a nation of winners and losers, in which everyone is either the one or the other. Failure is thus a constant and shadowy companion to the American dream, an ever-present component of the American experience. Sandage links this to several factors, including modern society's perpetual evaluation and our time's statistical exposure of private lives. In the nineteenth century, the

innovation of statistics collection seemed to reveal in real time previously hidden – or at least obscured – connections relating to the population and society. In the US, this also coincided with the credit institutes' division of the populace into those who were creditworthy and others – which is to say, losers. In addition, Sandage sees a link with the rise of meritocracy. The statistics demonstrated, incontrovertibly, that the masses were nothing other than mediocre.[1]

Sweden is also a nation of mediocrity, just like every other nation, and here too – even if we are not as influenced by the idea of an American dream – mediocrity is associated with a lack of success, rather than a normal distribution. There are people who believe that we are now living in an age of perfectionism, placing sky-high expectations on ourselves. Nothing other than flawless will do, and everything that doesn't make it is pretty much a failure. These growing demands for ultimate excellence are regarded by the Public Health Agency of Sweden as one reason for the current rise in mental illness.[2] The same trend seems to be occurring in the rest of the West, and perfectionism is said to have increased since the 1980s.[3] In his most recent book, the British psychologist and researcher Thomas Curran writes of a hidden epidemic that is haunting the modern, capitalist Western world, where the tougher demands we wrestle with mean that we are increasingly likely to fail – and are particularly

likely to dread this failure.[4] That fear inhibits us, Curran claims.

Our contemporary individualism, enthusiasm for evaluation and constant searching for something that is occasionally vague but better – yes, "more perfect" – makes us ever-more vulnerable to failure. However, in itself, of course, failure is nothing new. Quite the opposite, setbacks and adversity are part and parcel of being human.

Mistakes, errors and a lack of success have, for centuries, comprised the very foundation of science and research as we know it. Trial and error. We could even claim that, fundamentally, science is about daring to get things wrong and then learning from your mistakes. A researcher makes predictions and finds regularities, patterns and laws in what appears to be chaos. The periodic table and the discoveries of Newton, Linnaeus and Einstein are just a few examples; new theories replace old ones, errors are found, and systems improved or discarded. Faults and troubleshooting are part of the process, and what the Enlightenment, modernity, progress, was all about was this: taming and mastery through rules, predictions and – yes – finding mistakes.

We are now seeing indications that fewer scientific breakthroughs are occurring – at least if by breakthrough we mean scientific achievements that move our knowledge in a completely new direction. This is happening despite our faith in research and all the global resources invested

in it.[5] Is the lack of breakthroughs a failure of our times? And, if so, is it our fear of failure that makes us less bold and thus less likely to explore new directions?

We could ask ourselves whether anyone now believes in progress and the future in the way that people did in the 1960s. In this way, we live in a darker world – or are we just less naïve? And there are fiascos, for individuals and for societies, that are difficult to learn from, and where the lesson is perhaps just to put it all behind you and move on.

Still, if we swept all those fiascos under the rug, if all our setbacks were hidden and forgotten, we would not have made any progress. We are somewhere between these extremities, daring to see the mistake for the shambles it is, sometimes with no lesson to be learned, and to use it. In this essay collection, six researchers from the humanities and social sciences take a closer look at failure and the unintended consequences of success.

They range from what the constant evaluations of modern life do to us, to medical advances that inadvertently change how we perceive the body and create illegal markets. In this essay, education researcher Magnus Hultén writes about the education system. Management by objectives was introduced to make goals clearer and easier to achieve, but that has not been a success.

Almost everything we do has unintended consequences, and it is far from obvious what constitutes a failure – particularly when little time has passed. According to Walter

Benjamin, the angel of history sees the past as a long chain of catastrophes, while being propelled back-first into the future on a storm called progress.

Someone who continues to read Samuel Beckett's famous lines on having another go, soon realises that he is not delivering an optimistic call for success, but rather a pitch-black description of failure:

> Try again. Fail again. Better again. Or better worse. Fail worse again. Still worse again. Till sick for good. Throw up for good. Go for good. Where neither for good. Good and all.[6]

Jenny Björkman

Notes

1. Scott A. Sandage, *Born Losers: A History of Failure in America*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005.

2. Public Health Agency of Sweden, "Varför har den psykiska ohälsan ökat bland barn och unga i Sverige?", Solna: Folkhälsomyndigheten, 2018, www.folkhalsomyndigheten.se/publicerat-material/publikationsarkiv/v/varfor-har-den-psykiska-ohalsan-okat-bland-barn-och-unga-i-sverige/. See also "Young people drowning in a rising tide of perfectionism", *The Conversation* 5 February 2019, https://theconversation.com/young-people-drowning-in-a-rising-tide-of-perfectionism-110343.

3. Thomas Curran & Andrew P. Hill, "Perfectionism is increasing over time: A meta-analysis of birth cohort differences from 1989 to

2016", *Psychological Bulletin* vol. 145, no. 4, 2019, pp. 410–429.

4. Thomas Curran, *The Perfection Trap: The Power of Good Enough in a World that Always Wants More*, London: Cornerstone Press, 2023.

5. Michael Park, Erin Leahey & Russell J. Funk, "Papers and patents are becoming less disruptive over time", *Nature* no. 613, 2023, pp. 138–144.

6. Samuel Beckett, *Worstward Ho*, 1983.

ERRARE HUMANUM EST


START

The obvious objectives

Setting objectives and working to achieve them has become a normal part of many people's lives. Some claim that this kind of goal-oriented work is something new in the history of mankind, but of course this is not the case, although in recent decades management by objectives has become a new form of management, especially in the public sector.

In this essay, I will focus on schools. Understanding the historical role of goals/objectives in schools can provide insights into how the educational system functions as an institution and how it has changed over time, which can help us shape the schools of the future. Objectives have changed from being the natural foundation for schools and education and instead become their epicentre. But is this what we want? It is not certain. In the mid-1990s, a new form of management became popular in compulsory schooling in Sweden. Politicians called it management by objectives and results, or just management by objectives. The idea was that setting goals would more clearly lead and characterise education. Educational results – and

especially the pupils' knowledge – would be improved. In the early 1990s, politicians from the left to the right were enthusiastic about this. Some portrayed it as a paradigm change: rather than sorting pupils on a normally distributed grading curve according to how well they absorbed the lessons, fixed learning objectives would guide teachers' work in the classroom. The learning objectives would act as beacons, clearly guiding pupils towards the intended skills. In the future, it would even be necessary to raise the requirements for what a pupil needed to learn to pass, said those responsible, as this management system would lead to continuous improvements in teaching.

But it never happened. There is no evidence that schools improved because of the reforms, quite the contrary. We could even say that the reform failed in its primary objective: to ensure that all pupils would acquire the knowledge in the learning objectives that the state set out in the curriculums. The system was designed so that qualification for upper-secondary school required passing key subjects in compulsory school. When the system was introduced, it turned out that a large proportion of pupils, around 15 per cent, did not achieve these learning objectives. That such a high proportion of pupils would not qualify for upper-secondary school was an alien idea to those who designed the system. It was even the case that when one of the initiators of the reforms raised the hypothetical question of how society should deal with pupils

who did not attain these objectives, this was dismissed as a non-issue. Everyone would pass – the system was designed that way.

Even now, almost three decades after the reform was launched, an equally high proportion of pupils – around 15 per cent – leave compulsory education without passing the subjects required to enter an upper-secondary programme. Despite numerous reforms aimed at improving the system, the proportion of pupils who fail to qualify has remained virtually constant. Why did it go so wrong?

Objectives, objectives, objectives …

Of course, schools are not alone in setting objectives for their activities. Ten years ago, when political scientists Daniel Tarschys and Marja Lemne summarised their analyses of how the state used objectives in a range of policy areas, from gender equality and foreign aid to the environment, they noted that "the twentieth century's discussions of state objectives [. . .] are somewhat reminiscent of Ravel's *Boléro*, with its gradual increase in emphasis".[1] In other words, objectives for public policy, such as schools, have been around for a long time and have become an increasingly important instrument of control for the state.

The comparison with Ravel's *Boléro* and the gradual increase in emphasis fits well with the education system, although the use of objectives in schools has shifted. Not only are there now more objectives, but they are of different types and uses; they are about overarching goals for education, subject specific learning objectives and how these should be used when planning and evaluating teaching and learning. Recognising shifts in how objectives

have been used to regulate education is important in understanding how objectives can be both a necessity and an obstacle in education.

The introduction of management by objectives in the administration of central government in the 1990s is a modified truth. Education has, as the historian Hans Albin Larsson said, "always been governed by objectives".[2] Or almost always, to be correct, which I will return to.

However, management by objectives is a concept that possesses both vagueness and clarity. Its clarity lies in its simplicity; there is something intuitive about the idea that makes it easy to communicate. Still: if all management that aims to achieve objectives is called management by objectives, there is a risk of the concept becoming practically meaningless, as the economist of public administration Björn Rombach points out.[3] Therefore, when researchers, politicians and journalists describe education as being managed by objectives, it is unclear what this actually says about how schools are run. Education philosopher Paul Hirst argues that the very idea of education implies that goals and objectives have been formulated, however vague they may be.[4] Describing schools as managed by objectives is thus almost tautological.

This becomes even more confusing when the reforms of the 1990s are presented as a change in school management, from management by rules to management by objectives – a characterisation that the media, politicians

and researchers are often guilty of (including myself). Besides which, educational objectives are formulated as rules in legal documents. The current curriculum and Education Act are full of rules that relate to goals and objectives, especially in relation to grading. The curriculum contains specific and detailed learning objectives for each subject, and in the Education Act these are linked to rules for how grades should be set, what documentation is required, the rights pupils have to appeal teachers' grading, and so on. If, in addition, the objectives are viewed in relation to the growing monitoring apparatus for inspections and results, we also see that the introduction of management by objectives has coincided with a gradual increase in government regulation.

Objectives become results

The introduction of management by objectives in the Swedish public sector at the end of the twentieth century is thus not to be understood as the sudden introduction of objectives in education, but about making objectives the epicentre of how to govern education. For schools, this is reflected in how teaching now increasingly focuses on achieving the learning objectives specified in the curriculum. In particular, the requirements for a pass, grade E, have become important, as all pupils are expected to achieve the objectives, as stated in the law. This has, according to the education researcher Rebecka Florin Sädbom, resulted in more results-oriented teaching.[5] The education researcher Ingrid Carlgren has called this backwards pedagogy: the lesson often starts with the teacher informing the pupils about the relevant learning objectives and grading criteria, with the effect that the pupils become focused on achieving these.[6]

Over the past few years, objectives and the associated results have acquired an increasingly important role in many areas. Each year, my salary negotiation focuses on

target areas for which I have to indicate my performance. For us researchers, the number of publications has become increasingly important – four is better than one. The main thing has become that we publish many articles; what is written in them seems less important. Since measurement methods rarely capture the organisation's objectives, and few organisations have objectives that are fully measurable, the risk is that, in our eagerness to measure, we make what is easy to measure important, rather than the other way around. These challenges exist in many organisations. It is easy to set up requirements – and measurements – for how many jobs a job applicant should apply for, but it is equally easy to lose sight of the goal when the focus is on writing a certain number of job applications, as the philosopher Jonna Bornemark notes in her book on the loss of judgement.[7] The police's pursuit of easily solved crimes, ones that can rapidly improve their performance statistics, is a familiar example. The minute-by-minute management of healthcare, in which care activities are quantified in minutes so that the needs of the elderly can be easily translated into time, is another. Managing organisations in this way can be extremely effective, but it can also lead to the organisations' overall objectives being neglected.

Many activities in contemporary society are characterised by demands for rationality; nothing should be left to chance, emotion or judgement. This places demands on

the measurability, monitoring and evaluation of activities, in relation to the established objectives. The economist Michael Power and the political scientist Peter Dahler-Larsen have described it as living in an audit society, where everything is constantly evaluated and verified.[8] The management by objectives that gained increasing currency in Sweden's public sector towards the end of the twentieth century is thus not primarily characterised by the formulation of objectives, but by the other side of the coin: a focus on what can be measured, on results. Management by objectives is thus also called management by objectives and results, emphasising its evaluative aspects. Of course, management by objectives has always been about achieving them but, as it has moved towards measurability, management by results may be the better name. However, let us take a step backwards in this Ravelian bolero, to help our understanding of objectives' changing role in the world of education.

Elementary education: Raising the level of ambition

In 1919, when Sweden's elementary schools first received objectives and a purpose, thanks to the new curriculum and the associated statute for elementary education, it received plenty of attention. Bengt J:son Bergqvist, the first director-general of Sweden's National Board of Education, acknowledged that this meant that elementary education had been given a task for the very first time.[9]

Elementary education had been governed by national statutes since 1842, and had had national curriculums since 1878, but these never formulated objectives and purposes. The focus had been on expanding the education system which, in brief, meant ensuring that schools were built and parents persuaded to send their children to them. Grammar schools, on the other hand, which was the type of school to which the wealthier members of society sent their children, had long had both purpose and objectives.

That early statutes and curriculums for elementary education did not have objectives says something about their importance; establishing objectives is a way to clarify

ambitions. Researchers thus generally regard the 1919 curriculum as important to the development of a democratic school system. It was very ambitious and vastly different to its predecessor, the standard plan of 1900. The 1919 curriculum was not only different in that it formulated objectives for each school subject, for the first time it included a timetable, as well as instructions on how teaching should be conducted. Its subject content was also different in many respects from that of previous curriculums, prescribing work that would activate pupils and emphasising education for working life and good citizenship. Elementary education now became a means of democratic societal change. The subject of civic knowledge appeared in continuation schools and is regarded as a forerunner to the subject of social studies. The educational researcher Tomas Englund has described it as the addition of a clear civic focus to basic education.[10] At the same time, the Swedish Church's power over the organisation and content of elementary education was greatly reduced and, more generally, democracy made its breakthrough in Sweden.

Dreams of a new school

Objectives also play a central role in clarifying the visions of the compulsory schooling reform – the most extensive school reform of the twentieth century. This reform, which spanned several decades, various government inquiries and large-scale trials, was driven both by necessity and by dreams. The members of the 1946 school commission – including Alva Myrdal and Ester Hermansson – are often cited as the great visionaries. The new education system was created between 1940 and 1960, in the shadow of World War Two and the fear of a totalitarian society. It gave politicians a reason to rethink not only the objectives for individual school subjects, but also the objectives of education as a whole. The reform gave the curriculum a more substantial catalogue of objectives, including the addition of overarching and general goals, which had not been specified in the curriculums for elementary education.

The far-reaching reforms to the Swedish school system in the mid-twentieth century meant that the previous parallel school system, with school forms such as gram-

mar schools, girls' schools and elementary schools, was abolished and one type of school was introduced for everyone, with nine years of compulsory education. In addition, there was a gradual introduction of coherent and state-controlled upper-secondary education. As a result of the reforms, the state took an increasingly strong grip on basic education in Sweden.

Internationally, the Nordics' education systems, particularly Sweden's, were described as role models. The Nordic education model was a coherent education system characterised by equality and high quality, available to every citizen, and with delayed differentiation, so that pupils shared the same subject content for as many school years as possible.[11] The reforms built upon the idea of education as an economic and political force for societal change and democracy.

The age of rational objectives

The compulsory school reform may have set an international example, but there was debate in Sweden. The 1960s saw newspaper articles about unruliness in the classroom and two clear factions emerged: those who believed that discipline issues had arisen because the new system's objectives and heterogeneous classes were dealt with using the old system's methods; and those who believed the problems were linked to the absence of the old school's disciplinary methods. In other words, there were both those who thought the school had changed too much and those who thought it had changed too little.

The general sections of the curriculum quickly gained a bad reputation – the poetry sections, as they were sometimes contemptuously called. They were seen by many as a collection of lofty visions and objectives that had no basis in the reality of a classroom. There was a growing perception among politicians that the reform had succeeded in terms of organisation, but failed to realise its educational objectives. The reason for the failure was sought in the 'internal work', especially in how teachers worked in

the classroom. The National Board of Education therefore initiated several projects that aimed to create systems that would increase learning. The now best-known project was the MUT project for determining and evaluating objectives, and a sister project called the LIGRU project, for reading literature in compulsory schools.

Both MUT and LIGRU were met with harsh reactions from teachers. In an open letter to the LIGRU project in 1971, a teacher called Louise Vinge wrote that she and other teachers and teacher trainers had been sent a thirteen-page questionnaire asking them to rate the importance of more than a hundred questions about various objectives, which Vinge found "insulting and appalling".[12] Göte Klingberg, the researcher in charge of the project, replied a few days later that the purpose of the project was only to make a systematic analysis of the objectives, aimed at improving the teaching of literature.[13] Vinge argued that Klingberg's systematic approach transformed children's ability to express themselves through words into numbers in statistical analyses, which risked making the teaching of literature "anything but what it should be: a living, individual, unrestrained and total encounter with the strange phenomena that is the art of words".[14]

The same positions were echoed in debates about the MUT project. On one side, there was the way in which administrators, bureaucrats and researchers approached teaching and the teaching process, highlighting the need

to ensure pupils' basic skills and, on the other side, teachers and teacher trainers who wanted to guard against the increased control and instrumentalisation of teaching.

The latter faction won the first round, but the administrative evangelists were to stage a comeback.

Management by objectives in a neo(liberal) guise

One consequence of the compulsory school reform was that the state tightened its grip on basic education. Despite ambitions for local co-determination, in practice there was not much of it; regulations expanded and the power of bureaucracy grew. Over time, the National Board of Education came to be caricatured as an autonomous and bureaucratic colossus. Garnisonen, the large office block built in 1972 in Gärdet, Stockholm, for the National Board of Education, among others, became a symbol of bureaucratic power, with its 347-metre-long corridors.

In the light of contemporary discussions about 're-centralising' the school system, it is interesting to read newspaper articles from the 1980s about the power of the state. In 1987, *Dagens Nyheter* reported that "Bureaucracy around schools is growing".[15] In the article, Solveig Röjerman, a fifth-grade teacher in Sollentuna, who feels alienated from all the levels of bureaucracy above her, says that she does not really know what they are doing. The article depicts massive bureaucracy, which apparently mostly focused on producing reports and complicating every tiny

decision. Most of all, Röjerman wants more freedom – and the article describes the way forward as "management by objectives".

In the 1980s, a major public inquiry into state power found that the school system was the area that people felt they were least able to influence. Parents' inability to affect the choice of school for their children was highlighted as a concrete problem.[16] The investigators were strongly critical of the power accumulated by the state, and noted the growing powerlessness of citizens in the face of a rigid state bureaucracy. The winds of freedom were blowing, and the Swedish state needed to rethink its role, requiring an institutional reorientation. Also, right-wing winds were blowing and, in the international arena, Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher led the way in privatising and streamlining the public sector.

It was in this spirit of neoliberalism that management by objectives emerged as a solution. Swedish companies had already started using the method in the 1960s, when it was presented as a modern management method that allowed the manager to take a step back. In its management-oriented form, management by objectives was based on a few simple principles: the importance of setting measurable objectives, and the delegation of power to those closest to the activity to make their own choices.

This was about not locking employees into predetermined methods, but about allowing them to choose

appropriate ways of achieving what was ultimately important: the organisation's objectives. In theory, there was also a requirement that the measurable objectives would be decided through dialogue between the employees and their managers, so they would have a good foundation.

The method came, like so much else at that time, from the US. According to the sociologist Elizabeth Popp Berman, management by objectives is a method that was introduced to public administration in the US in the 1960s.[17] Berman believes that this led to an economically influenced rationality in American public administration, which became institutionalised in the following decades. Broadly speaking, the development that took place in the US seems to correspond to what the political scientist Göran Sundström has described as the introduction of a "rationalist management model" in Swedish public administration at about the same time.[18] According to Berman, this new type of rationality changed what was considered good policy in the US, from a focus on rights, democratic processes and equality, to efficiency, cost-effectiveness, choice and market solutions.[19] Similar policy shifts can also be seen in Swedish public administration.[20]

The extent to which this type of management method entered the Swedish business community has not been analysed, but it clearly did. In October 1966, the *Svenska Dagbladet* newspaper presented a survey of twenty business

leaders, in which twelve responded that they used management by objectives.[21] The method was also introduced in municipal services. There are examples of municipally run preschools beginning to use management by objectives in the 1970s. Exactly what different companies and organisation valued in the method is difficult to say, but it emerged as a modern management method that corresponded well with the time's ideas about de-bureaucratisation, decentralisation and increased employee participation. By the time it was proposed as a management method in central government, it had been well tried and tested and was established in other fields.

For the school system, the 1990s' management by objectives reform required major changes to the organisation and governance of education. An entirely new organisation was created for school bureaucracy and the colossus that was the National Board of Education was closed. The National Agency for Education, as the new authority was called, was to "stop at the municipal boundary". In other words, not to go in to schools and make decisions, but leave that to the accountable authorities. This was clearly different to the National Board of Education.

In parallel with the introduction of management by objectives, education became marketised. Increasing educational diversity and offering a choice of schools were already high on the political agenda, and the idea of marketisation arrived with the change of government in

1991. Management by objectives was then regarded as a prerequisite for marketisation: the state set the objectives – particularly the requirements for a pass grade – but left it to the various actors to decide how to achieve them.

Knowledge, values and objective-based grading

Two government inquiries were established to design the new governance system for education: a curriculum committee and a grading committee. The first thing to note is that the basis of the political intentions was a contrast of the past. "Progressive schooling must end", as Minister for Schools Göran Persson said to the *Expressen* newspaper when work began on the reforms.[22] An unambiguous and knowledge-focused curriculum was the aim. An image had emerged during the 1980s in which knowledge had taken a back seat to progressive ideals – it was time for this to change. This issue was most clearly pushed by the Moderate Party, but the Social Democrats joined in. The grading issue was seen as being connected to that of knowledge, and the relative grading of the time was severely criticised. The Moderates regarded it as illustrative of state inflexibility and a lack of interest in knowledge: a normally distributed curve along which pupils were sorted according to predetermined percentiles. In the 1980s, no one was in favour of relative grades, at least none of the political parties or their youth wings, and nor

was the pupils' organisations or the parents' association. In contrast, objective-based grades were proposed. They were sometimes referred to as knowledge-based grades and appealed to people who longed for a return to the absolute grading scale used in schools before the comprehensive school reforms of the mid-twentieth century.

The issue of knowledge permeated the directives to the two committees, and their work. This was further accentuated when a centre-right government took over in 1991, and new directives also emphasised that the school system's approach to knowledge should be based on the latest research.

However, the curriculum committee saw challenges in their directive to unite increased management by objectives with a greater focus on knowledge. The task was creating a new and unambiguous objectives-oriented curriculum, as required by the directives, while avoiding the trap of instrumental rationality.

Directives and previous government bills had depicted the management by objectives of the previous curriculum, Lgr 80, as unclear and contradictory. Refining this required not only new ideas about how to specify objectives in the curriculum, but also how different parts of the curriculum interacted with them, so avoiding inbuilt contradictions. Parts of the curriculum that signalled content and working methods were removed, for example. As had already been stated, management by objectives requires

not locking in too many variables; it should not say both what objectives are to be achieved and how they are to be achieved. Also, according to the directives, the curriculum was to make space for local specifications, given how the people responsible for implementing the curriculum – especially teachers – should be able to influence the actual design of the objectives. This required that the curriculum's objectives were clear, but also not so locked in that they did not allow for local adaptation.

As a way of avoiding the trap of instrumental rationality, the curriculum differentiated between the two types of objectives: goals to strive towards and goals to be attained. This division introduced a distinction between objectives in terms of educational processes and outcomes. One example of the former is that when teaching physics, the school must strive to ensure that the pupil "deepens his or her knowledge of acoustic phenomena".[23] An example of the latter is that by the end of grade nine "the student must understand how sound, described as a mechanical oscillating movement, is created, propagates and dampened".[24] While the intention was that the daily planning of teaching would be based on the goals to strive towards, the attainment goals would be the basis for evaluation at specific points in time, such in the above example from the ninth grade in physics. The curriculum committee felt it was important that attainment goals did not become too prescriptive for the teachers' work, as this

could lead to too much focus on results, thus limiting the goals. Once the curriculum was put into practice, this did not work – the attainment goals were what was important, not least because they had a direct link to the objectives-based grading system.

The curriculum's clear link to results in the form of grades became a contentious issue that had not been resolved by the time the reports by the curriculum committee and grading committee were presented. One way to create a less direct link between grades and the curriculum would have been to standardise grades via centrally administered testing, which was also considered. Standardising grades means that how the grading criteria are interpreted in individual cases is not as decisive, as levels are adjusted based on the performance of all pupils. However, the grading committee opposed this, arguing that it smacked of the old grades' relativity and ignorant inflexibility, which was precisely what they wanted to get away from. The challenges that the curriculum committee had already identified and believed they had overcome by constructing these two types of objectives thus did not turn out as well as they had anticipated.

Widening the concept of knowledge

It is important to consider the new concept of knowledge that was developed for the new curriculum Lpo 94 – partly because it differs from previous curriculums, but also because it was later the subject of criticism. The idea was that widening the concept of knowledge would counteract reductionist tendencies in management by objectives. This, however, was a failure.

The first thing to note is that previous curriculums had distinguished between knowledge and skills. During her work on the concept of knowledge, Ingrid Carlgren, the member of the secretariat with responsibility for developing the new concept of knowledge, wrote to the chair of the curriculum committee, Ulf P. Lundgren, asking whether the division into knowledge and skills had become obsolete. Why not simply talk about knowledge, Carlgren wondered.

In the decades prior to the early 1990s, when the report was written, the concept of knowledge was already changing in research in the social sciences and humanities. From once being a narrow concern for philosophers, the

concept of knowledge became central to many other fields. One important book was the historian Thomas S. Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, published in 1962, which questioned the hitherto accepted view of scientific knowledge as true over time and independent of theory. Instead, Kuhn argued that facts depended on the theories that underlay them, and that theoretical shifts – or paradigm shifts as he called them – could lead to entire fields of science suddenly being considered unscientific. Through his study, Kuhn also opened up a concept of knowledge that has great analytical value for the social and human sciences.

Several other important books on the development of the concept of knowledge followed in the period up to 1990. These developments influenced education research in the 1970s and 1980s, contributing to its evolution from quantitative to more qualitative. In education, translations of psychologist Lev Vygotsky's writings for a Western readership from the 1960s onwards also played an important role, as did works by philosopher Michael Polanyi on tacit knowledge. However, no new epistemological perspectives had been established in education by the 1980s.

In her work on a more scientifically based concept of knowledge for schools, Ingrid Carlgren took her starting point in the lively debate on knowledge in the 1980s. For schools, Carlgren's proposal meant widening the previous concept of knowledge from its narrow meaning of facts

(although this was never clearly defined in previous curriculums) and including practical knowledge. Carlgren hoped to help raise the status of the latter form of knowledge in schools by using an inclusive concept. Carlgren tried to capture this innovation in four terms: facts, understanding, skills and familiarity.

Carlgren's work attracted interest even while the committees were working. There are stories that the grading committee managed to get hold of drafts by rummaging through the rubbish bins of the curriculum committee's office in Stockholm. The grading committee also wanted to get on board the knowledge train, and had an idea that knowledge could be described using a hierarchical model where the lowest level meant that pupils knew individual facts and the highest meant that they could apply their knowledge.[25] One draft of the committee's report included this knowledge model. However, the ministry thought it was enough that one perspective on knowledge was presented – by the committee that had been tasked with this.

When the curriculum committee's report, *Skola för bildning* (Schools for civic education), was released in 1992, the issue of knowledge also received considerable attention. The vast majority of referral bodies were in favour of it, including the Royal Swedish Academy of Sciences, which argued that it was in line with modern science.

The logic of the wall

Following the implementation of the new governance system in the mid-1990s, much of the debate centred on the grading criteria. Many teachers reacted to what they perceived as a lack of clarity about grading – the criteria provided in the curriculum were not sufficient to determine a particular level. Even though the catalogue of objectives had been streamlined and systematised compared to the Lgr 80 curriculum, the fact that they were the basis for grading meant that completely different demands were placed on the objectives. The requirement that the curriculum's stated objectives must be clear but also allow for local adjustment proved challenging to many teachers. The local objectives were often simply direct copies of the central ones; in other cases they were outright distortions. Local objectives for a passing grade could be obligatory attendance.[26] At teacher conferences, the new objectives were criticised:

> A pupil who can make a phone call to his aunt in Hjo will pass communication skills. Pass with merit if he can ring his aunt in Knisslinge. And pass with distinction if he can

> call the National Agency for Education in Stockholm, receive information about the grading system and then interpret it.[27]

A direct consequence of the new grading system was the creation of a new type of pupil, those who did not achieve the objectives (i.e., the goals to attain for a pass). As I mentioned, this group was considerable. Despite these pupils being due to the design of the new grading system, the failure of many pupils to qualify for upper-secondary school was interpreted as a sign of how poor the Swedish school system was. Towards the end of the 1990s, there were several major debates in parliament about the crisis in schools, with the main focus being how to increase the proportion of pupils with pass grades. The 2000s saw a series of reforms aimed at tackling the problem. In addition, international assessments, in particular PISA, further fuelled the crisis. A number of reforms were implemented and inspections of school activities increased. More national tests, earlier grades and more regulation of teachers' work were introduced.

For many teachers, management by objectives did not allow the participation that the state intended through its directives for a new management system. Goals were perceived as requirements and, when pupils did not achieve them, teachers were blamed. In an attempt to fight back, they argued that the grading objectives were unclear: make them clearer and we can do the job! Teachers thus

paradoxically contributed to the increased regulation of their work.

Despite all the talk of management by objectives giving teachers more freedom, autonomy in key areas seems to have been reduced as regulation has increased. Not only that, but the demands for documentation, standardisation and performance monitoring have contributed to shifting teachers' focus away from teaching. The reforms since the 1990s have thus, contrary to their intentions, contributed to the deprofessionalisation of the teaching profession.[28]

The future?

While management by objectives has reigned over schools for three decades, it has not lived up to the expectations – a school with knowledge at its heart, where all pupils learn what they are supposed to. It may even be that management by objectives is a barrier to learning. There is talk of failure, or at least a series of unfortunate and unforeseen consequences, but management by objectives remain a cornerstone of the education system. The attraction lies in its clarity, with objectives for the knowledge pupils should achieve through their basic education.

At the same time, there is growing dissatisfaction with the kind of rational management methods that have come to be associated with management by objectives. It creates stress, and preoccupation with results often leads organisations astray in relation to their overall objectives.

The unreasonableness of such systems – for all parties – sometimes becomes apparent when someone manages to abandon them. I'm thinking, for example, of the home-care services in Mörbylånga, which replaced a centrally administered minute-management system with one that

allowed staff to set their own schedules. This contributed to both reduced stress among staff and satisfied clients.[29]

Thus far, the logic behind changes and solutions in the world of education has been that the tougher – clearer – the governance, the better. Exactly what is meant by clarity has varied over time and will have to be covered in another essay, but the principle has led schools into a vicious spiral of ever-increasing regulation of objectives, leading to an obsession with measurable results. The risk is that many people learn to do the right thing, but still get it wrong.

In my view, school policy documents and the political debate about education have both become stuck in a meta-bureaucratic language about knowledge. Attempts have been made to operationalise the idea of a school for knowledge within the framework of a rational management system governed by objectives. Pupils do not learn more just because we define knowledge according to this or that theory and regulate levels of knowledge through objectives in policy documents and legislation. There is a risk that talking about knowledge obscures the view of knowing about a subject. In teaching a particular subject we often end up in technical exercises, where a pupil who has to learn the concept of force, for example, is constantly checking a grading matrix to see whether they have achieved the desired grade. Perhaps the matrix says that the more force arrows are drawn, the higher the grade,

and so the pupil draws a few more force arrows.[30] But what knowledge of force as a concept does the pupil gain through this exercise?

It should be added that many pupils like the clarity provided by the current system, while they may also feel stressed by seeing how much work they need to put in to achieve the highest grades. Requirements for different grades being clearly stated in the curriculum and the Education Act has also meant greater legal certainty for pupils: the grounds for assessment are explicit. In other words, politicians are not the only ones who are maintaining the system – pupils and teachers (and parents) also contribute to its continued legitimacy and a development in which the screws are constantly being tightened.

The biggest failure of the current system is the number of pupils who do not achieve pass grades. However, this is a dilemma that politicians are happy to discuss and offer solutions for. Somewhat cynically, one could say that what politicians have here is a perpetual, ongoing issue surrounding education that justifies their existence. More inquiries and reforms, including a new curriculum, a new grading system and new funding are planned to address the problems of low levels of knowledge and the high proportion of pupils who do not achieve the goals. Unfortunately, I believe that these are doomed to failure.

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RJ 2024
Failures?
Editor: Jenny Björkman
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Sven Anders Johansson

Is education in schools dominated by a reverse pedagogy? When grading criteria are transformed into learning objectives, one might wonder – and underlying this is the system of management by objectives that was introduced in schools in the 1990s.

Public policy targets have long existed, but they have become an increasingly important policy tool in recent decades. For schools, setting goals went hand in hand with marketisation: the state set the objectives – particularly the requirements for a pass grade – and then let schools decide how to achieve them. But management by objectives is a concept that is both clear and diffuse and, despite the reform hardly living up to expectations, it remains a cornerstone of education policy.

In 2024, Riksbankens Jubileumsfond publishes an essay collection under the title *Failures?*. Education researcher Magnus Hultén writes about the downsides of management by objectives in schools.

RJ 2024: *Failures?*
Riksbankens Jubileumsfond
in partnership with Makadam förlag

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