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Lockers and Hangers: Defining Space and Interaction between Vocational and Academic Students

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Where is home in a large building in which you spend your days, week after week, year after year? Who do you interact with out of all these hundreds, even thousands of people, who like you spend their days as students, teachers, principals, school nurses, counsellors, food service or maintenance staff in a typical school? I decided to revisit the upper secondary school I attended from 1988 to 1991 and look at the processes of change of spaces that forwent and surpassed my own experience of being a student in the building. The overarching question I posed was how the spatial construction of the school allows for and limits interaction between students in vocational and academic education. This question was brought to three different time sets – the early 1970s, late 1980s and the present day. My everyday interaction with the school did not stop with graduation in 1991. Thirteen years later, in 2004, I returned for in-service training and after finishing my degree, I ended up working as a history and civics teacher for four years.

The school – Dragonskolan – is one of the largest contiguous upper secondary units in Sweden and is the everyday environment of nearly two thousand 16 to 19-year-olds attending tracks of great variety, e.g. programmes for training to become hairdresser, construction worker, welding operator, electrician, as well as academic tracks for the equivalence of A-levels in a wide variety of subjects such as chemistry, biology, math, English, history, and Swedish. The school and building that was substantially refurbished between 2008 and 2011 was planned for and built in connection with a reform unifying vocational education and training (VET) and academic tracks in the
Swedish upper secondary school in 1971, with VET organised in two-year long tracks and academic education as three-year long tracks.

Between first entering the school as a pupil and leaving to become a Ph.D. candidate in history and education, the school was rebuilt and transformed. The premises for vocational training were, and still are, situated in the northern part of the school. I experience very little interaction with the students in VET, who mostly spent their days in the areas in conjunction with the vocational education premises, when I attended an academic track at the school in the late 80s and early 90s. One of the motives behind refurbishing the school 2008 was to try to create smaller units within the school. The three units, called “houses”, would include academic and vocational tracks as well as an equal representation of boys and girls.

In the process of the present study, I have explored three sets of data. First, the school plan from 1974 together with photographs found in a pamphlet presenting the new school. Secondly, my own memories of the experience of attending the school between 1988 and 1991. And finally, the school plan from 2008 together with a photograph of a locker. The locker has been kept to allow for the storage of sports equipment and is very similar, if not exactly the same, to the ones that were in the school in 1988 to 1991. The three sets of data provided the basis for the overarching question of how the spatial construction of the school allows for and limits interaction between pupils in vocational and preparatory education. Since the visual data only represent the distribution of different functions in the school (classrooms, corridors etc.), there are no ethical issues of privacy. I am no longer an employee of the municipality and the visit I made was in my role as a researcher and had been authorised by the principal, who also provided me with the pamphlet from 1974. The reliability and validity of the investigation in the use of my own experiences from school as a set of data is a more relevant matter that will be addressed below. The question concerning spatial obstacles and allowance for interaction between pupils in vocational and preparatory education is an interest evolved from an on-going project concerning general knowledge and history in the curriculum of upper secondary VET. Interest in reading the spaces of Dragonskolan from the
perspective of division/integration of VET and academic students was also generated by my own experience of school.

Considering the value of visual research has made me realise that through visual representation, we can access information about the past that is not visible in written text. The familiarity of school environments helps us interpret past experiences of schooling, at the same time as the unfamiliarity of the past can make us pay attention to details and ideas that become visible in the history of education, and this “seeing” can enhance the understanding of, and help us formulate questions concerning, contemporary education. The problems I have experienced in the process are linked to my own process of formulating the value of visual research. Faced with visual data, I found it hard to analyse the material, where to start, and to assess my interpretation and conclusion as valid. A set of questions about how to read images in educational research posed by Ian Grosvenor served as a point of departure and my “seeing” was enhanced in the weeks that followed. Eventually, I experienced the process of inquiry as liberating and eye opening. It has also made me aware of how deceptive the conviction that texts are more interpretable than images can be. Photography, as text, “constitutes a site of production and representation, and […] a photograph must be read not as an image, but as a text, and as with any text it is open to a diversity of reading”.

Set of Data I: Images from 1974

The booklet from 1974 contains information on the background of the decision to build a large school unit that offered vocational as well as preparatory education, technical and construction data of the building, some of the ideas behind the organisation of the school, full page pictures of the exterior and interior of the school and schematics of each of the three

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floors. In my reading, I closely studied the plan of the school and the location of different educational areas, as well as the location of administration, leisure areas, library and departments. The type of school built reveals the ideology of upper secondary schooling.\(^1\) Interpreting what the school plan tells us about ideas and ideals of education at the time, words that come to mind are *large scale, centralised, functionalist, modern, optimism, expansionism,* and *mass education.*

Shop facilities are positioned in the north and more general classrooms in the south, as is the library. Administration, school health and counsellors are centralised in specific areas. The southern corridor (the cloakroom corridor) is equipped to provide the entire school population with hangers and lockers according to defined knowledge areas, e.g. general theoretical, general technical, etc. (Figure 1 and 2 on page 22/23). This finding, when contrasted to my memories, surprised me and made me realise the importance of the location of your locker for who you interact with in school.

**Set of Data II: School Memories 1988–91**

Reading the booklet from 1974 could be described as a photo elucidation process. It not only brought back memories of my own schooling, but also memories of the experience of the school I was trying to “read”. On the one hand, one can claim that these memories only represent “a particular and individual knowledge”.\(^4\) On the other hand, not making use of my experience would have deprived me of a tool that served to direct attention to how the function of spaces had evolved from their original intention.

I attended the school between the fall of 1988 and spring of 1991. For three years, the building was my everyday life. That my body and my senses contained the memories of the space became clear to me when I returned to the school twelve


Figure 1. 1974 schematic of Dragonskolan: Ground floor.
Figure 2. 1974 schematic of Dragonskolan: First floor.
years later for in-service training. Leaping the stairs, rushing along the corridors, cutting corners in a hurry were familiar and natural patterns of movement in the spaces of the school. Memories rose to the surface when viewing the original school blueprint. I found myself comparing and contrasting in my reading of the photographs in the pamphlet. I looked for the recognisable. Seeing the piece of art on the wall in the administrative corridor in black and white, I added the colours to the picture. I could hear the silence of the empty auditorium. I felt the hard stone floors of the cloakroom corridor. I looked for the unfamiliar and found unknown features. The lockers and hangers were different from the ones I remembered. The canteen was not the same, nor was the cafeteria, that had glass windows showing the outer corridor by 1988.

I attended an academic track and all my classes except physical education took place in the south section of the school. My friends and I had little or no excuse to enter the north side of the school. My memories of the northern part of the school and of the workshop corridor are memories of a poorly lit space and very much a male-dominated environment where I felt unfamiliar and uneasy.

The close reading of the original blueprint and the explanations of how the cloakroom corridor was designed to serve all the students in the school, and organised according to a classification of knowledge areas (Figure 1), rather than of vocational and theoretical knowledge, made me realise that the school had undergone a change by 1988. The original idea of the cloakroom had been transformed.

By 1988, the original lockers and hangers – seen in the background in Figure 3 – had been replaced by tall steel lockers – seen in Figure 4 – with room for books and clothes. I had my locker together with the rest of my class, which in turn had its lockers nearby the other first years in the same track.

Apart from the cloakroom corridor, there were lockers in the vertical corridors and part of the workshop corridor. In my memory, the lockers were distributed according to the geographical position of primary teaching localities. As a consequence, the vocational and academic students were neatly separated into different spaces. The practical reason for changing the initial idea might be the need to provide lockers spacious enough
for clothing, probably to prevent theft of the pupils’ personal belongings. Larger lockers meant there was no room for all of them in one area. An additional plausible explanation is the inconvenience caused the vocational pupils, who needed to walk across the school to get to the workshops, and back again to access their lockers. Either way, the original idea for a central cloakroom corridor had been abandoned by 1988.
Set of Data III: Contemporary Images

Tired and run-down, the Dragonskolan was substantially refurbished between 2008 and 2011. The idea was to reorganise the school into three sections, each a combination of programmes dominated by girls and boys, respectively, as well as a blend of academic and vocational programmes. The aim was to create a limited space were the pupils would feel at home. The lockers were located in spaces inside the sections, rather than in public corridors. One obstacle in the process of integration was the position of the shop facilities, which were too costly to be relocated. The new school makes visible new ideals concerning upper secondary schooling. The reorganisation of administration, teacher workplaces, school health and counsellors reveals a more “adolescent-centred” perception of education.\footnote{This could partly be explained by the fact that non-compulsory 16 to 19-year-old education in practice is compulsory and there is a larger proportion of pupils that would rather do something else than continue attending upper secondary school. In 1976, 66 percent of the graduates from compulsory school continued directly to gymnasium, in the nineties the figure rose to 98 percent (Skolverket). The new structure of the school represents a different approach to making a home in the school for the adolescent. This is related to a changing perception of youngsters in the age group 16 to 19. They were to a larger extent viewed as adults in the early 70s, whereas today they are viewed as more in need of supportive socio-structures.}
Figure 5. School schematic 2008: Ground floor.
Figure 6. School schematic 2008: First floor.
Conclusion

The idea of integrating VET and academic tracks was present in the 1974 material as well as in the school schematic of today. In the original school, the very idea of vocational and academic education side by side in the same building, with shared facilities such as the cloakroom corridor, canteen, café, library, auditorium and sports hall, was an integrative act. In my memories from late the 1980s, integration was limited, despite common facilities. No VET students went to sit in the library, located on the first floor in the south part of the school. Most academic students chose the south entrance to the canteen. I was at unease whenever I walked the northern corridor. In the refurbishing of the school, integration of the student body was a priority, since division was seen as a problem. Here I have proposed the positioning of the lockers as a decisive variable for how students define their space in school and how different groups take on different spaces. The lockers are the private space of each pupil. In my years as a student, it was the place where I started my day, returned between classes to change books, where I hung out with friends during breaks, where my day ended and where I made plans for the rest of the evening. The lockers, in my memories, defined the space where I belonged in this vast building.