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Using art in Swedish schools to understand the Convention of Children's Rights

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Swedish schools have fundamental national instructions for all activities:

- children have the right of cultural freedom of speech and pleasurable work;
- adults must respect children and young people's culture and challenge their preconceptions;
- oral, written and non-verbal forms of expression have equal value;
- aesthetic expressions are forms of language and communication in learning;
- increasing control of language increases freedom;
- aesthetic work must not be only an occasional event in school;
- cultural and aesthetic competence are important aspects of all knowledge and competence.

The extended expression of language

Speaking and writing stand side by side with art and other cultural forms of expression, even in newspapers and in public discussion. But while we talk about an expanded conception of language, at school the situation is otherwise. Verbal language dominates ordinary work, and is characterised, with mathematics, as a 'basic' skill. Other forms of expression are brought together under the heading 'practical-aesthetic subjects'. Modern communication is a mixture of different forms of media: the essence of freedom of speech is to express thoughts, opinions and feelings in the most suitable language.

Where teachers use art as an inspiration, or as historical material, they often choose early art - or if they use modern art they involve Picasso or Miró, for instance. These artists represent something between realistic content and abstract expression: the works speak to the children and give them an opportunity to interpret with help of their imagination. The paintings are often colourful, sometimes naive or surrealist, and this can also be attractive. There are often explanations available about these paintings, and many teachers want to have such 'answers' for their pupils. The result, the product, of such practices is more important than the process, and the result is predictable - perhaps because the result will be shown to parents or shown in the classroom. It is not usual to talk about the problems involved in the creation of the art, and it is rare to give time or interest to discussing deeper meaning of their content.

Why is contemporary art almost invisible in schools? One answer may be that new ways of creating demand new technique. Nowadays pictures are made with computers, film and videotapes. This involves expense, and also imposes demands techniques, in method and content, and teachers may not feel confident in these. Questions will be asked and perhaps they cannot be answered. But contemporary artists often allow the observer access to the most difficult part of their communication, and we are all faced with questions that not

are always enjoyable. It should be the same in school: the questions and the answers - if there are any - ought to come from the pupils.

Students develop as humans and citizens during their education. There is a close connection between democracy and freedom of speech and publicity, and each presupposes the other. The Swedish curriculum and syllabi are based on the concept of democracy, and schools anchor these basic values: of equality, gender equality, and solidarity to the weak and exposed. The curriculum emphasises democratic principles; all pupils should be able to influence, to be responsible and to participate. Control of one's own actions is a human right, an important part of the process of democracy, and basic to successful learning. The fight for speaking freely is a determinate part of growth, and art is an important part of the process. According to the Convention of Children's Right we have to understand that children are citizens who have the right to voice their own opinions. They have also the right to take part in cultural and artistic life.

The development of Swedish society

Pupils have to be committed to learning for deeper meaning, but it is important and necessary that school learning is based on the conditions and experiences of the children, starting from their daily knowledge: this meets 'school knowledge', and together they result in 'life knowledge'. The child will recognise its own experiences in school, and school subjects are the tools to make the world intelligible. To deny the experiences of children is to deny their human rights.

The combination of free speech and using it in an artistic way is important for expressing thoughts about art and aesthetic learning at school. Through art we encounter the thoughts of others and gain a new perspective on our own lives. In agricultural nineteenth-century Swedish society there was no organised school as an institution, and production and reproduction, work and living, were very close. Children participated in this adult world. Production was open and visible, and children's upbringing and training was integrated with work and active participation. The context gained meaning through observation and oral communication. Early industrial society began to separate production from reproduction. Children went to school for a few hours each day, where they talked and read about real life, but they still also participated in work, which was close to their life. Today there is a huge gap between production and reproduction. Most pupils study for twelve years, and there is a great distances between work and living. People are segregated by age. Upbringing, education and life qualifications are mostly acquired at school. Are our children learning for school and not for life? Swedish society has seen a huge explosion in media - arguably too much information is available - and is society is increasingly abstract. What are the effects of this? Do we know more and understanding less, and are people looking for simple solutions as a result of feelings of powerlessness and passiveness?

The effects

How can we balance these effects? We must create good learning situations in which contexts and structures, process-directed learning and possibilities to exercise influence are in focus. The media explosion and the flow of information provide new knowledge, beyond school subjects: this has to be discussed, analysed and put into different contexts. We have to learn to live with insecurity and contradictions. What teacher is prepared to

take on this difficult task? We need to co-operate at school and try to help each other in different ways.

When you work with form, it is nearly always necessary to bring content into the product. In exceptional cases the form is superior, as for example when you work with decorative tasks such as patterns, but mostly the content must be added. This will open the way for more cooperation at school between teachers who are specialists within different fields. Teachers specialising in language need to work with teachers of civics, environment and history – and by 'language' we mean both verbal and aesthetic language. Ingrid Carlgren and Ference Marton lay stress on this, arguing it will be increasingly necessary for people to live with insecurity, and that people working with others can make decisions and navigate in a society in which nothing can be taken for granted.

The expanded concept of knowledge

How should we develop a school that works as an active part of a critical and creative society? We must create a place where young people can investigate their possibilities for action and find out what they want. Openness to the world and methods of dealing with insecurity and divisions have to be learned, and this learning ought to be social, constructed together with other people. In the Swedish curriculum of 1994 the concept of knowledge was expanded to cover three aspects and four forms.

The aspects are *constructive* (meaning that knowledge is not a way to copy the world but a tool for understanding), *contextual* (knowledge depends on its context) and *functional* (knowledge is intended to be used).

The four forms of knowledge are:

- *Factual* - information that can be measured: a quantitative form of knowledge.
- *Understanding* - qualitative knowledge, that is understood in deeper way.
- *Proficiency* - knowing how something is done or shaped, applied to intellectual and manual practices. This is the practical corollary of understanding - facts, understanding and proficiency are the visible forms of knowledge.
- *Familiarity*: ultimate knowledge, which will help us to apply the knowledge into new contexts and to discern similarities and dissimilarities.

There are capacities in this expanded conception of knowledge, such as the ability to frame problems, undertake research and draw conclusions, to regard facts and circumstances critically, to realise the consequences of actions and decisions, and the ability to think and reflect on problems. These capacities have to be developed in all subjects at school. School should encourage the creative side of the pupil. Answers to questions about society, the world and our own place in it are not givens: with such a view working with aesthetic forms will be essential, helping us perceive ambiguous and contradictory issues about which we can agree or disagree.

Deliberative communication

It is essential that students learn to participate in deliberative communication and practice considering alternatives and analysing arguments. It is also important to communicate, because this unifies modern society. Part of this is learning to listen to and to consider

other people's arguments, and to show tolerance and respect for their points of view, to learn that it is acceptable to question authority and traditional beliefs, to realise that we can disagree and that this is not dangerous. Working in an aesthetic way gives concrete possibilities to ask questions about difficult contents. We can create content that forces in society try to neglect. We can also be reminded of things that we have forgotten to dream about and demand of our lives. Sometimes pictures and form talk to us beyond words. The method of art, and its relative freedom, may offer a prototype of method at school. It is a freedom that makes it possible to express the uncommon, and to create the world from a deeply human perspective.

The strategy of the Swedish government

The Swedish government has a strategy to implement the Convention of Children's Rights: the Convention and its intentions should focus all decisions concerning children. Sweden ratified the Convention in 1990 and is obliged to follow it: children have to be respected. This is a constant and continuing process. The Convention is supposed to throw light on children's conditions, and change attitudes, how to act, and how each individual can work in different activities and on different levels of society. The perspective of the child is developed so that the inclination of the child becomes central. This implies changes in laws, regulations and praxis. The Swedish government regards the Convention as important, and its implementation is seen as best served by disseminating knowledge and consciousness, so that it reaches decision-makers whose activities affect children's daily lives, adults working with children and the children and young people themselves. The strategy is that the Convention be an active instrument to leaven all decisions concerning children, and be emphasised in all aspects of children's education.

A practical example

This is a three-step example of implementing of the Convention of Children's Rights:

1. Pupils/teachers are divided into groups of approximately four to five and each group is allocated an article from the Convention for Children's Rights. Each member of each the group reads the article and writes down his/her version of the text. The content and the different versions within each group are discussed. At this stage it is important to use imagination, memories and associations: different experiences influence the ideas that emerge. Everyone in the group has to take part in this work, and it is important that participants listen to each other and respect the different versions.
2. A version of each article is put into a box, which may contain various concepts, and thus be a hybrid. Group members discuss together the creation of the words in the shape of an installation in miniature. In this step different subjects are integrated - for example language, social science, music, ethics and geography. The aim is not to answer a problem but to pose a question to the other groups and perhaps to offer a new perspective.
3. The work is presented with a display of the contents of the boxes. Different groups tell the others all about their contribution. What is the focus? Why did they choose this form? What were the motivations? Was it a compromise? What did they learn? How? What tools did they use? In step five is the dialogical classroom, when different voices meet and interact, and the potential for learning is at its greatest.

An important question on which to focus is *why* we work like this. Pictures and other artistic forms open possibilities to create questions and to scrutinise opinions and standpoints in a critical way. In work with pictures, experiences are shaped and knowledge is produced, which will be visible, understandable and possible to mediate. Different degrees of realism and more symbolic forms of production, qualities and relations of space can be involved. The 'audience' can see the whole at the moment of presentation. The model demands co-ordination, compromise and collective learning.

We finish with some a sentence from the pupils' evaluation:

interesting and stimulating way to work, we are learning from each other and it's obvious that we learn in different ways, co-operation between subjects are positive.