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How do young people's values and philosophy of life correspond with the curriculum and citizenship education at school?

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Introduction, concepts and questions

Even young people have a philosophy of life formed from their experiences, alone or together with others, inside and outside school. Such a 'lived' philosophy of life might include a self-concept, other concepts, feelings, attitudes and ways to act. It is a way of organizing experiences, it gives patterns to interpret life and handle it. It is a process going on all through life. This is a definition given by Hartman (2003) and 'lived' means that it is not an established religion or ideology, but one formed personally from one's own experiences. A person's philosophy of life becomes a personal map over them and their culture, their own personal mark in the world. Some experiences become more important than others in life and can be called existential questions. 'An existential question is about the basic conditions for life and existence. It also expresses a need to reflect upon yourself and your experiences in life' (Hartman, 2003, s.71). These questions are not the same for all people, different issues become of importance. They arouse feelings and need reflections and actions which may lead to a change in a person's values and philosophy of life.

Citizenship means rights and duties, but also identity and sense of belonging, being a citizen. Figueroa (2000) understands the citizen as an embodied individual-with-others, as an other/self with equal weight for both, underlining the relational character. Osler and Starkey (2000) define citizenship education as having two interrelated components, the structural/political and the cultural/personal and they see the concept of citizenship as founded on the notion of individual as actor in a democratic polity which requires an understanding and acceptance of human rights. Education for citizenship in Swedish pre-schools and compulsory schools are expressed as a foundation of values in the national curricula for preschool and school (Utbildningsdepartementet 1998a and b). It includes values of importance to become a good democratic citizen. Equal value of all human beings, freedom and integrity, solidarity with weak people, equality for men and women, tolerance for differences and influence for all are some of the values in the curriculum. How does the values of the pupils and the values of the curriculum go together? These values are supposed to be taught to pupils by all teachers, not in any specific subject. If that project is to succeed it is of crucial importance to ask what philosophy of life both adults and youth may hold and how it is 'lived' in school. This paper looks upon this from a children's perspective. The questions asked are: What values and philosophy of life do children and youth form from their experiences inside and outside school? How do these values correspond with the values in the curriculum?

Methods used

This paper draws on results in studies based upon 107 written life stories and 31 interviews as well as round tours in former pre-schools and primary schools. They were

made with young people, 15 to 16 years old, in five classes in the ninth year of the Swedish compulsory school in 1995 and 1999. One of the classes comes from a multicultural school and area. The pupils were asked to recall and reflect upon their experiences during life, in pre-school and school, as well as outside school (Torstenson-Ed, 1997, 2003). The studies have a phenomenological and a life history approach. That means an individual in his context and a time aspect where past, present and future go together in a nonlinear, human time.

Meetings with peers and adults

Meetings with other people are of great importance for what becomes existential questions and forming your personal philosophy of life. Children's meetings in school are meetings with both peers and adults and they may give good or bad experiences. The studies show that young people react strongly upon experiences of offence, conflicts and bullying that make you feel angry, helpless or offended. These experiences arouse strong feelings, and they have to be reflected upon or else suppressed. They become existential questions. They are not the same for all children. Being a girl or a boy, to have a certain ethnic background, to be a pupil at school or to be a child of special needs are mostly taken for granted parts of your identity and life. But it may become an existential question if there are strong boundary-lines parting worthy and worthless and you are categorised on the wrong side of the line. To be treated as less worth than your brother by parents because you are a girl, to be an immigrant child in a Swedish class or group, to have to go to special education might make you feel bad about yourself if it is not accepted. In such situations the young people clearly express a value of justice and equal rights and value for themselves. But it should not to be taken for granted that these values are accepted as principles for all.

There are three pupils with immigrant background in the studies who have experiences of being bullied, all in classes with a majority of ethnical Swedish pupils. They handled it in different ways and came to different conclusions. One girl had nobody to speak to about the experience, she suppressed her memories but felt worthless herself. One boy, bullied already in pre-school, armed himself and fought back in school. Later he accepted racist values, fighting immigrant young people together with peers with the same ideology, denying his own immigrant background. One girl had a mother and a sister who defended her and with whom she could talk. She was able to reflect upon herself and the people bullying her, trying to understand and keep her own self-respect at the same time. But she also expresses great disappointment with her teachers who didn't do anything and bagatellized the bullying when she asked them to intervene. All three had one conclusion in common; the importance of being Swedish. They had been forced to choose side.

There are also examples of pupils feeling bullied by their teachers, mistreated because they are slow learners. Most pupils feel they have a good relation to teachers if they adapt to being 'a good pupil'. When there was a conflict going on between teachers and pupils as in one of the classes it led to a 'we and them'-thinking, but it also seemed to lead to a higher consciousness and ability to reflect upon equal values of adults and young people. The reasons why one teacher is well liked are that she is a good listener,

she doesn't hold prejudices and she gives equal priority to both parts in a conflict, both teachers and pupils. The pupils telling this seem to have learnt about reciprocity and equal value as a principle.

It seems to be of great importance to have somebody to talk to about experiences like this, somebody listening. Then it is easier to understand that the justice you demand for yourself also must be a principle applicable for other people. If you don't get justice and redress, if you feel that nobody listens that will have consequences too. It may lead to feelings of revenge or worthlessness, which does not lead to equal value for all as a principle. The results show that if the pupils have somebody to talk to it is more often a parent, a sibling or a peer than a teacher. Here the adults in school have a great task to promote democratic values, not only to teach them, but to listen and try to apply them in real life in school. Also the Crick report in UK argue that children cannot simply be taught how to be effective citizens, they also need to learn by experience, they need to learn conflict resolution, skills of persuasion and decision-making. Spencer (2000) argues that the impact of that may be great. The schools need to create an environment where pupils feel that they will not be ridiculed by their teachers or classmates. This would require a significant change of ethos in many schools, she says about UK. That goes for Sweden as well.

Meetings with knowledge and learning

Another part of a philosophy of life might be a view of knowledge and learning. The young people tell about their learning outside school, it may be learning about poetry, computers or mending mopeds, all of their own choice. Then they talk about a good motivation, learning within a context, alone or with the help of peers, and they give equal status to practical and theoretical knowledge. That is exactly the definition of learning and knowledge which you can find in the Swedish curriculum of compulsory school. When asked about learning at school the pupils also prefer working with projects where they have the opportunity to choose content, time and place for their learning. But this doesn't occur very often. Usually, they have another view of knowledge and learning at school: You should learn what you are told however boring to get good marks, knowledge in itself is not important. So they have double standards, one for life and one for school. The paradox occur that while students hold the same view of knowledge and learning as the curriculum and practice it in their own lives they usually don't find it possible to practice in school. This raises questions about what is possible to achieve in school as an institution which is compulsory and have the same aims for everybody. Learning and living according to democratic values ought to be integrated – is that possible?

If your own values and values of the school don't go together you may expect that the pupils should want to change school. But most pupils prefer to adapt to the system to get good marks, and the pupils who were in conflict with their teachers don't think it is possible to change school as the teachers are not listening to them. They agree when I as a researcher suggest that they would like some changes regarding content, their built environment, ways of working, teachers, influence but they don't ask for that, the school is at it is, the teachers don't listen and the school is not possible to change. As school is

the first miniature society which pupils meet you must ask the question if that will be the view they will hold for society as a whole later on, that it is not possible to change, it does not matter what I say or do, teachers or somebody with more power will decide. Figueroa (2000) also underlines that educational inequalities need to be addressed. As schools are an integral part of society, inequalities in school may be a symptom of inequalities in society, and also in turn contribute to these inequalities.

Future plans

When pupils tell me as a researcher about their future plans they also reveal values and attitudes towards school and society. They try to let their views of themselves and who they are go together with their views of the society of which they will take part. Some of them have double standards in this case too. They have double future plans, one for themselves, one for society and school. It is mostly young people with resources who are capable of that. 'As I have good marks I will probably choose science and later become a lawyer or something dull like that', one girl says. But she also says that she would like to make music, to compose, to learn to play and sing. She does that in her spare time and then she works really hard. Another girl interested in literature and poetry would like to become an author. She knows it is difficult, so she mostly keeps that a secret plan. Officially she tries to combine her interest and good marks in languages and literature with future plans to become a journalist. One boy tells about his interest in computers, 'I have learnt it all by myself without any teachers', he says proudly. Sometimes he has got some help from his peers. His philosophy is that something you have learnt all by yourself is a good thing to invest in for the future because that is something you will do well.

Some pupils answer that they don't think much about the future, they live from day to day. They also tell that their interests in cooking, repairing motors, doing things with their hands are not met very well at school. Sometimes they may find an education possible to combine with their interests even if they haven't got good marks at school, as the boy choosing an electrician program wishing to repair computers in the future. The future plans of these pupils are more often inspired by experiences outside school than of content, learning and other experiences inside school. It is not easy for them to use school for their purposes and the school doesn't know about the pupils life outside school. The young people that really should need some support to make their own future plans, school and society fit together don't seem to get any help with that.

Citizenship education - shared values?

The Swedish curriculum talks about values which teachers should teach and pass on to their pupils. These values are important for citizenship in a democracy, equality, solidarity, tolerance and influence. They correspond well with the human rights and the UN children's rights ratified by many countries. But I think the curriculum gives a misleading image of how to learn about them. They give the picture that these values are qualities that adults and teachers already possess and just have to pass on to young people. That is hardly the case. The studies show that children and young people are well aware of and also defend moral principles like justice and equality especially when

they are challenged. But the studies also show that both children and adults continuously fail to live up to these principles, for example all kinds of conflicts in school are between grown-ups and children as often as between peers (Szlarski, 1996). And you only have to read a newspaper about ethics in the business world or in politics to understand that moral principles and values have to be defended, practiced and learnt anew every day in society. That goes for teachers as well as pupils in school too.

Perhaps adults have a better vocabulary about values and ethics, but studies show (Colnerud, 1996) that teachers often lack words to talk about their own professional ethics. This means that both pupils and teachers should need education about that, and why not together? Certainly adults and teachers have a greater responsibility to see to that conflicts and offences are handled and talked about and settled in a good way. And this is perhaps the most important part of citizenship education, to live up to these values together, to talk about their shortcomings. That would give children and young people a way to understand and practice a democratic way of life and make it part of their philosophy of life.

There are many obstacles for that in school. The teachers themselves don't feel like they have an influence or may change things, they are not aware of their own values or have a double standard of values lived and taught. They feel controlled by a curriculum in which aims of knowledge are called 'aims to reach' and have a greater strength than the aims of values, as they are just 'aims to strive for', which creates an imbalance in importance between knowledge and democratic values. There are other values in school, 'a hidden curriculum' seldom talked about, as the demand for the school itself to achieve good results to get a good reputation, as well as the demand to save money. Saving money is a political aim, seldom talked about as a choice between good pedagogics and good economy. The list can be made long. Perhaps the important thing is to talk to the pupils about these obstacles as experienced by their teachers. In that way they will learn something about the situation of adults in society and the importance to foster democratic values and to create good conditions for democracy. To have a 'hidden curriculum' of values influencing without being made conscious and clear, seem to foster double standards in values for both young people and adults, to have one standard for yourself, one that fits your school or society. That is something which won't promote solidarity, equality or any other democratic values.

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