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Dare to trust the pupils' minds

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Different pictures by the teachers ...

'Man's picture of reality is in a way more important than reality itself, because it is the picture that navigates his deeds'.¹

This quotation from the Swedish historian Peter Englund summarises the problem of citizenship teaching in the schools of Sweden.

In 2003 the Swedish National Agency for Education undertook a national evaluation of the Compulsory School educational programme and results (NU-03).

It is probably one of the largest countrywide evaluation studies made in Europe. One of its unique features is that we have results from each student in many subjects which can be related to his/her teachers, class and parents. This makes it possible to get an understanding of the relations between a student's attitudes and results, and then to compare this with national goals.

The results, presented in November 2004, point to other things that can be compared to what was found.² NU-03 shows that the social subjects (civics, history, geography and religion) are high esteemed by pupils. Pupils like these subjects and their teachers. Social science teachers are very confident and satisfied. NU-03 indicates positively that more students than earlier have good processing skills, i.e. they can actively and independently structure, analyse and present a given subject. This is in line with the country's ambition that each student should have a high 'human capital'. All seems well. And would be well, if it was not for the content of the education.

... gives different knowledge by the pupils

The results of the citizenship education do not accord with the expected standard. In our curriculum (Lpo94)³ the main purpose for citizenship education is that 'School has the task of imparting fundamental values and promoting pupils' learning in order to prepare them to live and work in society. It should therefore impart the more unvarying forms of knowledge that constitute the common frame of reference that all in society need'.⁴ The outstanding feature of pupils' knowledge in citizenship was found to be the opposite, the absence of a common frame of reference for citizenship. Pupil's knowledge of society is more often superficial and fragmented than it is deep and well integrated. The contents and organisation of what has been learned differ from pupil to pupil and from class to class.

¹ Englund, Peter, *Förflutenhetens landskap*, Stockholm 1991

² Skolverket (2004) National evaluation of the compulsory school 2003. A summary main report.

³ Curriculum for the Compulsory School System, the Preschool Class and the Leisure-time Centre (Lpo94).

⁴ *Ibid.* p 7

One of the main findings of NU-03 is that teachers' attempts to improve students' processing skills have led to content having a secondary role. If the content is of minor importance, it is naturally easily forgotten. Only fragments of knowledge, without connection to each other, are left. The NU-03 results raise the question of what this lack of a common picture of citizenship means for students' understanding and participation in an increasingly diversified and multicultural society.

This paper will focus on this problem, and try to translate the NU-03 picture to a proposal for optimising citizenship teaching.

Four views of the problem

Let us begin by looking at the picture NU-03 gives of four concepts: syllabus, teacher, pupils and education effect.

1. The syllabus – too extensive

The Swedish syllabus for social science focuses particularly on the elements that build up and strengthen democratic society. It emphasizes citizens who develop their own individual personalities as well as develop the democratic values and general knowledge that is needed in society. The syllabus also includes the basic capacity for inquiry needed in daily working life. The content of the syllabus sets the standard very high: if it could be achieved it would be a tremendous strength for the Swedish society. The problem shown through NU-03 is that the syllabus is not realised in the way that is intended. This is related to ambition of the goals, to teachers' traditional ways of teaching, to school organisation, and to the lack of individual follow up.

The syllabus of the social science subjects' most obvious influence on the teachers is to create a heavy workload. The size of the syllabus is shown through just five of the 31 *minimum* goals of knowledge needed to achieve the lowest grade in social science.

The pupil should ...

- understand fundamental concepts and phenomena of a democratic system, and be able to discuss problems concerning democratic attitudes in everyday life,
- be able to understand the connection between events in society, as well as differentiate between factors affecting these,
- be aware of people's living conditions, and able to examine their assumptions and compare living conditions in the past and present and in different parts of the world,
- understand and be able to reason around the opportunities and difficulties which occur in a society with cultural diversity,
- be able to discuss and work through ethical, aesthetic and existential issues, and understand how these may be dependent on time and culture.

The volume of the syllabus far exceeds the teachers' ability to deliver it. Their practical response is to teach the syllabus selectively, and NU-03 demonstrates that different teachers make different selections.

2. The teacher – too independent

The teacher seems to be steering their way more from her or his own perspective than from the conception and unity that is found in the curriculum and syllabus. All teachers appear to 'design' their teaching from their own personal view of reality and social behaviour: this practice of teachers is confirmed by other social science research. The teacher's 'mind map', their picture of reality, and their interests, are strongly steering the actual teaching situation. Teacher relate to the content of teaching in one of two ways: they either select parts from the syllabus as basis for educational content, or select the content and then search for parts of the syllabus to legitimate it.

3. The pupils – too much work in isolation

A strong signal is given to teachers in the Swedish curriculum in the statement that 'the teacher should take as the starting point each individual pupil's needs, circumstances, experience and thinking'.⁵ This individualistic perspective is made even stronger through sentences such as 'school should strive to ensure that all pupils develop a sense of curiosity and the desire to learn and develop their own individual way of learning'.⁶ When these are combined with circumstances such as larger classes, pupils coming more from more heterogeneous backgrounds and isolation of teachers in interpreting their educational practice, the outcomes seem to be more individual and lonely work by pupils. In spite of the good intention – to start from pupils own beliefs and experiences – it seems that education as a whole is more individualised than ever before. 'What can you, as a social being, really learn alone?' is a question that follows from the findings of NU-03. The debate needs to move to focus on the following questions: what new perspective on the qualities of citizenship can pupils develop together? and, under what circumstances can a new understanding for the perspectives of others be developed?

4. The learning effect – too fragmentary

The picture given above, a little oversimplified, shows a fragmentary and scattered knowledge of citizenship. Wherever we put the emphasis – on the syllabus, on the teacher or on the pupils – it seems difficult to avoid such a splintered outcome.

- Emphasising curriculum outcomes leads to too many goals, most of which will result in superficial and easily forgotten knowledge.
- Emphasising the autonomy of the teacher leads to learning that is related to neither the goals of the syllabus nor the interests and needs of the pupils.
- Emphasising pupils' individual interests risks pupils merely learning more about what they already know.

The impact of social science education over the past ten years has been to develop pupils' processing skills but to have less common content of knowledge. The problem is the difficulty for educational systems to deliver the unvarying type of knowledge that constitutes the common frame of reference that is needed by everyone in society.⁷

⁵ Ibid p 14

⁶ Ibid p 14

⁷ Ibid p 7

To improve the citizenship teaching process

This view of the situation developed from NU-03 also suggests ideas about what improvements can be made to raise students' common frame of reference for citizenship. The National Agency for Education has pointed to the responsibility, at the national level, to make the syllabus more distinct; and at the municipality level to give schools greater support. At the teacher level, the National Agency for Education is now urging the optimisation of pupils' knowledge and social development.

In support of this last point, we will focus on three ways to improve citizenship teaching, and then in the next section, three basic conditions for the citizenship teacher.

1. Trust the pupils' minds

We have described above the elements Syllabus, Teacher and Pupil in this order ('S-T-P'). The logic of this order is that the syllabus is given to the teacher, who transmits it to the pupils. NU-03 indicates that this is not the right order.

The teacher's action is the determining factor. When and how the teacher acts is critical. If the actor is the learner, there is a risk that the teacher will be the learning subject and that the pupils will become objects. In 'S-T-P' the teacher is the one who interprets the syllabus and transmits this to the pupils. Something essential is lost in this: the pupils need to reflect on the questions why? what? and how?

If we move the T (teacher) to a point where he or she no longer stands between the purpose and the pupils, we get the order 'S-P-T'. The idea behind this is to create a situation in which the pupils directly, from their point of view, reflect on the goals for their studies, asking the crucial question 'Why?' Can we in this construct a mental meeting place between society's efforts and the thoughts of pupils? Is this possible? Since the pupils are citizens of the society, the syllabus ought to relate to the pupil's thoughts and life. If not, something is wrong – not in the minds of the pupils, but in the minds of the adults directing the syllabus.

Even if the teacher is taken out of the role of interpreting curriculum goals for the pupils, the teacher does not totally disappear. On the contrary, the teacher has a highly important presence, creating situations in which pupils promote their thoughts, conversing reciprocally with them and documenting the results of their thinking. By organising this reflecting, the teachers' role becomes to canalise the thoughts and the energy which comes from the situation. Or if not this, to be aware that the pupil's mechanisms have not yet started, to find out why and to create a new situation for reflection, to create sparks in the pupil's mind.

The first point is to trust the pupils' minds. More or less conscious of it, every pupil has her or his own picture of the world and the meaning of life, which helps his or her orientation to everyday life. Confronting situations and events in society, meeting the views of others, waken new thoughts and questions. This is a fruitful starting point for citizenship teaching.

2. Create learning situations

There are three risks related to the practice of the teacher. Firstly, the teacher, with a ready and complete view of knowledge, can be impatient to teach the pupils what he or she

knows. But for the pupils, this will only lead to remembering a copy of the teachers' view, to be remembered until the test and then forgotten. Secondly, the empathic and energetic teacher will encourage pupils to study what they are interested in. But then the pupils often only learn things they already know about. Finally, there is the combination: the teacher full of knowledge and activity, who is everywhere and helps everybody in need, because the purpose to reach the goal as fast as possible. And the pupils allow this to happen, because this is the easiest way. In summary, where the teacher's practice appears to be active and engaging, the pupils become passive passengers, learning to manipulate the enthusiastic teacher as the easiest way to achieve high grades.

NU-03 points to an alternative practice for the teacher; waiting for pupils to test, fail and discuss what they can learn from this. The teacher's important contribution is to follow the pupils' learning development, and to begin to act only when the pupils' thinking comes to a standstill, or needs to be challenged, or there needs to be a change in learning organisation. This is not to take over, but to contribute from a meta-perspective, following pupils' development and direction in relationship to the goal of improving citizenship. This role will guarantee the quality of consciousness demands a high quality teaching. It should also be a pleasure for the teacher that pupils are actively learning and gaining new perspectives to better understand themselves and society.

3. Decrease the doing, increase the learning

The temptation for the teacher is to act to do too much and too early. It is different for the pupil: for them, the temptation is to start as quickly as possible. But doing is not necessarily learning. There is a risk that the activity in itself is thought of as learning: the need not be engaged, even if the pupil talks and their fingers move. The organisation of learning is essential to optimise pupils learning.

NU-03's findings on citizenship education suggest two alternative situations. The differences between these depend on the possibilities pupils have to influence, discuss and reflect with each other and the teacher.

NU-03 indicates the importance of organising learning time, and the need to reduce 'doing' and increase time for group reflection. This can be done the hard way, by dividing the lessons into three. This trisected use of time would give equal portions of:

- a. A preparatory time, in which pupils initiate dialogues with each other and the teacher. Problematic discussions of the questions of Why, What and How are important;
- b. An exploratory part, extending the work of part 'a', to test ideas in a situation unrelated to school context, that of 'every day' life';
- c. A time when pupils and teacher together relate parts 'a' and 'b', asking 'what have we learned?', 'what difference will this make for me?', 'what new questions have developed?' what is our view of these?'. The last question leads to point a, and a new learning cycle is started.

The citizenship teacher – improvement of the basic conditions

The analysis of the outcomes of citizenship teaching in NU-03 also suggest possibilities for the teacher who is teaching citizenship. The results indicate the importance for the citizenship teacher to strengthen...

1. ...the status of citizenship teachers

In Sweden three subjects are necessary for admission to higher-level studies – Swedish, English and Mathematics. There is a strong political support to include the natural sciences, which are assumed to be important for the development of trade and industry. The teacher of civic subjects has a low and weak status in the eyes of politicians, headteachers and even some colleagues. But the civic teacher should have much greater esteem: in the NU-03 evaluation civics was the highest of both parents' and pupils' lists as the most necessary school subject. To counter the demands for giving more stress to the natural sciences, it can be argued that more the pupils know of the society in which they live, the more they wish to understand and strengthen it through learning science. The civic subjects can be seen as a portal to natural science and other subjects. Such a perspective is a good platform to increase the status of citizenship teachers.

2. ...the professional dialogue

The NU-03 confirms that Swedish schools are a good arena for teachers of different subjects to come together, discuss and strengthen their social abilities. But this has developed at the expense of the dialogue between teachers teaching the same subject. This has, according to NU-03, resulted in a varied civic education, even within the same school. The result of this is that the robust platform essential for subject's status, discussed above, cannot be built. This lack within the school increases the need for discussion and input from the social scientists in universities and the teaching educators to secure and strengthen the competence of teachers.

3. ...the right to take the power over the time and place

The more detailed the teaching schedules, the less the possibility for teachers to create good learning situations for the pupils. It is essential that teachers control the use of time to ensure that thought processes are not interrupted by a lack of time.

These three points postulate that the teacher is active in school society. A passive civic education teacher gives the signal of not being worthy to be a teacher of democratic citizenship. It is a question of model behaviour.

Summary

The solutions to the problem of teaching citizenship cannot be found outside the pupils' minds. Because pupils are citizens in society, teaching citizenship is more a question of canalising their questions to common learning, than that the teacher giving them answers to questions they have never asked.