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# Being a good friend: Constructions of friendship in Life Competence Education

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## Introduction

Great expectations are placed on schools: not only as institutions for education, but also as arenas for the prevention of social and societal problems (Löf, 2009). It may be argued that this is nothing new, with a historical perspective it is clear that a worry for the young and the 'reckless' was a reason for the foundation of schools (Sandin, 1986). However, the terms for school, and childhood, have changed and are still fast changing. Today school is no longer a solitary institution, but a complex multi-contextual setting. The identity of school has shifted from being a modern institution to an open educational setting, interacting and cooperating with other contexts and social spaces, for example with parents (Tallberg Broman, 1998) and sports corporations (Peterson, 2008). Childhood's social spaces are woven together and are dependant on each other. Consequently, children constantly change sets of norms and regulations as they meet different social contexts. This requires developing skills of self regulation, which are also stressed by school through, for example, individual development plans (Vallberg Roth & Månsson, 2008) and peer mediation (Kolfjord, 2009).

At the same time, childhood sociologists strive to raise children's voices, arguing that childhood is a marginalized social category (Qvortrup, 2005; and Mayall, 2004). Lauder (2006) and Alexander (2006) both point out that the integration of childhood in society must build on shared fundamental values, suggesting a common effort for equity, health and democracy in school, the one place where all children spend most of their days (Löf, 2009). Similar arguments are found in political discussions on education, expressing a wish for new ways of working in schools, such as Life Competence Education (Wigerfelt, 2009; Löf, 2009).

## Life Competence Education - a brief background

Life Competence Education is my own translation of the Swedish term '*livskunskap*'. This translation can be contested since there is no one excepted definition of the term nor is there a common understanding of this school subject. This has been one of the underlying problems with Life Competence Education from the beginning (Löf, 2009). The new, multi-faceted identity of school opens up for a competitive situation where both national institutes and private consultants are eager to enter, claiming their specific programme, strategy or pedagogical concept equips children with protective social and emotional competences. Moreover, since the subject is non-mandatory and without national guidelines, it leaves room for teachers to interpret the content and pedagogy. This means that Life Competence can be just about anything: Some schools apply cognitive programmes to train pupils' social and emotional competences, whilst others use this new subject as a way of contextualizing sex and relationship education. As we see, efforts of creating togetherness and a common ground are, ironically, leading towards confusion and even disagreements in practice. The confusion concerning the definitions of Life Competence Education is raising questions on the importance of local discourses: What ideals and values on friendship are constructed and upheld in classroom interaction? How are these ideals constructed? And how do local discourses relate to the expectations of this subject as a prevention of societal problems?

The aim of this article<sup>i</sup> is to analyse how a local discourse on friendship, is constructed within Life Competence Education in a complementary school in multiethnic Malmö. As will be demonstrated, qualities of *a good friend* are highlighted (Goodwin, 1994) in interaction during this school subject. But first I will describe the approach and design of this study.

## Ethnography and ethnomethodology in childhood studies

Childhood studies are criticized for applying narrow, ethnographic methods (see Qvortrup, 2005; Mayall, 2004). This sort of critique has encouraged the development of childhood studies looking towards

perspectives in which children, childhood and structures are inseparable. Corsaro (2005) defines peer groups as the intermediate contexts of childhood. The individual child is constantly, in social interaction with peers, participating in social institutions (politics, family, education, etc). This makes peer group experiences central for individual development.

As I interpret Corsaro's reasoning, each individual is the result of accumulated peer group experiences – so far – since this process goes on the life through. With this understanding of peer cultures, friendship is an important fundamental in the definition of citizenship. Consequently I see identities as occurring in interaction, with various possibilities for positioning in different social spaces and contexts. This approach has been of great influence when designing this study, arguing for the combination of ethnographic data and 14 hours of video recordings from both classroom and recess activities.

### **Video recording**

Video recording is one way of collecting more contextualized data than for example field notes and audio recordings. However, *how* the video recordings are conducted is of relevance to the outcome (Jordan & Henderson, 1995; Heikkilä & Sahlström, 2003). I have video recorded social interaction in classroom situations, with a specific focus on Life Competence Education where activities are constantly changing (switching for example between small group discussions, drama exercises and personal reflections). Because of this a hand held video camera was crucial, allowing quick moves and switches of focus (from classroom overviews to close ups).

Heikkilä & Sahlström (2003) also stress the necessity for reflection over what impact the technical equipment has on the everyday activity. A video camera, for example, might become the centre of attention even though the researcher tries to blend into the environment. Fortunately, this has not been a problem in this study. Most of the children seem to be relaxed and more or less uninterested in the camera. One explanation might be that my field study started one year before I introduced the video camera and they had already given me access to their everyday activities at school. In a few situations where the camera was explicitly remarked upon by participants, it brought advantages to the analysis. Comment's like 'Be aware of her filming', helps in pointing out normalities (or rather a-normalities) either within the peer-group or in the classroom situation.

When analyzing video recordings it is important to remember that these data tell about what is done and said, but not about intentions, neither participants experiences of what is happening, nor structural causes (see for example Jordan & Henderson, 1995). It can be difficult to set aside personal expectations and biases. Stokoe & Smithson (2001) point out how for example someone interested in gender is likely to make 'gender' an analytical category, although it is not explicit in collected data. However, it might be necessary to, like, question whether a 'clean gaze' is possible.

One way of avoiding taking macro-structural influences for granted when analyzing is applying an ethnomethodological standpoint. When analyzing video recordings from this point of view it is important to analyze data with a 'clean gaze', without applying in advance created categories for analysis (see for example Goodwin, 1994). Also, a detailed analysis of interaction can show how structures are deconstructed (Evaldsson, 2004; Stokoe & Smithson, 1998).

### **Setting and participants**

This study involves 32 children in 4th grade (10-11 years old) and their two female teachers in a compulsory school that has organized Life Competence Education on a weekly basis. Up until this school year, Friend-Conversations (my translation of the Swedish term *Kompissamtal*, see Edling, 2002) has been the foremost content in Life Competence Education in this class.

Friend-Conversations is a strategy claimed to prevent bullying through solution focused group sessions. The sessions follow a structure of three rounds led by the teacher. In round one the participants tell about conflicts they have been solving lately. In the second round the teacher asks if someone has been hurt by anyone since the last session. One rule is not to mention any names, if anyone recognizes the situation and feels they have participated in hurting the one raising the problem they are applauded to admit and give their side of the story. It is hoped that the problems end with an action of forgiveness and the peers give suggestions for alternative solutions to have in mind if this situation ever occurs again. In round

three, the last round, the children tell if they have hurt anyone since last session. Again, admitting is applauded. In this round names are allowed, so that the 'victim' gets a chance to receive an apology.

A national overview of anti-bullying programmes, shows that there are no evaluations or scientific evidence supporting this strategy's preventive effects (Matti, 2007). There are, however, a couple of studies where Friend-Conversations is mentioned from an ethical perspective (Linnér, 2005; Johansson & Johansson, 2003). Both studies describe this strategy as a democratic (yet disciplinary) tool for seeing and solving conflicts from children's perspectives. At the same time Johansson & Johansson (2003) highlight how children in this situation are expected to leave out personal conflicts in front of teachers and peers in a way that would be unlikely to be accepted in a group of adults. Also, Linnér stresses the difficulty of managing the conversations without them turning into manipulative oppressions (which is also alerted by Edling, 2002) or even 'trials' where children are prosecuted (Linnér, 2005). Although the ethical perspective is not the main focus of this article, it brings an interesting perspective on the setting and the classroom interaction.

The teachers in this study use parts of the original concept of Friend-Conversations, but have chosen to manage the sessions in their own ways. One of the teachers (the one leading the girls' group) only uses two rounds 'have you been hurt' and 'have you hurt someone'. The other teacher (the one leading the boys' group) differs more from the original concept in the sense that she raises a certain topic for the conversation. Rounds in this group can also be of evaluative character, where the children say how they think they have managed to follow rules (made up by themselves) in other sessions. In line with the strategy, they focus solutions to problems raised and they let the children verbalize emotions. At times conflicts are visualized through role play, which is recommended by Edling (2002). Apart from the original concept, though, Friend-Conversations in this school is at times concluded with 'uplifts', i.e. a round where the children boost each other, acknowledging something good that they have done or a personal quality that they admire.

### Constructing 'a good friend'

During these sessions the children are divided into a girls' and boys' group – a gender arrangement (Thorne, 1993) made by the teachers, who thought the girls could benefit from some time without the 'dominating boys'. Displaying a detailed analysis of a sequence from the girls' Friend-Conversations session, I will now demonstrate how ideals of *a good friend* are constructed in interaction.

The girls are seated in a circle and when the rules are settled the rounds begin. In the round 'Have you been hurt since last session?' Melanie tells about a situation where the sharing of some cookies created many problems (excerpt 1, see endnote for transcript key).

#### Excerpt 1. Melanie introducing the cookie incident<sup>ii</sup> (video recording 080414)

- 1 Melanie °hmm like° (.) one time (.) someone had brought cookies sort of (.) yeah and
- 2 there were two swinging and then I and this person that brought the cookies
- 3 came and then we went to the ones (.) on the swings and ((smiles)) they got
- 4 some of these cookies too and the person promised me the day before I'd get
- 5 four pieces so th- so these two persons thought it was a little unfair like 'cause
- 6 they didn't get four so I may >yes< I got a °little mad°
- 7 Teacher yes (.) how did you solve it then
- 8 Melanie not mad but like (.) maybe I had a little ((waving her arms)) I might have
- 9 yelled at someone °or something like that° ((shrugging her shoulders, smiling))
- 10 Teacher mm but how did you solve it then
- 11 Melanie ((shrugs her shoulders)) we made friends ((looks at the teacher))
- 12 Teacher did you say- did you do- what did you do to make friends
- 13 Melanie nothing
- 14 Teacher °nothing°
- 15 Melanie ((shrugging her shoulders)) °I don't remember° ((laughing))
- 16 Nicki ((mumbles))
- 17 Teacher was it you Nicki
- 18 Nicki like I had promised Melanie to give her four pieces then they- then I felt
- 19 that Nicole and Andrea thought this was unfair so I gave- I had given them

Although Melanie is stressing this problem was solved already, the teacher asks her to share how they managed to solve it on their own. In the excerpt above Melanie describes the incident from her perspective (line 1-6). In short, the following is the story: Nicki had brought cookies to school, with a promise to Melanie that she would get four pieces. The situation got problematic when they met two other girls that also wanted some cookies.

In line 6 Melanie says she got mad, when the others thought the sharing of the cookies was unfair, but withdraws her strong feeling immediately, vaguely telling she might have yelled or something like that (see line 8-9). This action can be interpreted as an effort of minimizing her part of the conflict, implying that she is acknowledging her behaviour as non-desirable.

The teacher does not give attention to whether Melanie yelled or not, instead she is focusing the solution of the problem raised. Melanie responds with a shrug, saying that they became friends, which makes the teacher repeatedly try to penetrate the question, how the girls overcame the problem (line 7, 10 and 12). At this point (line 16), Nicki gets involved in the conversation and admits her participation in the incident. From her perspective the situation presented another dilemma: that of sharing her cookies between her friends, without making anyone sad and without breaking any promises. Despite the fact that she managed to keep her promise to Melanie, Melanie got upset. One of 'the other girls', Andrea soon takes part of the conversation, giving her view on the incident. She is unhappy she only got three cookies, instead of four as promised, something that Nicki is trying to confront:

**Excerpt 2. Displaying the dilemma (video recording 080414)**

- 35 Teacher a- if someone brings from home and then  
 36 having promised to give someone (.) 'cause  
 37 that's what you have done Nicki, right?  
 38 Nicki ((nodding))  
 39 Teacher and then the others around you also feel that- did you feel that you wanted to  
 40 give the one around you too?  
 41 Nicki like, I mean everyone that wanted I gave, like ((looking down, pulling her  
 sleeves))  
 42 I didn't just give them  
 43 Teacher no you wanted everyone to get some  
 44 Nicki ((nodding)) almost everyone got  
 45 Teacher yes (.) how should one do then you think? if many stand around-  
 46 Melanie like, it's solved  
 47 Teacher yes  
 48 Melanie we are friends again  
 49 Teacher yes but you haven't sorted it out you became friends again but you didn't talk  
 50 about just that did you?

Excerpt 2 (above) shows that in this group, being fair is an important quality in a friend and makes (together with betrayal and disloyalty) a central theme for the day. Out of a total of eight conflicts, seven focus on this in some way. Someone was let down when friends didn't keep their promises, another was left behind when the rest of the girls hurried to the restaurant, and others were worrying about friends feeling let down. As a result, within this local discourse actions of dishonesty and disloyalty are highlighted (Goodwin, 1994) as something that causes pain and sadness. Consequently, this discourse is also pointing out qualities wished for in a good friend: honesty and loyalty, as well as inclusion and a concern about others' feelings.

The teacher is destabilizing the polarization of fair - unfair by displaying Nicki's situation as a nuanced ethical dilemma for the girls to discuss. As we see, the teacher is sorting out what happened, making sure Nicki is agreeing of her interpretation (line 35-45). When doing this, the teacher is balancing between speaking of a personal problem and finding general solutions.

As the teacher asks the girls for alternative solutions to this dilemma, Melanie is obstructing by saying 'it's solved' (line 46). The obstruction, combined with the groups' enthusiasm with coming up with different solutions is lightly changing the direction of the conversation, as it opens up for Andrea too to

admit her participation (this is not found in the excerpts presented in this article). She was one of the girls that got mad about Melanie getting more cookies than the rest and wanted to give her perspective to the story. So, the conversation is once more returning to the defining of the problem. After a long discussion Nicki raises her hand:

### Excerpt 3. I got noting (Video recording, 080414)

91 Nicki but listen it- the weird thing with ts is I thought  
92 they got a little sad ((looking down, pulling her sleeves)) but like  
93 they got (.) Melanie got four and then Andrea got three °and I got like nothing°  
94 like it's weird that they were sad if like °I got nothing°  
95 Teacher yes (.) did you hear she thinks it weird that you were sad one  
96 got four and the other got three °and then she got nothing herself°  
97 Andrea no I wasn't sad I was just a little grumpy  
98 Teacher mm okay  
99 Andrea I didn't know like that Nicki didn't get  
100 Teacher no  
101 Andrea I thought she had taken before  
102 Teacher mm do you understand what she is saying that she gives you and you are still  
103 sad ((leaning towards Melanie)) do you understand Melanie

Now, not only a third party of the conflict has entered the conversation, but Nicki is bringing in a new detail to the story; she got nothing for herself (line 93-94). This detail is casting new light to the incident, twisting the scenario. Andrea is immediately toning down her part in the conflict (line 97), saying she did not know about Nicki not getting any cookies for herself (line 99 and 101). Andrea's change of position upon this new information marks that there are now other moral perspectives to relate to, such as whether her acting was selfish or not? In the lines 102 – 106, the teacher is giving Melanie a chance to join them in this new moral stance (Evaldsson, 2004). Then they move along to the next case.

### Conclusion

In this article I have given an example from Life Competence Education in a compulsory school in Malmö, aiming to describe how local discourses on *good friends* are constructed in the classroom setting. The strategy used within Life Competence Education, Friend-Conversations, is a forum for solving, admitting and excusing non-desirable actions. The detailed analysis of the conversation highlights ideals on friendship when striving towards a consensus. Consequently, this is also pointing out what is wished for in a good friend.

First of all, the explicit rules regulate the conversation, displaying non-negotiable qualities: *No gossiping* and *no disrespecting* other's integrity. Also, the conversational routine promotes other desirable qualities: A good friend can *listen* and is *willing to share* personal problems has the ability of *expressing (positive) feelings and opinions*. Furthermore a good friend is easy going in the sense of *not getting hurt* when being criticized by others. Central actions in 'good friendship' (referring to the original concept) are solving problems by *reaching consensus* in a *diplomatic spirit* (without loosing temper), as well as the *admitting* of own mistakes and *forgiving* others.

As the incident concerning the cookies turns into a negotiation of morality, aspects in friendship are lifted from children's perspectives. Here we see *generosity, reliability, loyalty, justice* and *consideration* as some of the ideal qualities in a good friend. The way children are fostered into 'good friends' in Life Competence Education opens up for a new perspective on children as either beings or becomings (see Lee, 2001; Qvortrup, 2005). As we can see, the standpoint of Life Competence Education (as conducted in the school studied in this article) is peer group experiences, acknowledging children as beings. Still, within the concept of Friend-Conversations is an underlying standpoint that children need conversational routines to train their communication skills in order to become good (better) friends and to handle the responsibilities that comes with friendship.

If we agree on my previous notion on friendship as a fundamental notion in citizenship (referring to Corsaro's theory of peer cultures, 2005), the construction of *good friends* could just as well be the same as the construction of *good citizens*. However, Life Competence Education can be seen as both training of children to become desirable friends and citizens, and also as a local interpretation of fundamental values.

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<sup>ii</sup> The transcript key is a simplified version of traditional CA keys (Jefferson, 2004): °quiet talk°; (.) is a pause in talk; ((shows actions)); >faster talk<; - interruption; ↑ and ↓ mark raised and lowered voice.