

Didactics for Life?

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Drawing upon ethnographic fieldwork, this article explores how the national value-system is realized in a Swedish compulsory school. The ethnographic data is combined with video recordings of a 5th form class in a compulsory school in Sweden. At this school the work with fundamental values is organized within the non-mandatory school subject Life Competence Education (Sw. Livskunskap). A common feature in this subject is the ambition to establish a sense of companionship and to strengthen togetherness among children (Löf, 2011).

In the task of strengthening togetherness within groups of children, the establishment of common values becomes central. A local working plan is formulated by the school to point out learning objectives, as well as ways of working in the classroom. Still the teacher is left alone with her own interpretations of what values to establish. With childhood sociology (Corsaro, 2005; Lee, 2001; James & Prout, 1997) as a starting point, the analysis focuses on constructions of childhood through local interpretations of the value-system (Sw. Värdegrunden): Which values are established in the classroom interaction? Which view on children, teaching and learning is permeating the work?; Which childhood is constituted through teaching? The results suggest that the values and norms that are constructed in local school practices and alleged to be part of the value-system are based on teacher's own interpretations of what children need.

Keywords: Childhood, Didactics, Ethnography, Life Competence Education (Sw. Livskunskap), Sweden, Teacher, Value-system (Sw. Värdegrund)

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Introduction

The inviolability of human life, individual freedom and integrity, the equal value of all people, equality between women and men, and solidarity with the weak and vulnerable are the values that the school should represent and impart. (Lgr11:9)

Integrity, every person's equal worth, equality, and solidarity are central concepts in the common value-system (Sw. Värdegrunden) written in the Swedish compulsory school curriculum. Of similar importance is the development of the students' ability to critically analyze information and to understand the consequences of various relations. Furthermore, the curriculum mentions a number of perspectives which must be present at all times during teaching: the historical, environmental, international and ethical aspects, which later "will permeate the school's work in order to strengthen and underscore the students' capacity to personally take a stance" (Lgr 11:10).

This is the framework for what I call the school's social agenda, and within it the pedagogical activity is organized. The social agenda comprises both regular school subjects (such as mathematics and history) and those areas of knowledge permeating all school activities, such as equality, sex and relationships education, anti-bullying and prevention of drugs, alcohol and tobacco. The value-system must imbue a school's environment and its pedagogical activities. However, working with the value-system is easier said than done and research and quality inspections have revealed serious flaws both in the classroom environment and in teaching the subject (see Colnerud, 2004; Englund & Englund, 2012; Löf, 2011; Skolverket, 2000 and 2011, among others). The gap in quality is wide among schools and even within individual schools. To solve the lack of equivalence, in the 1990s several Swedish schools started to collate all work done with the value-system in one specific new school subject, often called Life Competence Education (Löf, 2011). The solution has turned out to be problematic.

What Life Competence Education turns out to be as practiced in the local school depends to a high degree on the educators' individual interpretations of the national curriculum. In some schools other staff, such as school nurses or counselors, are brought in to teach this specific subject. As a consequence, the content, values, and forms of education vary from school to school (and even from classroom to classroom). Hence, the lack of equivalence remains a problem. Another problem raised in relation to this situation is the shift from the value-system described in the curriculum that occurs in schools and

classrooms (a.a.). In local schools, the work with fundamental values is transformed into a struggle to solve social problems associated with the area where the school is located. Also, the private relationships of individual children are exploited in local interpretations of the value-system.

The aim of this article is to understand school's work with the value-system (here organized as Life Competence Education) from a teacher perspective. I have a specific interest in the constructions of childhood (James & Prout, 1997) through the organization of classroom activities and discuss which view of children permeates this teaching context. Drawing upon ethnographic data combined with video recordings from the classroom practice at a school, I explore a 5th form teacher's didactic choices in teaching Life Competence Education during one school year. Interestingly, the ethnographic fieldwork took an action-oriented twist because the teacher wanted to use my video recordings as a tool for professional development. With me as an observer, she watched all recorded classes, evaluating her didactic choices and then made changes when planning for future classes, based upon what she had seen. As I will demonstrate, this opened for yet a deeper understanding for work with fundamental values from a teacher perspective.

Before I discuss the results, I will provide an overview of the research on schools' work with the value-system within the subject Life Competence Education.

Values in Life Competence Education – previous studies

Parallel to the development of Life Competence Education as a school subject, researchers have shown more and more interest in this subject as a phenomenon (Englund & Englund, 2012; Löf, 2009, 2011; Skeie, 2009; von Brömssen, 2013). Since Life Competence Education is a vague subject and defined differently by different actors, various practices, programs and working methods are used in teaching it. A common feature, though, is the desire for Life Competence Education to equip children to handle the risks in society (Löf, 2011; see Lee, 2001; and Beck, 1986/2005, for a further discussion on the risk society).

As the schools referred herein are mandatory, they are an arena where all children can be reached with interventions. Much of the material used within Life Competence Education is supported by public health and medical research that put forward the health benefits of various concepts that are presented in manual-based programs. These studies are principally based on a strong American context that focuses on schools and education as a frame

for health work and prevention strategies (see among others Mayer & Salovey, 1995; Zins et al, 2007). In Sweden, only a few studies on the programs associated with Life Competence Education use this normative approach. For example, Kimber, Sandell, and Bremberg (2008) have promoted their own manual-based concept, SET, i.e. Social and Emotional Training (Eng. SEL, Zins et al., 2007), as an evidence-based program to develop children's psychosocial abilities.

From an education perspective, researchers find the programs used in Life Competence Education troublesome. Many of the evidence-based programs require a strict loyalty to a manual (Wickström, 2012). Evaldsson & Nilholm (2009) point out how the use of these programs limits the didactic possibilities: Working with a module does not allow for a democratic working process, in which students' experiences, needs, and questions are central. Rather, teachers need to adapt each learning situation to their students. In spite of this professional dilemma, governmental actors still stress the importance of applying evidence-based methods for improving students' results (a.a.). Hence, the discourse on evidence has been successful in promoting different programs in schools. After analyzing one of the popular programs that initially was claimed to be evidence based, von Brömssen (2013) asked if it was "an easy buy?" She argues that this particular program is built upon a cognitive behaviorist theory that is not appropriate for a contemporary school setting (see also Englund & Englund, 2012).

No matter how schools organize Life Competence Education, the use of drama exercises stands out as a principal working method for establishing fundamental values (Löf, 2011). As with research on the different evidence- and manual-based programs, research on pedagogic drama is mainly normative, arguing for the benefit of this working method. In a study in which Öfverström (2006) analyzed pedagogic drama from a teacher perspective, the teachers interviewed talked about drama exercises as a way to give students experiences that help them to identify and understand themselves and others. In addition, they said that exercises for cooperation strengthen the sense of belonging and feeling safe in the classroom. The teachers saw all these aspects as fundamental for children's self-esteem and intellectual, emotional, and social competences. In line with this, Sternudd (2000) defines pedagogic drama as reflection-in-action. Independent of how teachers chose to work with different exercises, they offered reflections of themselves, the peer group, and society. Drama exercises are also found in psychosocial

programs (such as above mentioned SET). In this context though, the aim is to train children's social and emotional skills.

Because a psychological, self-development approach is permeating many versions of Life Competence Education, teaching tends to take a therapeutic approach. Children's emotions and private relationships are often used as examples in group discussions on moral and ethics intended to solve and prevent conflicts (Aspán, 2009; Irisdotter Aldenmyr, 2013; Löf, 2009, 2011). This is in line with von Brömssen's argument that schools' fostering agenda has transformed into an emotion-regulating practice (2013; or a "friendly power regime," to use Bartholdsson's terms, 2010), that risks offending children's integrities.

One important finding of these studies is that this power regime works through the different programs. Responsibility is put on children to act, talk, and develop towards the ideals defined by the teachers. The training of children to regulate themselves, emotionally and in social interaction, makes visible both the increased control and the individualization that characterizes postmodern childhood (Tallberg Broman, 2009, 2011; Prout, 2000).

Summing up previous studies on Life Competence Education, there are two standpoints regarding schools work with the value-system in general, and with this subject in particular. On the one hand, some researchers present the benefits of certain programs or working methods. On the other hand, critical studies point out problems with these ways of working. This polarization often leads to an unfortunate debate on whether Life Competence Education should constitute a school subject on its own or not. As a consequence, the real problem is obscured: the difficulty in concretizing schools' social function. Regardless of whether Life Competence Education is dropped as a school subject, the problems remain. Since the subject was constituted partly to offer students equivalence in working with the value-system, it would be naive to believe that the work will be coherent if the subject is eliminated from the schedule.

My argument is that the discussion about Life Competence Education should instead have to do with schools' more encompassing work with the value-system. Though, there is value in acquiring insights from the debate on Life Competence Education because the methods used in the subject are used in other teaching situations. The risk for offensive contents being used in teaching situations is far from being restricted to Life Competence Education; rather, the risk for offensive content lies in any situation where questions about life, relationships, or ethics are taken up for discussion.

As pointed out by many researchers, values made central in national curricula are often uncontested (cf. Arnot, Hopman & Molander, 2007; Ibrahim, 2005; Popkewitz, 2009). In this context, Gunnel Colnerud's (2004) discussion on the conceptual problems of the value-system is interesting. Even if her research is not dealing specifically with Life Competence, it involves somehow those values and ideals that are conveyed (to children and about children) in the school activities. The basic concern is, according to Colnerud, that the value-system has become a generic concept for a number of normative issues, problems and phenomena in school practice.

When values of different nature (as for example, values, opinions, moral and quality) are put together to a single, subjective generic concept as "value", a common value-system becomes impossible. Furthermore, she considers that the schools' work with the value-system tends to be a practice for opposing "violations", that is to say, violations of rules, as well as moral transgressions in the pupil groups (a.a.). The common value-system is thereby displaced from striving for a unanimous view concerning societal values to aiming (through different pedagogical efforts) to change the behaviour of individual pupils. In consonance with this, Ibrahim (2005) points out that a curriculum that strongly focuses on students' skills is trivializing fundamental values in an equal and sustainable world. Instead the solution, as suggested by Ibrahim, is a holistic perspective and a striving to develop students' abilities to analyze and reflect upon values that undermine global citizenship and human rights (compare with Popkewitz, 2009).

Therefore, a critical understanding of the value-system is crucial. A related important question concerns how actors in local schools, such as educators and students, interpret the value-system. In this article, I will present a study of one teacher's work with fundamental values in Life Competence Education, which contributes to understanding what such interpretation involves. Of special interest are her own critical reflections on how she was organizing classroom situations.

Theoretical and methodological framework

Childhood sociologists provide insight into childhood and children's everyday lives through studies of social institutions (Corsaro, 2005; James & Prout, 1997; Tallberg Broman, 2011). A key notion is that childhood is not only a time in individual children's lives but also a structural (and marginalized) category in society (Mayall, 2002; Qvortrup, 2005). Seen from this theoretical perspective, changes in the education system are closely inter-

twined with changes in childhood. If we take schools' work with Life Competence Education as an example, what is "new" with this phenomenon can be contested when put in relation to the history of childhood. Sandin (1986) shows that a concern for the young and the "reckless" was once the reason why schools were established. School as an institution was built upon a belief that (certain) young people needed to be educated to become desirable citizens. However, the terms for school, and childhood, have changed and are still fast changing.

The identity of school has shifted from being a modern, solitary institution to an open multi-contextual setting (Tallberg Broman, 2009, 2011), interacting and co-operating with other contexts and practices. Childhood's social spaces are woven together. This is one of the traits of contemporary childhood. Consequently, children constantly change sets of norms and regulations as they meet different social contexts (a.a.). At the same time, childhood sociologists strive to raise children's voices, arguing that childhood is a marginalized social category (Qvortrup, 2005; and Mayall, 2002). Lauder, Brown & Dillabough (2006) and Alexander, Giesen & Mason (2006) 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 – ways like Life Competence Education (Wigerfelt, 2009; Löf, 2009).

Studying Life Competence Education provides not only insights into this subject as a phenomenon in schools, but also as a childhood practice. Through the analysis of this specific subject, I cast light over school as an institution where discourses on childhood are constituted by children, educators, and policy makers. As previously mentioned, the aim of this article is to understand interpretations of the value-system from a teacher perspective. The theoretical framework for the study offers a possibility of studying how childhood is constituted in the classroom, through the teacher's didactic choices. In childhood sociology, social justice and change are a strong focus. A starting point for the analysis has been the notion of social structures as created through social interaction (see, for example, Corsaro, 2005). This perspective shed light on school as an institution where childhood is constituted by children, educators, and policy makers.

Ethnographic fieldwork

This article's empirical material is based on ethnographic fieldwork (Cor-saro, 2005) and video recordings of classroom situations (Heikkilä & Sahlström, 2003). During a school year (2008–2009), I followed a teacher, here called Monica, and her teaching of Life Competence Education in a 5th form class in a compulsory school in Malmö, Sweden.

In line with the Research Council's ethical recommendations (Gustafsson, Hermerén & Petersson, 2005), the fieldwork was introduced to and accepted by all the parents and teachers involved. Before doing the video recordings, I informed the parents about my plans and the aim of the study. The children, parents, and teachers were informed that their participation was voluntary and that they could stop at any time during the study. 12 (of the totally 24) children, whose parents agreed to their children's participation, were put in a special teaching group. I observed both groups, but only used the video camera in the one where all parents had agreed in writing to the children's participation.

Classroom activities are constantly changing (between, for example, 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). The quality of recorded data varies from 'good' too 'very good'. The microphone takes up sound from several meters, allowing switches of focus from overview shots to close ups.

Heikkilä & Sahlström (2003) stresses the necessity of reflections over what impact the technical equipment have on the everyday activity. A video camera, for example, might become the centre of attention although the researcher tries to blend into the environment. Fortunately, this has not been a problem in this study. Most of the children seemed to be relaxed and more or less uninterested in the camera. One explanation can 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 the few situations where the camera was noticed by the participants, it brought advantages to the analysis. Comments like "Be aware of her filming", helps pointing out norms either within the peer-group or in the classroom situation.

For Monica, the situation was different. Life Competence Education was new to her. She had been assigned this subject to complete her scheduled teaching hours. She was initially reluctant to teach a subject unknown to her, and described this teaching year as a learning process, not only for the stu-

dents but also for herself. Also, having me, a researcher, in the classroom, was new to Monica. During the fieldwork period, Monica wanted to take advantage of my presence, both as a “sounding board” and to use my video recordings to develop:

It’s new for me too — having real lessons, which are part of the schedule and all. So I would like to take a look at the, I would say. /.../ I will improve and during... I don’t want to wa... I am impatient and I don’t want to wait till we are done with the whole project. /.../ It’s logical, isn’t it?

At the beginning, I was skeptical because of how my study would be changed as a result of co-operating with Monica, but, at the same time, something in her constant effort to improve was appealing. The ethnographic study thus shifted towards a more action-oriented method, where my video camera and I became a sort of hub in this work towards change. We sat down regularly to talk about the lessons when they were finished; Monica often wanted to know my opinion and, a couple of times, we went through all the video recordings. Monica reflected upon her way of working with Life Competence Education, both in terms of the content and the various exercises she had tried. Many of these moments of reflections were recorded with a voice recorder. Thus, this study draws upon ethnographic data combined with video recordings of classroom interaction and audio recordings of the teacher’s reflections upon her work.

In the analysis, I make visible which values were valid in Monica’s teaching, according to how she chose to organize her classes. In this context, the understanding of her moments of reflections as a discursive practice is fundamental (Fairclough, 2010): Monica interpreted what happened in the classroom and, based on those interpretations of what the children needed, she planned the additional work. As I will demonstrate, there are a few turning points in her reflections along the school year. In turn, these shifts of stance have great impact on the view on children permeating the educational setting.

Results

In the following, I chose to present results that shed light on the aspects of the teaching situation, which is applicable not merely to Life Competence Education, but more generally to all work with value-system in a pedagogical context.

Setting

The school where the fieldwork was conducted is located in a socially complex area. Many of the children live with an irregular economy and in cramped housing conditions, and several in special homes for homeless families. Several children have a better standard of living, but the school is strongly stigmatized because of the neighborhood's image (Wigerfelt, 2009). Life Competence Education has been a scheduled subject at the school since 2003 and a locally implemented working plan exists for the subject. This plan provides clear guidelines about what will be discussed in classes in Life Competence Education. For example, it says that the 5th form must focus on the following contents:

Relationships and feelings: Train the children to practise how to express their own feelings (e.g. expressing feelings, listening, expressing positive things, having friend conversations, etc.)

Actions and consequences: Through various exercises, train the students to dare to express one's position or values (e.g. group pressure). Together with the students, make visible which rules are necessary for co-existence (e.g. communication as an alternative to violence, limits, laws /invisible rules).

Facts and prejudices: Stress management (e.g. goal images, mental training). Create the possibilities to engage in discussion by confronting prejudices with facts (e.g. sexuality, puberty).

(Excerpt from the school's local working plan for Life Competence Education)

The local working plan contains references to methods and material to be used, with practical examples of how the content can be used for discussion in the classroom. These methods are dominated by drama-pedagogical exercises of relaxation, concentration, and co-operation, often used as ways of introducing conversations and discussions about values and valuations (cf. Sternudd, 2000; Öfverström, 2006), as well as for training children's skills (Kimber, Sandell, and Bremberg, 2008). Setting out from the working plan, the teachers decide on how the content shall be implemented.

The analysis of the material I collected together with Monica shows what it is like for a teacher to interpret and organize the practical work with the value-system in the classroom. As I will show, Monica made a few turning

points as regards her ideas, which were of great importance to what, and how, the values were established in the classroom.

“An important and real class”

Even if Monica was initially reluctant to teach Life Competence Education, she quickly took her new position seriously. During the first class, she told the students that the exercises they would do were not games:

- Monica: As soon as we come into this room, we will be silent. Because it is a class, isn't it?
- Students: (whisper things)
- Monica: (shushes again) I do not want to say it once again. So listen /... / this is an important and real class. We are not joking around.
- Althea: When we had Life Competence Education with [the previous teacher]
- Monica: (interrupts) I know everything.
- Althea: We had games (is interrupted again)
- Monica: No, no games. Exercises. We are doing exercises!

As we can see in this excerpt, Monica remarked that the ludic component in the exercises should not be understood as games and joking. She thus is constructing the work in the classroom as “for real,” an important part of the school. This marking can be interpreted as a way to underscore that the work with the value-system constitutes an important part of the school's work, which cannot be taken for granted considering the difficulties schools face in concretizing the value-system (c.f. Löf, 2011). For Monica, this becomes a dilemma with which she would have to deal throughout the whole school year. She had to work hard every time to get through the ludic exercises in such a way that the students incorporated the content and the seriousness with which both Monica and the school regarded the subject. Monica had to constantly legitimize her work, in relation to the students, her colleagues, and herself. Thus, she was lonely in this discursive practice (Fairclough,

2010), having no one with whom to discuss and define Life Competence Education.

According to Monica, the exercises were simply ways to reflect upon oneself and others, a starting point which is central in the work with drama-pedagogical exercises (see Öfverström, 2006). The first exercise consists of the students understanding what they have in common. She explained to the students that she herself had tried the exercise during a teachers' conference. The resulting thoughts had been strong insights for her and so she had decided to test the exercises with the students, which they did in small groups. A big circle was drawn on a piece of paper and the students were supposed to write down what they had in common or what they agreed upon within the circle. Outside the circle, they were to write down what they did not have in common, that is something that was unique for a person in the group or on which they had different opinions. Monica explained what the concept "in common" implied and provided examples: "Something you like, something you all like."

The children seem to find difficulties with the concept "different." Many understand that they are supposed to write what they like inside the circle and what they do not like outside the circle. One group agrees on everything — both what they like and what they do not like — before they write anything. Monica tries (carefully) to correct the situation and says that it does not necessarily have to be things they like. The children look happy when they are working.

Althea: Is it possible to write if one hates people?

Monica: No ... Althea!

Rami: If we love girls?

Everyone: (giggles)

Monica asks the groups (again) to stop thinking about "liking" and points to things that are different, for example, family. She continuously corrects the children because of how they are sitting, "sit properly." One group has problems understanding the task. Instead of looking for common denominators, they search for something, which everybody likes/dislikes. The group members laugh when Monica reads what they have written as "different":

Monica: Eating flies?

Group: (laughter)

Loella: We have misunderstood the task.

Monica: Come on, Loella, who eats flies?

Monica explains again to the children that what happens during the Life Competence Education class is not a game, but rather something important that they are to take seriously. /... / Another group suddenly realizes how to solve the task and they start writing what they have in common, such as: “We go to school.” “We live in the same area” /... /. Monica replies with a “very good” for every point they read out loud. When all the groups have done their presentations, Monica asks them to look at what they have written.

Monica: What do you have more of, “in common” or “different”?

All: In common!

Monica: Isn't it fantastic? I have to tell you that we had to do the same task with the teachers. We got the same results. We come here and we do not believe it.

As displayed in the transcript above, the main point comes across clearly during the conversation: We are more similar than different. This first exercise places Monica's Life Competence Education teaching (i.e., work with the value-system) within the framework of a search towards companionship, or what people have in common. By mentioning the teachers' experiences with the same task, she turns the notion of companionship into something beyond the students in the group. Despite the playful and ludic environment and the difficulties students faced in understanding the task, Monica was exuberant afterwards. Her experience was that the task worked because it contributed to the students being able to understand how they have to think to find the elements they had in common.

A growing content — from the teacher's interpretation of what the children need

With “companionship” as a starting point, Monica chose to base each future lesson on the students' evaluations and experiences of the previous Life

Competence Education class. In that way, she provided the students with a high level of influence, even if it was Monica herself who was responsible for planning and selecting the exercises. Although the syllabus had detailed references to methods, she looked for inspiration, using her own resources. She searched books, the Internet, and asked colleagues for exercises and methods that would match her interpretation of the content. She was especially fond of drama exercises, which seek to give the students the chance to concentrate, relax, and, not least, to get to know one another better.

When the students had difficulties doing an exercise, Monica planned a continuation of the task, which would challenge them a bit more. My video recordings gave Monica the chance to reflect upon what they would do next. She gave the same importance to what happened in the group while the exercises were carried out and to the students' reflections afterwards. Monica was generally satisfied with how the classes developed in the videoed group.

Having said this, Monica thought that there were a few things that “our” group had to work with: one was physical contact and the need to de-dramatize physical contact between boys and girls. During a dance exercise, the objective of which was to train the students' concentration, several students refused to hold one another's hands. When we watched the recording, Monica's impression was confirmed. It was mainly two girls and the only two boys in the group who stood out. The children did not even graze the others' hands during the dance, despite Monica's directions. “What a torture,” she said, laughing, when she saw how the children refused to hold hands.

In the recordings, it does not become clear who is refusing to hold hands; what can be seen are just four children who do not carry out the exercise as planned. Still, Monica interpreted this as if the boys were the ones who had set the tone:

I don't know. But I think it's ... it's the background. It is the culture. There are some fathers who come to the parent-teacher conferences and they do not want to shake our hands — with us, female teachers.

Even if Monica laughed at the funny aspect of the children's refusal to touch one another during the dance, she was serious about what she believed was the underlying problem: The boys' reproduction of what she feared was an expression of their fathers' view on women. In line with the policy documents, Monica thought it was her role to establish the common values described in the curriculum throughout the teaching. Consequently, it was im-

portant for her to work to break cultural patterns, which did not match these values. Life Competence Education is hereby constructed as a cultural fostering of children, which ironically risks a firmer settling of “us” and “them” (cf. Ibrahim, 2005; Löf, 2011; Popkewitz, 2009). Also, lost in translation is students’ discursive awareness and skills to deconstruct norms and ideals.

Interestingly, this problem (with fathers not wanting to touch female teachers) was nothing Monica had experienced herself. Rather, she said, it was something she had only heard colleagues talk about. It is interesting that Monica did not consider her own experiences or her knowledge of the children (see “disowning knowledge,” Trondman, 2006). At this point, she did not involve the children in her concerns, she did not ask them for their perspectives and experiences on this topic. Instead, she based her understanding of what had happened on other colleagues’ narratives of other children. For Monica, this was mainly a question of gender equality, and that all children should be able to touch and spend time with each other regardless of their cultural background. In Monica’s interpretation of the dance exercise, touching became a strong symbol for gender equality. During the work with the value-system, the situation was shifted from an all-encompassing question of companionship and equal worth to mostly about de-dramatizing the physical contact between the girls and the boys in the group (cf. Ibrahim, 2005).

The bench exercise

Monica selected a co-operative exercise to de-dramatize touching. In the exercise, the students had to stand on benches and then pass by one another without falling. To do the task, they had to help and hold each other. As usual, when she explained the background, Monica was specific as to why she had selected this exercise. She explained the problem (as she saw it) and referred to me to legitimize the objective of the exercise. It was not only Monica who had seen that the children had problems touching one another:

We are going to do something we have not done before. I think it is something very exciting — an exciting exercise. Why are we going to do it? Well, because both Camilla and I have realized that it seems to be kind of a (gesticulation) delicate matter to touch one another: Especially girls and boys. There were big problems with this and that is why we are going to do this exercise. We will see how it works. Maybe it does not work at all. I don’t have any idea. I am just as curious as you are. And that is why we have a bench here.

As we can see in the excerpt above, gender was made central in the construction of the problem. Yet, she dropped this aspect when introducing the exercise she had chosen for the children to work with during this class. Instead, Monica emphasized the curious and exciting aspect of trying something new. This implies that she wanted to give students arguments for new ways of acting. The presentation of the exercise as new opened up the possibility to blame eventual failures on the exercise and not on one another, which became useful during the exercise. It turned out to be difficult for the students to do the task; they were uncomfortable with the physical contact. When I transcribed my recordings afterwards, I described the sequence as follows:

Homan, who is a chubby boy, seemed to be quite uncomfortable with the exercise. Unlike the others, he walks by facing away from his friends. Everyone stands with their arms hanging by their sides and nobody helps out. Because the benches are so big, they are obliged to do the exercise in a hallway between two cloakrooms. During the class, other children are present in the room. A boy in the parallel class stands by the door when Homan is walking on the bench. "Look at the fatty boy", he says with a low voice. Monica doesn't seem to have heard, but Homan suddenly gives up and pretends to have fallen. Monica asks if he wants to continue. Homan nods. The exercise does not go as planned and the atmosphere is low. Some children look bored; they lean against the walls in order not to stand in the other children's way. Homan tries once and again, and Monica in vain tries to have the children help one another. Several children refuse to do so. Finally, Monica gives up and lets the children carry out the exercise as they like, which results in all the children jumping off the bench in order to let Homan pass without him having to touch anyone.

Monica also realized that the exercise did not go as planned, something she mentions during the general discussion afterwards:

- | | |
|----------|--|
| Althea: | We ... we did not co-operate. We did not help each other! |
| Liliana: | We did not co-operate. We only helped out the girls. We did not help the boys. |
| Althea: | I also helped the boys! (laughs) |
| Monica: | What did the boys do? Althea, what did the boys do? |

- Althea: They went away (she says whispering)
- Liliana: They ... they protested when the girls wanted to help them — that is, the boys wanted to help the girls.
- Monica: Why is it so? Why is it so (laughs)?
- Loella: Eehh ... I know (raises her hand)! They think that girls have bugs!
- Homan: (smiles)
- Monica: Okay? They think that girls have bugs — like those (makes air quotes) “girl-bugs”?
- Althea: Do you think that, Boris?
- Monica: Do you think that, Boris?
- Boris: Have I said that? (the girls laugh)
- Monica: (Places her hand on her chest). No, I have not said that you have said anything. I am just asking.
- Althea: (Turns towards Boris). Do you?
- Boris: No.
- Monica: No. No. What do you think (the children interrupt each other)? What do you say, Naima?
- Naima: If a girl touches a boy, they think that —“oh, they are together.”
- Monica: Aha. And then it is embarrassing? (Several children whisper)
- Naima: Yes...

Both Althea and Liliana said that they did not help one another and therefore showed awareness that they had not carried out the task as expected. They blamed themselves, or rather “girls” in general, by using the word “we” when they described the girls not helping the boys. Accordingly, the children emphasized the constructed discourse on gender as a problematic aspect of their interaction with one another. The conversation, however, took an inter-

esting turn a little later, when Althea took back her part of the blame, saying that she *did* help the boys. The analysis of this situation shows that, during the course of the conversation, what first looked like a collective action on the part of the girls shifted into having to do more with the actions of specific individuals. At the same time, the reasons as to why the exercise did not work out were formulated in terms of the boys collectively refusing to accept the help they were offered.

Students' choice vs. teacher's consideration

In the general discussion, it was accepted that the children had understood the task. They also solved it, even if not in the way that was expected. The students' right to relate to the task can lead to the interpretation that they shifted their positions and used their influence in the interaction in the class. Seen from the students' perspective (Corsaro, 2005), their way of reflecting upon the importance of co-operation appears in the dialogue to be open, self-critical, and more balanced, which is in line with the national curriculum and the local work with Life Competence Education.

Considering Monica's effort to constantly include students in the teaching process, it can be said that teaching has thus provided the desired participation. The students' capacity to take a stance and communicate about the exercise was, however, not what Monica discussed in our conversation after the class. Instead, when reflecting upon the class, she talked about the bench exercise as a failure. The students' explanations as to why the exercise went the way it did were explicit in the video recordings: They did not want anyone to think they were in love. This did not calm Monica's worries. She described that she felt unsure as to the real reason for students not wanting to hold hands. Though, this experience strengthened Monica's involvement in working with the value-system. It was a turning point, which made her see teaching as a possibility to help students overlook gender and cultural differences. At this point, however, Monica's didactic choices were based upon an understanding of children as in need to use exercises to learn how companionship should be realized in their group.

It is worth noting that Monica blamed the failure only upon herself. She explained that, as the teacher, she should have chosen another way of working, given the students who formed this specific group. There were only two boys and they were shy and introverted, whereas many of the girls were extroverted and tough. Homan's body structure and marginalization in relation to the student who walked by was another problem she said she should

have thought about, especially in regard to the group carrying out the exercise in a room where other students were present:

I remembered what the boy that walked by said about Homan and I wondered if Monica thought that the body could be a restriction in this exercise.

Monica: That too. Yes, that too. Yes, that's why I helped him. Mmm, I held him.

Camilla: Because, actually, there was someone who said something outside.

Monica: Yes.

Camilla: Did you hear that, too?

Monica: Yes, yes, yeees, yes. That also. But then, when he got the chance to continue ... he wanted to. Did you realize that?

Camilla: Mm.

Monica: I was almost sure he was going to say no.

In the work with the bench exercise, Monica was faced with a difficult didactic dilemma where the students' perspectives and capacity to exert influence were placed against her responsibility to take care of them (cf. Westlund, 2011). Many questions were raised in her reflections: How is a teacher supposed to act in a situation where students, like Homan, say that they want to try again, although there is an evident risk for repeated failure? Should the teacher encourage or prevent a new attempt? Should the teacher consider the perspective of student democracy and let the students decide for themselves? Is this actually a question of "free choice"? One way to understand Homan's "choice" to continue despite repeated setbacks and being discriminated against is to understand that he was well aware of what is expected of him as a student. These expectations of students include both that they would take a stance regarding tasks that are assigned and that they would do their best to solve problems within the task (Löf, 2011).

When I met Monica the following class, she asked to be allowed to watch the recordings immediately:

Yes, the bench. That is what I cannot get over. First of all: when we have this exercise ... we have two boys and eight girls, so it was wrong from the beginning. Because my intention was not simply that they would co-operate. It was mostly that they were going to touch one another — girls and boys. That boys were going to help girls and girls were going to help boys. That was my thought, mainly. So it was wrong, but I could not do it any other way /... /.

When Monica went through the video recording, she noted the mistakes she had made. First, she didn't consider that there were only two boys in the group. Second, she didn't consider the children's agency in the planning of this exercise – she took for granted that the students would follow her instructions without further ado. Also, Monica reflected upon the objective with this exercise. What she saw confirmed her memories of the class. It turned out that she had just had a class with another group, where she had tested the exercise. She was strongly determined to improve its implementation and see if it could be successful:

Now (in the second group) I had one-two-three-four girls and three boys in the small group. So we had a bench here inside and therefore it was quite calm, nobody else came in. /... / Two boys, quite unruly, and then a boy with ... how can I say ... Muslim background, so to speak. Very religious and so forth and maybe he also has certain opinions regarding girls? Very, very religious family. So they are three quite special boys, if I may say so. And so we also have four girls. First up was a boy, he had difficulties helping to hold the girls. But when they did it another time — everyone helped everyone else! /... / They succeeded. All of them walked all the way along the bench, even if they had only socks on; it was slippery. And a girl, a heavy girl with a big bottom, she also managed to walk by. Yes, they helped one another. So it was a great class. An amazing class!

While conducting this exercise, Monica paid attention to the mistakes she believed she had made with the first group. She made sure that the exercise would work, given the composition of the group. Since she interpreted the problem as being students not wanting to touch one another because of gender, she thought it was important to have a balance between boys and girls in the group. In this way, no one would feel exposed during the exercise and the following discussion. To avoid being disturbed by other students, Monica also made sure that the exercise would take place in a closed room.

During the exercise, she paid strong attention both to her role and to the students' various preconditions. She closely observed how each and every student solved the task. The result was a clear improvement, or as she put it: An amazing class.

Summarizing discussion

During the school year that followed this fieldwork, Monica has shifted from being reluctant to teach the subject Life Competence Education, to triumphantly talking about how she had managed to conduct what she called "an amazing class." The moments where Monica used my video recordings to reflect upon the interaction in the classroom constitute a key part for the development of her work. She had interpreted the interactions in the classroom and critically analyzed her way of organizing her teaching. This creation of meaning had become the grounds upon which she had built the work that followed.

In the examples, I have presented two important turning points, which were decisive for Monica's development of (and with) the subject. Both turning points are connected to the exercises, which Monica put forward as failures because the children did not comply with the instructions. The first one was the dance exercise, where the children refused to touch one another. She linked what she saw in the video recording with her colleagues' stories about fathers who do not want to shake hands with female teachers. Against this background, Monica interpreted the failure of the dance exercise as an expression of gender inequality, in which children reproduced a cultural gender pattern. To Monica, the discourse of women being subordinated to men (to the extent that they are not worth being touched by a man) needed to be dismantled. This interpretation was a turning point for Monica and strengthened her involvement towards continued work with the value-system. Her new understanding of the subject also implies a turning point in her work with the value-system. It moved from having initially consisted of companionship at a general and all-encompassing level to dealing with (what Monica interpreted as) children needing to use exercises to learn how companionship should be realized in their group. The teaching here is imbued with a view of the school's work with the value-system as a way to compensate for or correct certain families' way of raising their children. The childhood constituted through education or the teaching is dependent upon adults' values. In her planning of the classes, Monica considered children as subjects and actors (Corsaro, 2005; James & Prout, 1997): She listened to the students' points of

view, and negotiated values together with them in the discussions after each exercise. Yet, she based the following classes on her own conclusions on what the children needed to work with without major consideration of what the children had said.

The exercises themselves gained importance during the class. When the students reflected upon their implementation of the bench exercise, several possibilities opened up for Monica to take the discussion to a more encompassing level, such as social structures norms. Monica, however, was very much focused on the specific exercise and wanted the students to leave the room with a feeling of success. The objective thus became subordinated to the work methods. The complex of problems that arise is that the work with the value-system shifts towards work to regulate children's behavior, according to the teacher's interpretation of what is desirable (cf. Bartholdsson, 2010; Colnerud, 2004; Löf, 2011). In line with what von Brömssen (2013) claims to be behavioristic, the educational setting is based upon a view on children as incomplete citizens in need to be trained. Childhood construction (or rather reconstruction, James & Prout, 1997) underpins children's dependence on adults in order to fit into the society.

When Monica chose the bench exercise as a method to work with the more society-encompassing value gender equality, she confused values on different levels: The goal of the work shifted to values and valuations of a personal nature. According to Colnerud's reasoning (2004), the confusion of values of various natures hampers Monica's chances to direct her efforts more accurately. It became problematic for her to take up a topic such as gender equality through exercises that are meant to strengthen the feeling of companionship among the students in a particular group.

The second turning point occurred when Monica reflected upon the fallout of the bench exercise with the two different groups. The comparison provided Monica with the possibility of reassessing her concerns about boys reproducing a view on women, which she related to a certain culture. The category "culture" became less rigid when she realized that the exercise worked well in the second group, where some of the students come from, as she put it, "very religious homes." She had been able to see variations within the groups and therefore had the possibility of basing her teaching on a less rigid view of the children and their parents, rather than her colleague's categorizing narratives (Trondman, 2006). In addition, a view of children as subjects and actors came to permeate all the work. From this moment, the

children's experiences, relations, and companionship, rather than the parents' background, gained more importance for the work that followed.

Many intertwined factors were behind Monica's new view of what she earlier had interpreted as a reproduction of cultural unequal gender relations. I want to underscore the importance of Monica improving her didactic abilities through constantly reflecting upon her work. Monica's desire to develop through the subject can be said to be of key importance in this context. She placed a lot of effort on improving, which is the reason she asked to watch the video recordings. Even if I had maintained a role as a passive observer during Monica's reflections and planning, both the video camera and I would have become important resources for the development of her work.

The value-system has to be present in all the schoolwork (Lgr 11). Hence, there are reasons to argue, if we are serious about the school's social agenda, teachers need support to find their way through the important work that democratic education, health-promoting work, and prevention efforts imply. The results of my study clearly show that by taking the time to critically analyze their work, it is possible for teachers to see which values are established and reproduced within the classroom.

Another way of opening up the critical pedagogical work towards such flexibility could be through a constant revision of local pedagogical planning, where the formulations are analyzed in relation to the curriculum. If we lose track along the way, perhaps didactical questions could lead us back to the school's role: What is it that the school should do? And why?

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