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CONSTITUTIVE VALUES AND DAILY PRACTICE IN A SWEDISH SCHOOL

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Abstract

Schooling is always a moral practice. It takes place in specific contexts where social regulation is justified by reference to ethical codes and their specific values. Teachers' work is constituted by these values. Teachers act morally, steering practice in particular directions. The task is, however, never simple. In a context where the curriculum provides an ethical framework and schooling operates within a moral framework, there is a perpetual struggle to align personal values, school practices and the constitutive values of the national curriculum. This paper focuses on that struggle. It builds on a field study which investigates the relationship between school practices and the constitutive values explicitly endorsed in the Swedish national curriculum. Episodes of moral steering are presented together with the teachers' subsequent evaluation of these incidents. These episodes suggest that insofar as individual beliefs and moment-by-moment responses may lead to actions which counteract constitutive values, moral practice must also be a deliberative practice where alternatives are weighed and courses of action are adopted.

Introduction

Schooling is never neutral. Its purpose is to raise young people in accordance with different demands. These demands include knowledge and, as important, values. Teaching, like all forms of upbringing, includes ethics, moral, norms and values. These concepts are interpreted and handled differently in separate contexts and therefore they call for clarification.

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The concepts ethics and moral have the same significance and are often used as synonyms. Ethics and morals come from the Greek *ethos* and the Latin *moralis*, meaning custom and praxis. The concepts denote notions of good and bad, right and wrong. In Swedish philosophy Collste notes that these concepts are sometimes separated. Moral signifies actions and standpoints (praxis), while ethics indicates reflections concerning moral praxis. "Thus, there is a *moral* action but an *ethical* theory" (1996, p. 13).

What is considered right or wrong is expressed in norms. These are internalised in a culture, but are not necessarily consciously held or explicitly expressed. As Colnerud has suggested: "Moral usually indicates, in everyday language, the unreflective norms of actions, of what is good and bad, which operate in daily life" (1995, p. 11). Norms are based on values whose validity is presumed. Expressing the morally desirable is expressing values, i.e., priorities and ideals.

Values not only legitimate actions retrospectively, they also steer actions prospectively in an antecedent fashion. In Hodgkinson's words, they "tend to act as motivating determinants of behaviour" (1983, p. 36). More explicitly: "a value is a conception of the desirable which influences the selection from available modes, means, and ends of action" (Hodgkinson, 1978, p.121). Within the above framework, schooling entails two recurrent practices: ethical activities in the form of conscious and systematic reflection, and moral activities that steer human conduct around what is right and wrong. In this sense, ethics, morals, norms and values are seamlessly related to each other.

Schooling is always a moral practice. It is about the regulation of human interaction, according to prevailing norms. It takes place in a specific context where regulation steers conduct in certain directions, justified by reference to particular values. In this context, school participants come together bringing values internalised earlier. The school, therefore, is a place where values are negotiated (cf., Buzzelli & Johnston, 2002). Yet, upbringing and teaching cannot be aim-less. According to Alan Tom, teaching is moral since a curriculum's content explicitly or implicitly reflects a notion of desirable ends (in Valli, 1990). Or, as Hansen (1998) suggests "They [teaching and upbringing] attest to the fact that teachers work in a practice that calls on them to conduct themselves in a particular way" (p. 649).

The Swedish educational realm

Schooling is a matter of the future. A famous Swedish quote from 1968 illustrates how schooling can be understood as a goal-based contextual moral practice. Olof Palme, the then Minister of Education, later Prime Minister, claimed that: "The school must be a spearhead into the future classless society" (Reported in Andersson & Nilsson, 2000, p. 157). Therefore, values and curriculum steering are seamlessly

related to the future. The document which stipulates the Swedish school's goals, guidelines, ideals and values is called a *läroplan* (curriculum)¹. It identifies the steering values in education, themselves drawn from wider political-ideological assumptions. The *läroplan* is a consensually constructed document and a symbol of broad political agreement. Moreover, it is also a steering document, a point of departure for pedagogical activities where at least two steering principles come together. Actions are steered according to earlier practices, but also according to the prospective practices identified in policy documents that include legislation, *läroplan*, syllabuses and performance criteria (Samverkande styrning, 2001).

Social values have varied over time. During the last century, for instance, there was a move in Sweden from religious to democratic values (for further reading, see e.g., Petersson, 1999). Discussions of pedagogic values associated with teaching and learning came to the forefront in Sweden during the 1990s. When the *läroplan* of 1994 was introduced, a new label for the constitutive values of the school system was invented: "*värdegrunden*". Although not yet in Swedish dictionaries, this idea became closely associated with discussions of school practices and features prominently in policy documents. (See, for example Hedin & Lahdenperä 2000; Linde, 2001; Tham, 2000; Skolverket 1999a, 2000a, 2000b, 2001a, 2001b). In turn, "*värdegrund*" development projects were extensively funded during the latter part of 1990s (Skolverket, 1999b). Moreover, the government proclaimed 1999 to be 'the year of constitutive values' in education.

When the first *läroplan* to embrace pre-school was introduced in 1998, and the after-school centres and pre-school classes² were integrated within the school system, the *läroplan* for the compulsory school (Lpo94), was revised. A significant change occurred in connection with that revision. Instead of opening with 'knowledge' under the main heading 'goals and guidelines', the 1994 *läroplan* reversed this order and started with 'norms and values'. That reversal was intentional - to emphasise that the foundation of the *läroplan* comprises the ethical values and moral tasks of the school (SOU 1997:21). By articulating norms, values and the school's caring mission before its knowledge task, the *läroplan* emphasised symbolically that schooling can prioritise values over knowledge. Consequently, the *läroplan* for different sectors of the

¹ I will use the concept 'läroplan' in this text since the concept 'curriculum' has different meanings in different context and is thereby difficult to translate from English to Swedish (Lundgren, 1979). The Swedish concept 'läroplan' is a document which contains educational goals for pre-school and school.

² In the Swedish context, pre-school is the word for nursery school or day-care centre. Pre-school class is, however, a group consisting of six year old children.

education system (pre-school, compulsory school, and non-compulsory school) share a common view of knowledge, development, learning and values. Each of the three documents begins by identifying the democratic values which all Swedish schools should represent and impart: "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" (Lpo 94, English version, p. 4)

Thus, the promotion of democracy in and through Swedish schools, entails fostering a value-system which should be shared by all adults and children and permeates all educational activities. The daily work is to be organised in democratic ways in order to prepare children for active participation in civic life. Accordingly, learning *about* democratic values is not enough. The pedagogical practice has to be organised in accordance with democratic principles with influence, equality and responsibility as key dimensions.

These assumptions apply everywhere in the educational system. No matter where education is provided in Sweden, the provision should be of equivalent value. For instance, equal rights and opportunities for men and women are paramount. Equal opportunities³, therefore, is a practical issue which has to be visible in school.

The way in which girls and boys are treated and assessed in school as well as the demands and expectations that are placed on them, contributes to their perception of gender differences. The school has a responsibility to counteract traditional gender roles and should therefore provide pupils with the opportunity of developing their own abilities and interests irrespective of their sexual identity. (Lpo94, p. 6)

The läroplan provides thereby an ethical framework which is negotiated by these who work inside, or alongside the schools. There is a perpetual struggle to reconcile the constitutive values of the national läroplan with outside values, personal values and school practices.

This paper focuses on that struggle. It builds on a field study which investigated the teachers and children's⁴ interaction around the constitutive values of the national läroplan. A further interest was how teachers reconcile their individual values with their professional mission, i.e., how they reconcile individual and official values.

³ The Swedish word used for expressing this attitude is "jämsällldhet", for Sweden a unique concept and difficult to translate. The corresponding word in English is "equal opportunities" (Weiner & Berge, 2001).

⁴ I use the concepts child/children in accordance with the change done in the läroplan 1994 where the term pupil was replaced by the terms child and youngsters in due of the different activities integrated within school (SOU 1997:21, p.89).

The study

Green school is situated in a district with a population diverse in its social class and ethnic composition. It combines pre-school and compulsory school stages with around 200 pupils. This paper presents the result of the study within the six school groups (ages 6-11). The teachers worked in ten teams of 3-4 members. Although, the formal responsibility for teaching in school groups rested with the teachers the school teams included child-care assistants, pre-school teachers, and leisure-time teachers.

As a researcher, I spent a total of fifty hours observing and taking notes in all groups. My primary focus was on the teachers' *style*. Following Hansen, I use the term 'style' as including gestures, body movements, facial expressions and tone of voice. "The term [style] encompasses a teacher's customary ways of attending to students, for example how he or she typically responds to what they say or do" (1993, p. 397). Such personal attributes may be unconscious or taken for granted, but the analysis of such routine behavior may also reveal the "unreflective norms of actions of what is good and bad, and which operates in daily life", as noted by Colnerud (1995, p. 11).

My aim was to detect unreflective actions. I did not however seek to find how teacher's style had impact on children's moral development. Rather my interest was to find events which could be identified as value-related. What was going on in the room? How did the teacher respond? What was his/her priority?

My transcribed field-notes were returned to the teachers. I invited them to look for evidence of constitutive values in practice. Thereafter, I met the teams, and our discussions were tape-recorded and transcribed. These follow-up meetings served three functions: epistemological, methodological and ethical. First, they enabled me to assess the credibility of my record. Did the teachers, for instance, acknowledge a connection between my account and their experiences? In short, did my interpretation correspond with those of the teachers? (See also Larsson, 1994 and Merriam, 1994.)

Secondly, these discussions generated further reflections among the teachers, a process of "dialogical data generation" (Carspecken & Apple, 1992, and Lenz Taguchi, 2000). Teachers' reflections and comments were important and helped me to understand their underlying thinking, and to deepen my understanding of their ethical and moral standpoints and actions.

Thirdly, the involvement of the teachers was a matter of research ethics. The teachers were not simply passive study objects, but active participants in creating new knowledge about their practice. As Carspecken and Apple suggest: "An interview or a facilitated group discussion creates a new normative context for the subject through which slightly new identities may be claimed and new norms referenced" (1992, p. 531). Thus, I was interested in finding out how

teachers reacted while discussing critical episodes in my observations. Would this deliberation lead to proposals for change?

Constitutive values in school groups

In the classrooms, local specific values were expressed in the form of common standards of desirable behaviour. 'Class-room rules' hung in each room indicating e.g.: "We shall help each other. We shall listen to each other. We shall create a peaceful working atmosphere". In their daily interaction, children were reminded by the teachers of the conversation rules. They were expected to raise their hand when they wanted to speak and to listen to each other with interest and without interruption. A recurrent activity was called "The pupil of the week" where each child was given the opportunity, in front of peers, to talk about themselves and their interests. The listening children were supposed to pay attention and raise interested questions. The explicit intention was for children to respect one another.

The fostering of responsibility, influence and integrity was also visible. The children independently planned their weekly work on Mondays, and were thereby trained to take responsibility for their schoolwork. Children's different learning styles were accepted. For example, some preferred to sit on the floor and write. I often heard teachers giving the children option to choose between different tasks and, during group discussions, the children were able to propose and discuss different themes.

Such episodes were quite easy to link to promoted values. They revealed an attitude of preferable behavior stated in visible rules and methods. But there were other episodes which not only counteracted the läroplan's values but also were difficult for teachers to evaluate. "I didn't think of it then, but when I read this, it become so obvious" was a typical comment. Such unseen episodes are the focus of the remainder of this paper.

Unequal opportunities

A common feature in the observations was how gender had an impact on the daily practice which in its turn contravened stated values identified in the läroplan. Across the school groups, with one exception, I found two cultures existing side by side. One culture was characterised by following rules, working with tasks and being helpful to each other. Here I found vocal girls and silent boys, with girls serving as quasi-teachers and explicitly showing that they knew the social rules. The girls showed less confidence when presenting work in front of their peers. They excused their work even though there was nothing to excuse. When some six-year old children were to write what they were good at, the girls were good at playing games, reading and writing. When I heard girls' comments, their remarks were negative like: "I cannot do this", "My hair looks bad", "But I can

write much better, you know". Further, the girls expressed collective values and supported each other and the boys.

The second culture type was characterized by boys who received a disproportionate amount of time and space by being disruptive. In five of the school groups there were a few boys whose demands on teachers were constant. They disturbed their peers by talking, climbing on furniture, leaving the room or interrupting the teaching. When I heard these boys talking about themselves, they expressed more self-confidence than the girls. Six year old boys wrote about themselves as being good at carrying heavy things, climbing, and playing football. Remarks like "I'm the king", "I'm the best", were heard from boys. They also expressed disparaging comments about girls and silent boys. When boys presented their work in front of the group they showed pride, even when they had not finished it properly. Further, at a symbolic level, teachers had notions of how boys and girls are: "If the boys should show some caring, you have to ask them to, then they do it with pleasure, but they don't do it naturally".

When handling disruptive boys, the teachers used different strategies. They constantly kept an eye on them; gave these boys further attention and individual help; or corrected them from a distance when they did not behave appropriately. By seating boys and girls together in the classroom, the atmosphere was expected to be more peaceful. Or as one teacher said: "There is no conscious thought about that apart from not seating the 'trouble spots' together." A further strategy allowed the "naughty boys" to do what they wanted to, which gave the teacher time to help other children, or achieve peace and quiet in the group. When Luke, for example, wanted to sit in front of the computer instead of working in his book, his teacher tried to stop him from moving to the computer, but finally gave up. Afterwards she explained that her immediate strategy was to let him do what he wanted, as long as he was quiet. She had discovered that when she had paid too much attention to the disruptive boys, their reading-development was better, compared with the children who don't disturb in class. The rule "We shall create a peaceful working atmosphere" was realized by giving these boys full attention, at the expense of the others' learning, or by letting them do what they wanted. Pragmatic values counteracted democratic values. What worked was more easily sustained than what was morally desirable.

Unplanned suggestions

When unplanned suggestions were heard from the children, the teachers' aspiration to develop the children's ability to influence, or intervene, classroom practices was not always realized: "No, you can't do that, or "Because I have decided so", were answers from the teachers without explaining the basis for their decision. After a lesson in physical education, some children had suggestions for what to do next lesson. The teacher: "Good, but we cannot do

that next time, maybe the time after next. But it is good that you suggest activities....” A girl complained: “But last time we didn’t do what I suggested. The teacher: No, but we did another’s suggestion”.

These comments raised the question whether children are aware of how decisions are made concerning the lessons content. Do the children understand that there is a problem of reconciling their own aspirations with the teachers’ task? Have the teachers shared the läroplan’s intentions with the children?

Wake-up calls

To perceive that one’s moral practices not are in accordance with the prevailing beliefs of good teaching is not easy. That happened when two teachers read my field-notes. During my visits, both had repeated conflicts with boys who disturbed the order with off-task activities. Disrespectful corrective comments were issued to these boys, who, in turn, responded with disobedience.

Reading my field-notes had been important wake-up calls. It became obvious, through these critical incidents, that their values and practices were not consonant. Their experiences and the demand to transfer knowledge as teachers underpinned their explanations:

Teacher 12: It was very hard for me to read this.... I have tried to read this with an open mind and learn from it. In the middle of a situation, your reaction comes very spontaneously, you really use the deepest... everything my teachers and parents have said to me, not as much what I have learnt and what I believe in... my reactions come from deep down inside when you get so terrible angry.

One teacher distinguished herself from the leisure-time teacher who had more of a caring role:

Teacher 13: I am the class teacher, I am supposed to teach them knowledge for life, and that is the big difference [compared to leisure-time teachers] and I struggle with this all the time. I hope I have to struggle with that a little bit longer because my goal with being a teacher was to work a little like a leisure time teacher but in the class room.

Both teachers acknowledged that teachers have earlier experiences which they bring into the educational setting and, which in turn, influence their conduct. Further, they became aware of the need for ways to handle such critical, yet taken for granted, incidents:

T13: Yes, good methods has to become automatic even though you are fed up, to keep my dignity and not let it show. Well, yes, that is the balance. Speaking of consciousness, you have to start listening and look at yourself,... Reading this was really a wake-up call for me. It was like...Oh God, what am I saying? Do I always sound like this?

Girl resistance

When boys dominated the group and the teachers, there were no visible protests from their peers. But there were two episodes where girls demonstrated resistance towards boy’s conduct. During a morning assembly, when the class discussed the United Nations convention on the Rights of Children, they agreed that all children have the right to be called by their real names. Suddenly Mary raised her voice and complained that a boy in the next class, had thrown her underwear from her locker. The teacher defended this conduct by suggesting the boy was only curious. Other children had similar experiences with boys playing with their underwear, which they disapproved. The teacher continued to give several excusing explanations, ending with: “It doesn’t matter, does it?” At the team discussion her colleague advocated a more explicit attitude: “Maybe we should be more moral here”.

An observation in physical education illustrated how a girl’s experience was neglected. The children were grouped two and two and supposed to take turns with different activities, such as rolling a ball, balancing on a bench, while listening to music. When the music stopped, they should change activity. But it did not work out that way for Adam and Sue. She was only allowed to have the ball when Adam dropped it or while he was resting. Mainly, she was waiting for him to finish his balancing, jumping or dribbling with the ball. Kate had the same experience and left the room during the lesson. None of the teachers noticed these situations since they were busy with some boys who needed help with focusing on the task. After the lesson, there was time for evaluation. While Sue didn’t complain, Kate raised her voice: “Joe did much more things than I did.... When I asked him to move, he said he couldn’t”. Joe objected. He just started to move towards the bench before the music had started. The teachers defended Joe’s conduct by saying that he probably got so eager and just began exercising before the music started. “But it was good to hear your opinion”

In the discussion, her colleague wondered: “Do we have higher demands on girls that they should put up with more.... Accept injustice...?” Another teacher added: “We could also ask ourselves whether we consider it to be less problematic if a girl sits down and look at the others, it’s easier to let that pass if it is a girl.”

These two episodes illustrate how the girls’ experience of injustice was neglected. Moreover, their feelings were not only denied, they were expected to be accepting of the situation. Additionally, the dialogues included reflection concerning whether teachers have different demands on boys and girls.

Strong girls

There was one school group where boys did not dominate the space, which was occupied, instead, by strong, talented and cocky girls. That was expressed as a problem: *But this is the dilemma in this group.... "There is practically no model for the boys. Almost all the boys are shy."* Nevertheless, during my observations, the boys were given the teacher's full attention, something the teacher wasn't aware of until she read the field-notes. She argued that the girls who were cutting and pasting didn't need the same support as the boys - who had mathematics. Her colleague opposed that description by referring to another event where she had given the boys more attention because they were drawing. *"No matter what the children are doing, the boys get more help."* An important question was raised: *"I wonder if the boys really need more support or if they can manage more than I expect. Or could it be that if they loose concentration, they disturb more than the girls do."* If boys disturb they get the teachers attention, if they do not, they get it anyway since they are regarded as being in need of assistance or to avoid expected disorder.

Discussion

The Swedish läroplan recognises democratic values as forming the base of schooling. These values are 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. Further, it is required that these values should saturate all activities and be shared by all working within a school. In this paper, these are described as the constitutive values of Swedish schooling.

This paper draws on episodes from the inner life at Green school. The incidents, played out in language and other exchanges, provide a window on the complexity of schooling. They throw light on the primary focus on this paper: the interplay between the läroplan and school practice. In short, this paper is about the relationship between ethical beliefs and moral practices.

The staff at Green school had the ambition to realise the national läroplan's constitutive values in practice. The observations examine their aspiration to create a learning environment in accordance with their mission. Yet, as these episodes suggest, they experienced endless problems in their daily practices that arose from the value dimensions – personal, local and national that suffuse schools as work places. One of the recurrent problems is the clash between constitutive values and individual beliefs. This conflict was revealed, for instance, in comments such as: *"This is what I have been exposed to"*.

A feature of personal beliefs was that they acted as the value of the last resort. Teaching involves moment-by-moment practice where the teacher has to *do* something about unplanned incidents without time for prolonged

reflection. One teacher justified a problematic case of professional action in the following way:

In the middle of a situation, your reaction comes very spontaneously, you really use the deepest... everything my teachers and parents have said to me, not as much what I have learnt and what I believe in... my reactions come from deep down inside when you get so terrible angry.

Avoiding disorder is a further example of how teachers' practice clashes with constitutive values. An overall motivation for the teachers' actions was keeping order within the group, rather than to advance the cause of democracy. When reality struck back and disorder was feared, unconscious and taken-for-granted conduct could work against stated values. Boys who disturbed the class, for instance, were unreasonably costly in teacher's time and attention. Sometimes these boys were allowed to do what they wanted, as long as they didn't disturb the group. Respect for children's moral agency and learning was at risk when chaos was feared.

Practices may also create multiple regimes from a gender perspective. The fieldwork suggests that different rules were applied to boys and girls. At a symbolic level, there were prevailing notions of how girls and boys should be. Unlike boys, girls were expected to be caring, follow rules and not dominate space physically. The teachers thereby contributed to the reproduction of gender regimes based on stereotyped roles. They were distracted by an individualistic concept of helpfulness. As Walkerdine (1992) asks, is a girl raised to be a knower or a nurturer of knowers? When the gender image changed, the girls were regarded as powerful, talented and cocky, and the 'normal' discourse was suspended. This situation was described as a problem rather than as a possibility to affirm a different gender regime. The prevailing regime was transgressed by a 'moment of equality' (Berge 1999), but the moment was merely perceived as a moral problem, not as an opportunity. This finding is not unique (see e.g., Gulbrandsen, 1994; Källner, 1990 and Öhrn, 2002). It is a further reflection of how local norms and earlier practices have a steering effect in classrooms.

This gender blindness can be regarded, as Potts (1997) suggests, as a result of developmental psychology becoming hegemonic within the educational realm. But again, there is an intimate relationship between development and values. The values provide the direction to be taken by development. Supporting children's development always implies more or less conscious steering towards certain ideals. Why? And how? Thus, the problems of individual beliefs, the moment-by-moment practice, fear of disorder, and gender blindness, all of them intertwined, had an impact on the relationship between means and ends.

Despite the Green school teachers' conscious struggle with applying constitutive values in daily practice, the

episodes demonstrate the existence of values that counteract the teacher's mission. Contrary practice, attitudes and moral actions were normalised, and were only questioned and challenged when the teachers saw them in print. Conflict events were easy to identify, compared with more routine but nonetheless value-laden incidents. When these episodes were problematised through team members taken different moral positions, the unreflective norms of these actions were revealed. The teachers' comments on the episodes disclose the significance of analysing practice from a distance: "I didn't think of it then, but when I read this, it become so obvious". Furthermore, the field notes not only challenged teachers' practice, they contributed to new understandings and, in some groups, contributed to proposals for further change.

To conclude: Teaching is a moral practice. It entails the translation of ethical beliefs into moral practices that, in their turn, foster a specific moral being. This paper highlights difficulties associated with the teacher's task. If citizenship education is a political priority in Sweden, clarification of values and, above all, moral practices also becomes an important educational priority. Thus, there has to be space for deliberation within Swedish teacher education and school since the läroplan is a political framework rather than a pedagogic or didactic prescription. The result of this study suggest that there is a need for enhanced knowledge and awareness among teachers of how social, educational, and personal values have an impact on the work of schools. Interpreting, internalising and applying democratic values is a never-ending process. How these values can be realised in practice has to be constantly reviewed. If such problematic episodes can be anticipated, democratic values are more easily realised.

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