

Values in Practice – Teachers’ and Student Teachers’ Understanding of a Desired Classroom Dialogue

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Abstract

A Swedish study is presented in which a comparison is made between teachers’ and student teachers’ understanding of the National curriculum as regards the nature of the classroom dialogue and also to discuss teacher education and school development from this aspect. The study was a comparative case study and the method for collecting data was an inquiry with fixed response alternatives. 34 teachers and 50 student teachers participated in the study. Results were that the student teachers had more set their minds than the teachers on pursuing the intentions of the National curriculum which require pupils’ participation in setting rules for the work and the time together in the classroom. The teachers appeared to be more self-confident, or even presumptuous, of their teacher role than the student teachers. It is discussed whether the views put forth by the student teachers were more directed towards pupils’ development of key competences formulated by the European Union.

Keywords: comparative case study, classroom dialogue, teachers and student teachers, values



Introduction

The purpose of this article is to present a Swedish study in which a comparison is made between teachers' and student teachers' interpretation of the National curriculum, Lpo94 (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2006) in Sweden as regards the creation of fundamental values in the classroom and also to discuss teacher education and school development (national and international) from this aspect.

In Sweden, schools were governmentally controlled until 1994. From that year on, schools have been locally controlled; this means that the local staff is responsible for developing and improving their own school. This responsibility has been stressed even further in the new teacher education (Utbildningsdepartementet, 2000). Contemporary teacher education is also more strongly linked to educational research than previously. It is argued that a consequence of this is that many newly examined teachers are more updated in both educational research and the implications of the current National curriculum than teachers educated previously. At the same time, these last mentioned teachers are probably more familiar with practical problems related to educational research findings and to the demands of school development than newly examined teachers. The teacher training committee argues that the practical part of the teacher training in Sweden should "work as a bridge between teacher education and the pedagogical working practice" (Utbildningsdepartementet, 1999, p. 103).

In the National Curriculum for the compulsory school in Sweden, Lpo94 (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2006), two kinds of goals for the school in Sweden are formulated: Goals to be attained and Goals to strive towards. The Goals to be attained in particular concern the mastering of basic skills. Goals to strive towards are based on a number of fundamental values; according to these values, the purpose is, in short, to educate citizens who can participate in a public debate on problems of modern society. Teachers face a dilemma situation since they are expected to focus on as many as possible of all pupils being graded as Approved, *i. e.* to reach Goals to be attained), and at the same time the teachers are expected to let the Goals to strive towards be the focus for all work in schools. We also know that schools, as institutions, struggle with old hierarchies in which the newly examined teachers are expected to step back for those educated a long time ago. Along with the teacher education reform in Sweden (Utbildningsdepartementet, 2000) it has been clearly stated that the responsibility for teacher education is shared between the teacher training institutions and the local authorities.

The study presented in this paper gives an example of the differing apprehensions of teachers and student teachers as regards the creation of values and, thus, focusing some aspects of the Goals to strive towards. It appears from the National Swedish curriculum that one of the most important tasks for the school in Sweden is to promote the pupils' development into responsible citizens, who participate actively in professional life and in society. This is also pointed out from a European perspective; in the EU 'Education and Training 2010' work programme it is stated that future Europeans will need certain key competences such as 'interpersonal, intercultural, social and civic competences' (Commission of the European Communities, 2005, p. 13).

In order to facilitate such development it is necessary to create prerequisites for all pupils to participate in a democratic dialogue between children and adults, which is an aspect of sustainable development in the society. Such dialogues may take place in the classroom (between teachers and pupils), and the National Swedish curriculum clearly states that the teacher should for example "openly present and discuss different values, ideas and problems" [...] "together with the pupils develop rules for working and participating in the group" (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2006, p. 9). But, it must be noted that teachers face

a dilemma situation, since the school also demands that teachers should in particular instruct the children regarding fundamental skills.

Values and actions

It can be said that our actions are guided by our values. Certain actions, thoughts and views are regarded as self-evident and they are not questioned; they are often rooted in a fundamental value and these values may be very hard, or even impossible, to change. However, it seems possible to bring humans to the insight that values are not general, but most frequently cultural. Since teachers will in their profession pass on their own values (consciously or subconsciously) to their pupils, it is important to find out which values teachers, and student teachers, embrace.

Ödman (1998) points to the fact that teachers' values are reflected in their attitude towards different pupils. Ödman calls this different 'mentalities'. Many researchers touch upon this phenomenon in different terms. Bourdieu (1993) uses the concept 'habitus' and refers to similar phenomena when discussing that, as humans, we have different opinions of moral, sense of responsibility, duty *etc.*

The standpoint is taken in this article that it is not possible to educate without mediating values; Lindgren (2003) states that even if you do not explicitly mediate values, you still do it implicitly by your actions. The Goals to strive towards are meant to form the base for all work in Swedish schools and they denote the main goal for the school: to educate democratic citizens. However, the curricular goals have not been precisely defined for different subjects, resulting in teachers often working with the Goals to be attained in sight, since these goals are relatively concrete and measurable (Zackari & Modigh, 2000). Since the syllabus goals have not been precisely defined for different subjects there is an obvious risk that teachers will find it easier to work towards the Goals to be attained than towards the Goals to strive towards. The link between fundamental values, the goals and the grades makes it even more interesting to find out more about teachers' attitude in this respect. The question is what kind of dialogue the teacher offers the pupils in the classroom in order to make it possible to approach these goals, *i. e.* if the teacher is able to award all 'kinds' of pupils, both explicitly and implicitly. In the national curriculum it is stated that the teacher should openly present and discuss different values, ideas and problems; to make this possible it seems necessary that teachers have made their own values visible to themselves and reflected over them. If the teacher has not made this reflection there seems to be a risk that s/he will focus on Goals to be attained and that the instruction will, thereby, take place on a far too basic level.

Purpose of the study

The purpose of the study is to find out how teachers and student teachers interpret the National Swedish curriculum as regards the desired character of the dialogue in the classroom between the teacher and the pupils, and also if there are differences between teachers' and student teachers' interpretation. How does a group of teachers assess the dialogue in the classroom? and how does a group of student teachers interpret that this dialogue should be performed; do the teachers "openly present and discuss different values, ideas and problems" and do they "together with the pupils develop rules for working and participating in the group" (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2006, p. 9)? How do the student teachers understand that the classroom dialogue should be in this respect?

Method

Design.

The study is a comparative case study; a comparison is made of data collected in two different studies, where the same data collection instrument was used. In one study (Sandström Kjellin, Månsson & Karlsson, 2005) student teachers answered an inquiry in which they were to consider statements from the National Curriculum as regards the classroom dialogue, and in the other study teachers at a secondary school answered the same inquiry.

Participants.

Participants were 34 teachers working at a secondary school in Sweden and 50 student teachers attending a course in their teacher education; both groups are in the same geographical area of Sweden. The inquiry was handed out to 42 teachers; 33 of them answered it. 107 student teachers were offered to participate in answering the inquiry; 50 of them answered it.

Materials and procedure.

Both groups answered an inquiry containing two questions. The group of student teachers answered the inquiry during a lesson in their ordinary teacher training, and the group of teachers answered it during a staff meeting. The teachers answered the inquiry one year later than the student teachers; the reason for this is that the student teachers answered the inquiry in the beginning of a regular course in their teacher education, and the teachers answered the inquiry in a first phase of a school development project.

For the teachers the first question was: How are rules set for the work and the time together in the classroom? For the student teachers the first question was: How do you think that the rules for the work and the time together in the classroom should be set?

Two alternatives were given:

1. The rules are set by teachers
2. The rules are set by teachers and pupils together.

For the teachers the second question was: How common is it that different ideas and values are discussed openly in your classroom? For the student teachers the second question was: Should a teacher discuss her/his ideas and values openly in the classroom? Four alternative answers were given: never/if I find it necessary/if the pupils ask for it/always.

Data analysis.

The data was analysed quantitatively.

Ethical aspects.

Informed consent was collected from the teachers and student teachers participating in the study. They were informed that the participation was voluntary and could be terminated at any time. The study is reported such that it will not appear at which school and which teacher education institution the data material is collected and such that it will not be possible to identify individuals. It was made clear that the gathered information would not be used by the

researchers for any other purpose than research. A risk-benefit analysis reveals that the benefit, both for research and for teachers, is that the study illuminates an area that is essential for student teachers and for teachers in their everyday professional life.

Results

First, the result of the first question in the inquiry is reported and then the result of the second question of the inquiry. In the figures, percentage is indicated. In figure 1, the teachers' and student teachers' opinions/estimations are reported of how rules are set/should be set for the work and the time together in the classroom.

Teachers: N= 33 Student teachers: N=50

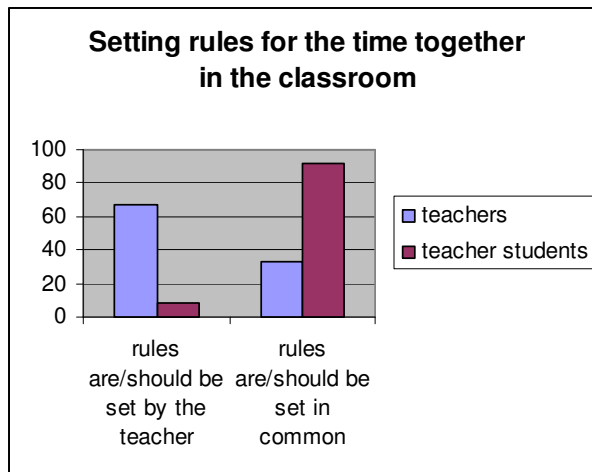


Figure 1. How rules are set/should be set for the work and the time together in the classroom.

Figure 1 displays that there were large differences between the answers in the two groups. 67% of the teachers had the opinion that rules are set by teachers, whereas only 8 % of the student teachers expressed that rules should be set only by the teachers. 92% of the student teachers had the opinion that classroom rules should be set by teachers and pupils together, but only 33% of the teachers estimated that this was done in their classrooms. The difference is statistically significant, $p < 0.001$. In figure 2 it is reported how the teachers and student teachers assess the occurrence/desired occurrence of discussions about different ideas and values in the classroom.

Teachers: N = 29 Student teachers: 50

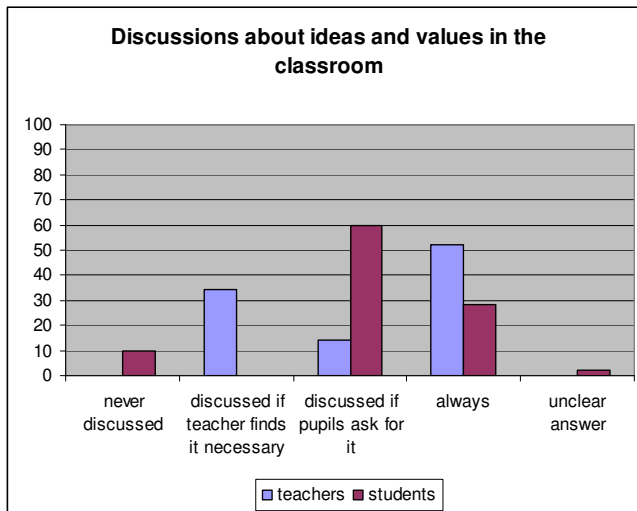


Figure 2. Teachers' and student teachers' opinions of discussions in the classroom about different ideas and values.

Figure 2 displays that 52% of the teachers always openly discuss values and ideas, whereas only 28% of the student teachers have the opinion that this should be done. 60% of the student teachers have the opinion that this should be done if the pupils ask for it; this estimation is made by only 14% of the teachers. The alternative 'if I find it necessary' was chosen by 34% of the teacher, but not by any of the students. However, the difference is not statistically significant. Only 29 of the 33 teachers answered these questions.

Discussion

The major differences between teachers and student teachers were that the teachers were less inclined to let the pupils participate in setting rules for the work and the time together in the classroom, and also that there seemed to be a pattern in the teachers of being more self-assured of their role as a teacher and a pattern in the student teachers to be less self-assured of their teacher role but more inclined to let the pupils participate in a democratic dialogue.

A majority of the teachers made the estimation that rules for the work and the time together in the classroom were decided by teachers only. Is this a sign that the teachers do not consider the pupils to be mature enough to participate in such a discussion and decision? Or is it a sign that the teachers are simply unwilling to let the pupils participate in this, *i. e.* a remnant from older curricula than the current one? The most probable explanation is perhaps that both explanations apply. However, Lpo94 (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2006) states that rules for the work and the time together in the classroom should be formulated by the teacher and the pupils together; the purpose is to prepare the pupils for an adult life as citizens who participate in a public debate on problems of modern society, and the teachers' answers is not in accordance with the ambitions set forth in the European society at large (Commission of the European Communities, 2005). If interpreted as a remnant from older curricula, this result can be explained by the theories of Bourdieu (1993): that it is a question of a common teacher 'habitus', and also Ödman (1998): that it is a question of a common teacher 'mentality'.

As regards the student teachers, a large majority had the opinion that classroom rules should be set by teachers and pupils together. This result is an example that student teachers

seem more inclined to work in accordance with the National curriculum, Lpo94 and the European society at large (Commission of the European Communities, 2005).

The result also showed that there were differences as regards the open discussion of values and ideas in the classroom. There were many more teachers than student teachers who estimated that they openly discuss values and ideas (or, for student teachers, had the opinion that this should be done). The most plausible explanation to this is perhaps that student teachers feel more insecure and more inexperienced than teachers and, therefore, do not make the estimation that they would themselves be able to perform lessons where they openly discuss values and ideas; this is also a probable explanation to the fact that there were a number of student teachers who stated that ideas and values should never be discussed in classrooms.

However, the student teachers were much more inclined than the teachers to discuss values and ideas if the pupils asked for it; the interpretation of this is that the student teachers are more willing to promote a democratic classroom dialogue, which is in accordance with the National curriculum, Lpo94 and the Commission of the European Communities (2005). The teachers, on the other hand, declared that they discussed values if they themselves found it necessary; this can be explained by reference to Bourdieu (1993) and Ödman (1998). No teacher student chose this alternative; this is interpreted as being a manifestation that the student teachers in this case did not have the same 'habit' (Bourdieu, 1993) or 'mentality' (Ödman, 1998) as the teachers. To put it simple, the teacher group appeared (not surprisingly) to be more self-assured as teachers and the teacher student group appeared more willing to listen to the pupils.

To sum up the results of the study, they showed that dialogue was needed between 'old' and 'new' teachers, for the benefit of both those groups, but in particular for the benefit of their pupils. The importance of teacher dialogue is pointed out in Sandström Kjellin & Stier (2008a; 2008b), and Sandström Kjellin (2008c) gives an example of how this can be performed.

The present study points at an important aspect when it comes to educate future Europeans who have 'interpersonal, intercultural, social and civic competences' (Commission of the European Communities, 2005); it seems hard to furnish young people with these competences if the classroom dialogue is not democratic. Yet, it is also known that performing a democratic dialogue is easier said than done! Sandström Kjellin & Stier (2008b) exemplifies how participants in a European collaborative project with the purpose to promote democratic dialogue, themselves didn't manage to perform such dialogue in their collaborative work.

A dilemma situation for Sweden has been pointed out: the Goals to be attained are easier to measure and this may be a reason for teachers to focus more on these goals (Zackari & Modigh, 2000). Recent changes in Swedish school politics also request teachers to focus more on the Goals to be attained. Probably this situation is not restricted to Sweden. It is likely that teachers all over the world fight with this dilemma. In fact it is well-known that testing and test preparations (to measure pupils' achievement of basic knowledge), is counterproductive to learning (see for example Banks, 2007). Probably the teachers in this study are more aware of the request from school politicians than the students, who may be more aware of the ideological requirements at a European level (the ideological sources may have been emphasized by their educators). A democratic classroom dialogue is not necessarily in accordance with an effort to make all pupils achieve the Goals to be attained. However, for the future we need to find ways to measure also the Goals to strive for; this study has been an example of an effort to 'measure' such goals for teachers and student teachers. We need to broaden the competence in teachers/student teachers to understand what mechanisms are

working when trying to perform democratic dialogue. The experience from Sandström Kjellin & Stier (2008b) showed this necessity.

Limitations

It must be noted that the study has limitations, but partly the limitations are also the key interest of the study. The teachers in the study are from one school only; this means that they have answered from the position of their daily situation at work at the particular school; this is a limitation to the study. The teachers could have been chosen from different schools, but this would have implied a larger study that was not possible to perform. The student teachers are from one teacher training institution only; this means that they are probably influenced by the values taught at the specific institution; this is also a limitation to the study, and the reason for this is the same. However, the interest of the study is to compare ideals that student teachers are taught to apply in the future and how qualified teachers treat these ideals in practice. Therefore the method, to perform a case study is justified.

The fact that only 50 student teachers out of 107, and 33 out of 42 teachers participated in the study may be of some importance for the result. The teachers who chose not to participate did not give a reason for this, but it is likely that those who participated were more positive towards an open discussion of values in classrooms. However, since the result showed that, as a group, the teachers were not in favour of an open discussion of classroom rules, this limitation does not seem all that important for the results of the study. If all teachers had participated they would probably have been even more negative, as a group.

The student teachers who did not participate were asked to motivate this, and a reason given by many of them was that they did not have time to take part in the study (taking part included more for the student teachers than only answering an inquiry). It seems likely that those who did not answer the inquiry were probably less in favour of an open discussion of values in classroom; this might have given another result of the study. However, a conclusion is that this is a comparison of a group of teachers and a group of student teachers who are both interested in values discussions in classrooms, and as such the result is relevant.

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