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Lived not taught: life and values from a children's perspective

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How do children learn values in life? Is it by being taught about right and wrong at school? Or is it by living and gaining experiences in life? Schools throughout Europe are talking about citizenship and democratic values, and in Sweden we have introduced something called a 'values-based curriculum', about democratic values of equality for all humans, both men and women, and solidarity with those in need. Teachers in schools are supposed to teach the pupils these values, which motivates the question in the title of this paper.

Children are boys or girls, they have different cultural backgrounds, belong to different social classes, and they have experiences as children meeting adults as parents or teachers. They do badly or well at school and are classified as children with special needs or not. Belonging to these different categories give different experiences; sometimes this is taken for granted and not reflected on at all, and sometimes it can give rise to strong feelings and new values in life. Sometimes these categories interact, and hide or strengthen each other.

This paper will describe conflicts in a school class, described from the children's perspective and using the categories social class, gender, ethnicity, generation and special education. It will ask questions about how such conflict is lived, how the categories interact and what the outcome might be concerning values (Torstenson-Ed, 2003, in press).

Method

A school class in Year Nine in Sweden was studied, using a three-fold method. All the pupils were asked to write their life story. Eight were then taken on a tour to their former pre-school and/or primary school, and interviewed about their experiences there, especially about their relations with children and teachers, about activities and rules, about things that were important and about the future. Five of the eight children had an immigrant background, three had a Swedish background. Four of the children had experiences of special education.

The secondary school was in an area with many social problems and many people from countries other than Sweden. There were children from ten different cultures in the class: Syrian, Bosnian, Chilean, Filipino, Finnish, Iranian, Iraqi, Pakistani, Rumanian and Tunisian.

The first thing I noticed in the class when I came as a researcher was a conflict between some boys. The teacher took them into the corridor to speak to them. The class was described by the teacher as having many conflicts, difficult to make contact with and only interested in their marks. During the interviews these conflicts were one of the things we talked about; this was not something I had planned in advance.

The children's description of lived school life

Class and style

The scene is a school class in an area (X) with many problems. One boy described it thus:

It's a bit special to live here, because it's a little, how to say, it's a bit of a ghetto, I think, it is no nice society, because there are crack and shit, so it is no nice place to live in, it would have been better to live somewhere else.

The children had been together since primary school, some since pre-school, and they described it as a harmonious group, where all nationalities worked together. Conflict arose when a group of pupils from another area (Y) were placed in the class in Year 7.

Social class is defined in economic and educational terms as well as by living space. The statistics show that in area X, where the secondary school is located, there are 10 % of detached houses compared to 80% in area Y. Area X has 30 percent of its inhabitants from other countries compared to 13 percent in area Y, and the middle income range is SEK 15,000 below average, while in area Y it is SEK 20,000 above average. Illness and unemployment are far higher in area X. The young people do not use the concept of social class, but they do use 'style' - the kids from the other area have a different style, meaning clothes, music, and so on.

Us and them

The pupils in the original class thought their harmonious class was disturbed by these 'foreigners' from another area. They have another style, and they simply don't know each other. 'You don't want to get to know everybody' as one boy says. One girl noted that the way pupils placed themselves in the classroom was significant. I observed that myself: in one corner, by the door, were one group of boys and in the diagonally opposite corner the new group of boys.

Gender

The girls occupied the middle of the classroom. One girl described the class as divided into three groups, X-boys, Y-boys and girls. Another girl said that she was 'neutral in the middle': the initial source of the conflict seemed to be between the young men. When asked to describe how the teachers treat boys and girls, there were different opinions. The boys thought that girls were favoured; that teachers did not reproach them so much when they arrived late for example; and that the girls received favours like having an exam later so they could prepare better. The girls thought that the teachers were treating them and the boys equally well. But, they said, if you ask the boys they will say that the teachers are unfair. But that's not true, one girl said: the boys are more involved in conflicts and so they get more reproaches. Despite this, this girl did not think it was better to be a girl in school. Girls had their conflicts too, but they got no help to solve them, they were not noticed by the teachers.

Ethnicity and racism

What about the role of racism in the conflict? Racist conflicts are more common between young men. A girl said: 'It was rather racist for some time, it was only Swedes coming to the class'. A boy described how they started conflicts between each other deliberately.

Somebody whispered: 'Bloody racist', someone else said 'What do you mean?' and the row was on. Both groups seemed to want to row with each other, one girl said, and that the word 'racist' was an effective trigger. Another girl thought that it was just in fun, pointing out that sometimes the boys laughed instead of getting angry. She thought the conflicts mostly depended on the different living areas. When I asked a boy directly if the conflicts were due to different cultures he answered 'No, you don't bother from which country people come'. It was mostly that some classmates were more unjust, he said, 'but there are racists here too', he added. The conflicts between the two groups seemed to be handled as racist conflicts by the teachers when trying to solve them.

One boy in the 'Swedish' group was an immigrant. He stuck to his friends but this loyalty caused him trouble. He was called the only nice 'black head', he was appointed 'an honorary Swede', so to speak, and the other boys called him 'not a real black head'. The boy himself tried to excuse his friends. They were not racists, he said, only nationalists. But he had trouble stating the differences, and he had to admit that some friends in the school election had voted with the racist National Democratic Party. He had explained that to them, but they either did not believe it or were not concerned. There were many signals both for or against racism in this conflict, but the youths from area X, with many nationalities, did not see racism as the main cause of the conflict.

Generation

There was another conflict going on in the school which was clearly experienced by the youths. While most school classes showed acceptance towards their teachers, these pupils described a clear conflict between adults and youths. 'According to the teachers we are awful and we get blown up by them every time we go into a classroom,' one girl said. 'We are compared with our parallel class, which is described as much better than we are'; 'There is a war going on between some of the teachers and us'; 'We are anti-teachers, because we are so unfairly treated'.

The conflict has come out of unjust treatment, one girl said. Another girl thought it depended upon the teacher's lack of control: they did not know what to do. A boy saw the teachers' lack of engagement as the main cause - 'they are waiting for the day to end,' he said, 'they are waiting to retire on a pension'. The teachers did not listen to them because of their bad reputation, is another conclusion the children had drawn: they had tried to make them listen, but it was no use.

It is tempting to dismiss these comments as exaggerations on the part of the youths, but they had also experienced the contrary, and were able to compare. They had one teacher whom they considered fair to them, and she was described in the opposite way. She liked them in spite of their bad reputation, 'you can talk to her about anything, she listens and you don't have to be afraid of her telling somebody else'; 'she has a great engagement, she likes her job and wants every pupil to get their marks'. When there is a conflict between teachers and pupils she was on both sides; a good teacher should bother and be on the side of both teacher and youth, the boy explained.

This conflict between generations has become intertwined with the conflicts between groups of pupils in the classroom. One girl described a situation when a boy was told by a teacher to take off his cap: 'in Bosnia you would have been shot for it' the teacher added. The girl regarded that teacher as a racist.

Special needs

Several pupils in this class had received special education or were currently receiving it. There are children who need help with reading and writing, children with social difficulties seen as caused by difficulties in the family or by disruptive behaviour and lack of concentration, or both. A girl described one of the boys as persecuted by the teachers because he was no good at school; the teacher compared this boy to his elder brother, who was good at school, and mocked him about the difference. It is interesting that the girl told this story as an example of racism in the teacher.

Us and them become we

The boys described the development of class relations from Year Seven to Year Nine, and it was clear the conflicts between the groups from the different areas has become weaker over time. They got to know each other - 'Earlier we didn't like them very much, it was like a war between us', one boy said. He went on

They kept to themselves and we kept to ourselves. Nowadays we are more mixed up. Now it is as if they belong to us, it has become one group instead of having two groups standing against each other. Now we have learnt to accept and to respect each other, we are one team now.

People who were racists still existed, but they are now in other classes or in town. Several youths confirmed this opinion.

Interpretation of the educational context

Clear interaction effects between different aspects in the conflicts described - between gender, ethnicity and racism, social classes, special needs and conflicts between generations - were observed. It seems as if there was an original conflict between two groups of boys from two different areas, grounded in estrangement, different styles and interests. Ethnicity is actualised as one of the areas has many immigrants. It could be said that the conflicts between the youths took place in a racist discourse, and it was treated this way by both youths and teachers. The youths know that there is a moral panic about racism in society, and that if racist accusations are levelled they arouse a 'better effect' in conflicts in relation to both peers and adults. The racist discourse also became extended to all kinds of conflicts between teachers and pupils, even traditional ones about wearing or not wearing caps.

This means that the conflicts between boys have a 'place' in the classroom; the adults help the children with their conflicts and racism is discussed. Conflicts involving the girls are hidden and they get no help. The conflicts between children and adults are also hidden and not addressed: on the contrary, the headmaster's orders are to forget about it, to reach consensus without any discussion. My view is that the generational conflict is the strongest one in the classroom due to power relations in the school context, and the most unchangeable as it is not being addressed. The example of the 'good teacher' shows that it is possible to address and to solve such a conflict. The conflict between the two groups of boys become less acute with time as they get to know each other.

What values do pupils learn from this school context? About everybody's equal rights, equality between sexes, justice, anti-racism? It is difficult to answer these questions.

I think that the single best way to learn something about equality and rights in this context for both the older and the younger generation is to deal with the conflict between teachers and pupils. The young people seem to have given up. They have tried to talk to their teachers, they say, and nobody listen to them. They also told me that they want revenge, to treat teachers as they are treated themselves. They have certainly learned something about racism, as it is talked about a lot, but as they tend to define all misuse of power by adults as racism, there could be a double message here. They have learned that the one who has the power has the rights. And the girls have learned that they and their conflicts do not count.

One important point arising from this is that is not possible only to teach, a teacher must live what s/he teaches, which is much more difficult. A teacher cannot look upon him/herself as a as a person outside what is happening in the school context; teachers are even part of the children's conflicts, and probably more so if they are unaware of it. Values have to be lived, not only taught about, and if living and teaching provide double messages, the lived ones are probably those that are remembered.

Theories and the life world philosophy of Merleau-Ponty

I now continue the discussion on a more theoretical level. The conflicts related here have actualised the theory in social psychology about us and them, in-groups and out-groups (Sherif & Sherif, 1953). Theories in research on gender, ethnicity, generation and special education contain an element of categorisation into dichotomies - us and them, men and women, Swedes and immigrants, adults and children, children with or without special needs. Categorisation itself is neutral: we could not manage either in research or in daily life without categorising things around us. However, the next step, to make an evaluation, is very easy to take and is taken frequently - we are better than them, they are bad - which leads to the next step, to separate them from us, and even to persecute or kill them. There are horrifying examples in European history, both old and new, of how such a progression can occur.

All theories contain and describe these components. Gender theory talks about the primacy of man, the man as norm, and patriarchy as a system where women are less worth (Hirdman, 2001). Generation theory (Williams & Nussbaum, 2001) and ethnicity research (Eriksen, 1998) use the concepts of in-groups and out-groups, and systems like apartheid, where different values are used. Special education talks about stamping theory and discusses segregation, integration or inclusion as concepts (Haug, 1998).

Segregation is often justified biologically as a difference between body and soul - man is talked about as soul, woman as body. Ethnicity and race have biological grounds. Different medical diagnoses have become more important in obtaining special education, in conflict with a more sociological view. There have been heated discussions.

Merleau-Ponty (1962) is a French philosopher who has developed the life-world philosophy of Husserl and Heidegger, talking of our life world. We live with our body in the world, it is inseparable from us and a whole of past, present and future. He has restored the wholeness of body and soul, which were separated in our culture both by religion and by another French philosopher, Descartes, with his well known expression: *Cogito, ergo sum*. Merleau-Ponty's (1960) main philosophical question is: How can we understand that man is altogether body and altogether soul at the same time? If he is

correct, the question debated in these research fields is incorrectly formulated. The answer cannot be body *or* soul, but only both.

Merleau-Ponty speaks about several dichotomies; body and soul, inner and outer, nature and culture, and in all cases he wants to see them as a whole and to show us that the borders between them do not go where we believe they do. This has been seen in the conflicts described above. It is difficult in daily life to separate aspects of class, gender, ethnicity and generation, and easy to believe that they can be solved separately and give rise to separate values. They are all intertwined and impact upon each other.

The basis of conflict is power and how it is used. The adult generation have more power and therefore more responsibility, which includes a responsibility to reflect upon your own contribution to conflicts in the school context, to analyse them and to try to solve them without too much 'prestige thinking'. That the conflicts are taking place in a certain discourse, a racist discourse in our example, does not necessarily mean that this is the most powerful conflict here; it may well be that between adults and children, between girls and boys, between good or bad pupils or between different social classes are hidden by what is perceived as the dominant discourse.

Merleau-Ponty speaks for an openness in phenomenological approach. This open way of attending is useful for both researchers and practitioners: to be able to read the person or the situation without prejudice. It must be important for teachers to be able to listen - to the young people, to themselves and to the context around them. This may lead to a dialogue that gives the researcher unbiased material, helps the teacher to see her/his own values and gives the pupils experiences of democratically handled situations.

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