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Who? Why? What? How? : Didactic questions and becoming an active citizen

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Abstract

What might subject didactic considerations mean when working with children in preschool and early school years? Curricula and syllabuses lay stress on children's various experiences and understanding of what is to be studied. In order to better understand the needs of the individual child and groups of children. Studies like Comber (2001) emphasise the importance of teachers updating their knowledge about who the children are and the area they are living in. Studies like Bunar (2001); Runfors (2003); Lahdenperä (2004, 2006, 2008); Ljungberg (2005) and Skolverket (2005) shed light on and problematise childhood and adolescence in transition from a democratic and an intercultural perspective and as a starting point for work with children and young people. Findings from our literature review reporting the years 1995-2009 and from subject areas like Swedish, Mathematics, History, Science and Artistic subjects will be presented. The review is mainly based on doctoral theses, research articles and other research reviews. Active citizenship and citizenship education may have the potential to empower individuals and groups. However, our review shows that the question about who the child is, is set aside, and seems to have scarce relevance to what is to be studied and why. Instead, research from different areas show that how to plan and carry out the work comes to the fore in most cases.

Key words: *active, citizen, democracy, didactics*

This paper draws on some of the findings presented in a research review commissioned by the National Agency of Education, Sweden (Hartsmar & Jönsson, Skolverket 2010). In the following text, examples are given from contexts where learning and didactic questions in connection with teaching are discussed on a broad scale. Questions that concern the daily work of the education profession in teaching, learning within specific subject areas, questions of democracy, socialisation and communication and interplay are brought forward. The term "subject" is used in two ways. While in the ambit of school work the word generally denotes the traditional school subjects, "subject" is used with broader intent when we give examples of content that above all stem from the activities of the pre-school. We seek to highlight and discuss the relationship between the subject of learning and the object of learning, and the act of learning in time and space. Our examples are taken from areas of knowledge that touch on history, science, mathematics, and aesthetic learning processes. How do didactic questions relate to the continual changes of childhood and the surrounding society? Is the construction of identity in a multi-contextual childhood taken into account,

and are children encouraged to assume the role of active participants in an ever more complex society?

The Convention on the Rights of the Child puts high priority on “the unique needs of the individual child” and this influences how the needs of the child are reflected in the policy documents adopted for pre-schools and schools. We investigate amongst other things a discourse promoting homogeneity and normalisation and how the sections of the Swedish curriculum dealing with Christian tradition and western humanism relate to this. At the same time that pre-schools and schools are directed to respect cultural diversity, it is pointed out that the foundation of “the nurture of the individual’s concepts of justice, generosity, tolerance and responsibility” lies in “the ethics held in trust by Christian tradition and western humanism” (Lpo 94 [National Curriculum], pg 3). There is an internal inconsistency in these directions. What didactic implications are there in holding a singular western system of ethics when the educator must at the same time take into consideration the individual child’s experiences, interests and needs in cultural diversity? The exact significance of what it means to respect and understand other cultures and what exactly should be respected and understood is not discussed in the school curricula. Runfors (2006) investigates the possibility of uniting indisputable values with respect for cultural diversity, and concludes that cultural diversity is implicitly understood to be something a person bears with them as a sort of baggage.

In *De likeverdige. Om sosialisering og de jevnealdrendes [Of equal worth: On socialisation and peergroups]* (1994) Frønes illustrates how socialisation from one generation to another is described in terms of the transfer of culture and knowledge from the adult to the child, and that the child is objectivised in the process. Bringlöv (1996) also brings forward these contradictory signals and says that cultural heritage is written about as something pre-existing and not as something challenged by values and norms. Nurturing cultural diversity is therefore subordinated to the system of values, which is clear from the following quotation from the National Curriculum for the compulsory school, pre-school and after-school care, Lpo 94, (pg. 5)

The goal documents are both contradictory and explicit in that separate individuals and groups of children bear with them a variety of experience and needs, and that these should be focused on in the group of children in question.

The “who” of learning

Instead of talking about the experiences of children, the concepts of the *child perspective* and the *children’s perspective* are used. Gunilla Halldén (2003) discusses and problematizes the ambiguity of the concept of child perspective which ideologically has been afforded a large “rhetorical capacity” (pg 21). To assume a child perspective can be, in our interpretation, put on the same level as the curriculum’s directives and of the wider knowledge of society and conditions for growing up that Comber (2001) speaks of, and which, broadly speaking, have their basis not only in the various life-conditions, experiences and needs of children, but also

in listening to individual children and interpreting what they express in a discursive context. To allow the child's perspective to be expressed is to allow the individual child himself to express his experiences, intentions, interests, needs and opinions.

To say that one is interested in and relies on children's experiences can, in connection with the didactic "why" and "what" questions, mean different things in a qualitative sense. In the majority of the studies we have seen, the "why" question seems seldom to be asked regarding the activity under investigation and the "what" question often has the character of a given canon of content in the sense that one works with the things one has traditionally worked with for a given age group.

Annika Elm illustrates in her Licentiate thesis *Interaktion och naturvetenskap i en förskola och en förskoleklass* [Interaction and the natural sciences in a pre-school and a pre-school class] (2008) how only part of a child's experience is used by the teachers, and that the teacher's approach has negative consequences for the development of knowledge. Elm concludes with:

it becomes apparent who can interact with whom and how the patterns of interaction fall into routine between the participating children and teachers, which Green and Dixon (1994) discuss in terms of actual relationships that occur within institutionalized practise. (pg 92)

Another view of the importance of posing the didactic "who" question could have its starting point in the teacher asking why certain content is adequate for this particular child here and now. Who are the children? What experiences do they have: intentions, needs and interests? The answers can lead to less certainty about the object of learning being a given content that one has been accustomed to use with a certain age group.

The search for the culture that children adopt and that they create is central in Carina Fast's thesis *Sju barn lär sig läsa och skriva. Familjeliv och populärkultur i möte med förskola och skola* [Seven children learn to read and write. Family life and popular culture meet the pre-school and school] (2007). Fast's starting-point has been to observe that part of children's lives when they encounter written language in their daily lives. Starting with the children's different lives and conditions of life, Fast describes the child's path from the home when they are 4 years old until their encounter with the pre-school and school when they are 7 years of age. The children come from a variety of socio-cultural, economic and language backgrounds. The studies try to answer to what extent children in pre-school, reception classes and school may make use of the experiences they have gained through text-oriented activities in the home.

The results show that children, through their families – each with its language, culture, traditions and religion – are socialised into text-oriented activities in a number of ways. Fast was able to conclude that the children to a great extent and irrespective of their individual

life conditions seemed to use popular culture and other media as sources in acquiring written language.

When it comes to the school's task of – in accordance with the intentions outlined in Lpo94 – using the children's experiences as the starting point, Fast's investigation paints a dismal picture of what happens to some children when they start school. Fast follows them for a period of three years and notes that all seven have in various ways learned to read and are literate long before they have any formal teaching, and in areas where adults are not present. She points out that reading and writing occurs in all types of homes and not just in those with good access to books, and that children, irrespective of their backgrounds, become, as Bourdieu (1982/1999) would phrase it, members of a language commonwealth where their identities are formed. Children use the internet, play computer games and are familiar with the icons used in these, play with Pokémon cards, watch television, read calendars, toy catalogues etc.

When children enter the world of school some of them are, however, forced to leave behind them their experiences and along with them important aspects of their language commonwealth. Fast notes that children hide their Pokémon cards and catalogues from the teacher. It is obvious that the school in this way loses valuable knowledge about these children's experiences. We ask ourselves if this can be because the children's activities are at least partly included in what Barton (1994) calls domain-specific literacy activities, where advertisements and products like Pokémon are not usually termed "good culture" - and that one therefore cannot learn anything important from them. Fast writes, that "Children move among texts and artefacts that have a huge global audience, where the adults are often manoeuvred out" (pg 180). In the "language market" (Bourdieu 1982/1999) which belongs to the school, there are other starting points than the ones the children have via the text-world of popular culture.

In contrast to the picture of children hiding things that interest them from the teacher, we can consider the work of a pre-school - class 1 in a village school in the county of Skåne in Sweden. Gunnarsson Contassot (2003) documented five visits to a class and carried out an interview with the teacher. When the teacher meets the children as six year-olds, she maps out their media world through interviews that are recorded. During the four subsequent years, that the teacher and children are studied, the children's development is documented through regular interviews.

One day the class is engaged in the theme "I and we". The book "Bara på skoj" [Just for Fun] by Ann-Mari Falk has been chosen so that the children can express their perspectives on what it is like to function in a group. The work is introduced with the children drawing self-portraits and writing text about themselves. In "Bara på skoj" there is a reference to Noah's ark. The children's questions prompt the reading of this story for the group. This reading takes place on a mat on the classroom floor. The teacher reads and everyone looks at the pictures together. The children's associations to text and pictures lead further to the experiences of some of the children of the story of the Titanic catastrophe. It turns out that a

number of children have seen the film of the same name. During the story of Noah's ark, one boy makes a connection with the world of Pokémon which he says has a similar story to Noah sending out a dove to search for land. Later the same day, the children write or draw in their personal diaries. Several connect the story of Noah's ark with events concerning their own lives and one of the boys draws a picture of his great-grandfather's funeral. The teacher, says Contassot, (pg 20):

consciously introduces a voice from another time, a Biblical story. /.../Pokémon's popular fictive world seems to be full of references to classic Western cultural heritage; the Bible, ancient Greeks, etc. David (pupil) makes a lightning-fast inter-textual connection to an important element of the popular culture of his media frame of reference and contributes in this way with yet another voice: the incredible meeting of a Biblical story and one of the adult world's rather more suspect mass-media fictions.

In this case the school does not contribute to the socialisation of children in a static culture. The teacher accepts the text-world the children bring with them.

The why and what – content, canon and experiences

In the article "Varför historia? – Historiedidaktikens kärnfråga" [Why history?] – the central question for the didactics of history" Karlegård (in Marton ed 1986:137-151) asks the question "What are subject didactics?" He criticizes a general focus on what should be *taught and learned* and how this should be carried out. These questions become meaningful, Karlegård maintains, only when the question *why?* has been answered.

The debate about the school has to a large extent lacked focus on the question of content – that is to say what the pupils should read, write and converse *about*. The teacher's work is not discussed in the first place as a didactic weighing up of choices, but more like a technical carrying out of a political decision, where even pre-prescribed content and diagnoses, tests and evaluations control the work. Nor is it about who the pupils are, what experiences they have and what questions they ask about themselves, society, school, teaching and learning; or about the content of what they learn or the conditions under which that learning takes place (Bergöö 2009).

Carlgrén & Englund (1995:223) point out that it is not possible to separate the task of nurturing democracy from the task of knowledge either in the pre-school or the school. "The knowledge task is a part of the democratic task, and vice versa" writes Bergöö (2009:15). These aspects of discussion on content cannot be traced in our research review. Bergöö points out that "what the children create is neither used, investigated nor discussed", and maintains that the discussions on the didactic questions remain unasked "unless the how and why of teaching is given a strong connection to what – the question of the content of the teaching" (Bergöö 2009:20).

The tasks of identity, language, knowledge and democracy

The task of fostering democracy in pupils was first highlighted by Lgr 80 [Swedish national curriculum for the compulsory school] which directed that everyone should, as active citizens, be able to contribute to public debate. Lpo94 and the syllabuses brought forward in 2000 highlight dialogue and exposure to a variety of perspectives in often controversial questions. Arguments are to be borne by ethical consideration.

In order to be able to participate as an active citizen in an increasingly complicated society, one must have sufficient knowledge on a variety of topics to make competent decisions and solve problems that arise. The natural sciences have an important role to play in every individual's competence for action (Jensen & Schnack 2006).

Just as one can ask oneself "Why history?", and "Why science?", one can just as legitimately ask "Why aesthetic expression?". Lena Aulin-Gråhamn, Magnus Persson and Jan Thavenius discuss and problematize the place of aesthetic learning processes in teaching in *Skolan och den radikala estetiken [School and the radical aesthetic]* (2004). In answer to the question why, they bring forward the school and pre-school as a democratic public forum where children learn to express themselves and become participating in democratic principles at an early stage. By teaching children to use media early, the authors maintain that the school becomes a modern public forum. "In contrast to school book knowledge, art releases the uncertain, the unfinished, the contradictory and the numerous meanings of our knowledge" (pg 10).

The four schools that are included in Hartsmar's study (2001) were chosen so that they "could contribute a heterogeneous picture of school contexts from a socio-cultural perspective." (pg 124) Differences in school environments were expected to give qualitatively different answers to the didactic questions that were posed. Interviews reveal the differences in answers that can be given by children in socio-culturally heterogeneous school environments. While children in high-status environments generally look towards the future with confidence and speak of their own homes, families, jobs and travel, children in multi-cultural schools with lower status speak of unemployment and lack of income. At school, however, who the children are and what their life-conditions are have no significance, and no effect on the teaching carried out in the various schools.

Hilary Cooper (1995; 2000) contradicts many others in stating that even younger children can carry out quite advanced reasoning if they are allowed to tackle interesting tasks that relate to their own life-world, and if they are allowed to use their own experiences. Concepts such as cause and effect and change can, according to Cooper, be included in work even with pre-school children.

One group of four year olds was talking about changes in uses of electricity, changes in shops and so on. One of them comments that "I don't wear clothes like that because I am not in the olden days, but I've seen an old-fashioned car racing up the hill and I've seen it not in

the olden days”. Continuity and change; there is some very complicated thinking going on here. (<http://www.history.ac.uk/education/conference/cooper.html>)

In *Negotiating Critical Literacies with Young Children*, Vivian Maria Vasquez (2004) describes a project at a pre-school in Canada. Children of the ages of 3 – 5 years, together with their teacher, work on various social issues. Central to Vasquez’ work is the use of questions concerning justice and democratic perspectives in the critical investigation of everyday texts together with the children. It is the children’s initiative that decides the content, through the questions that arise during the large meeting that the child-group has. Natural science content also becomes a topic of work. All the children in the group know the rhyme “Baby Beluga” about a happy white whale that plays in the sea. The children then hear on TV that the whale is a species threatened by the polluted water off the coast of Canada. The children come to school and want to talk about this, and to ask questions. When Vasquez puts the children to work on authentic questions about the whale and what they have heard through the media, they discover that the rhyme they know so well does not reflect reality. The children analyze the text of the rhyme and from news items from a linguistic perspective: which words are used? How do we understand the words? What picture do they give of the whale’s life? The children’s questions give rise to further social issues. To conclude the pre-school year, the class and their teachers arrange a “research conference” on important questions they have dealt with during the year.

The how of learning – the question in focus

The *how* question can be applied to both how the teaching is built up and how the children or teacher considers a particular question. Our review shows that classroom studies, where the how-question is related to the activity and to the teaching, dominate. When the how-question dominates, the aim is usually to make the subject more attractive through the development of teaching methods that interest the children and encourage them to engage in the work. Children can often choose between a whole battery of methods. They are also often allowed to choose *the order* in which they want to do things.

Character-creation: a working method in an historical framework

Within history-didactic research, both Schüllerqvist (2006) and Rudnert (2010) take up research and development work on pedagogic activities at museums that focus on *how*. Rudnert gives a comprehensive report of numerous projects. In this text we would like to use a couple of examples to illustrate some of the conclusions reported in both overviews.

Amongst the pedagogic research on museum activities, there are studies that report “what is left” after projects that have had the form of “experience days” such as Middle Ages Week on Gotland and role-play exercises in museum environments with historical personages and events (Aronsson, Gerrevall & Larsson 2000; Aronsson & Larsson 2002). It is concluded that the didactic possibilities are not always utilized and that these activities therefore risk simply becoming just isolated, nice events. This becomes particularly obvious when the

projects do not include the possibility of allowing the children – for example through play and role-play to *experience* how they themselves would have felt if they really had been the person they played. When the activity goes no further than being a dressing-up game without a deeper aim than to see oneself in the clothes of a bygone era, the exercise leaves no lasting impression. Gustafsson (2002) is critical of “experience days” which are limited to the borrowing of props and asks the question “Are the children Viking children, or just children dressed-up?” (pg 131)

Summary

If the why-question continues to be restricted to a background position in our considerations, we further suggest that the who-question has the very weakest place. The policy documents are explicit in saying that individual children and groups of children bear with them a variety of experiences and needs and that these need to assume focus in the group in question. Documents like this place the child clearly in the foreground. Karlegård (1983) very early asked the question to what end – why – one should study history and further, place the focus on the subject of learning, *who*, that could be advantaged by such study. We ask ourselves, why are there so few educationalists and researchers who consider and clarify the question about *who*?

That which might at first glance seem to be an obvious choice of content can appear less so when the why and who questions are posed and answered. Similarly, the focus on how one carries out the work is less interesting if one has understood that all methods can fail if the content has been chosen only by tradition and which in itself only has peripheral relevance for the group of children one is working with.

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