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## **Life Skill Education and the challenge to care professionally**

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### ***Abstract***

*This paper focuses on Swedish secondary school teachers' experiences from working with Life Skill Education, and the risk of diminishing the teacher's role to educate in academic skills, by caring for and focusing on students' emotional well-being.*

**Keywords:** *Life Skill Education, Subject matter, teaching*

### **Introduction**

#### ***Background***

The field of tension between school's task to foster and care for the child, and the task to teach academic subject matter is by no means a new one. One of our most prominent educational theorists, John Dewey (2009), discussed the matter in the early 1900s. Currently, the questions raised in this field have been more accentuated due to a trend of increased interest in therapeutic questions. One specific phenomenon within this trend is the new activity of Life Skill Education in Swedish education.

Although without a national curriculum *Livskunskap*, Life Skill Education, (LSE), is a fairly new topic in Swedish compulsory schools. The question whether LSE should be a mandatory subject in school has been raised in the Swedish parliament, from various parties in various times. Different commercial actors have provided both work materials and courses within the field for teachers (Löf 2009, 2011).

Critical researchers have stressed the fact that new educational materials and therapeutic aims have made their way into school (Ecclestone & Hayes 2009). In Sweden, one manual based program has come to dominate the LSE-field. It is called "Socio-emotional Training" and aims to increase children's and young people's mental well-being. The program includes the five basic elements: self-awareness, managing feelings, empathy, motivation and social skills, and the manual contains various exercises. Teachers are encouraged to practice 60-90 minutes a week with their students. During these occasions, the students get to exercise how to handle strong emotions and to resist peer pressure (Kimber 2009). The theoretical foundations of SET are based on American Brain Research, stage theories of emotional intelligence, and on Antonovsky's theories of coherence between a person's inner and outer world (Skolverket 2009).

#### ***Aims of the Current Study***

Critical educational philosophers and sociologists have pointed out potential risks combined with socio-emotional training and therapeutic activities in education. This current study draws upon the potential risk of diminishing teachers' primary task to educate in academic skills, in favour of focusing mainly on self-esteem and emotional well-being of the student.

The questions are:

1. In what respect may LSE contribute to teachers' dual task to both educate and care for their students?
2. In what respect may LSE risk to overshadow teachers' task to educate in subject matters?

Discussing these questions may help to sketch some theoretical guidelines for teachers to care for their students' social and emotional well-being without losing their own professional role as teachers, and without neglecting the task to teach.

### **Method**

I have interviewed four secondary school teachers about their experiences from and thoughts about teaching Life Skill Education. The interviews lasted for about an hour each and were semi-structured, focusing LSE in a broad perspective. All four teachers mainly follow the program of Social- Emotional Training, described above. These are the interviewees:

*Beatrice* works as a secondary school teacher in social studies at *Lake School*. She is a trained SET-supervisor to her colleagues and the SET-program is used by all teachers at the school.

*Carl* is also a secondary school teacher in social studies at *Lake School* and he also is a trained SET-supervisor to his colleagues.

*Nina* works as a secondary school teacher in languages at *Oak School*. She is trained as a supervisor in SET, but is by choice no longer functioning as one. At *Oak School*, all teachers are supposed to use the SET-program although it may vary if they actually do.

*David* is a secondary school teacher in languages and a colleague to *Nina* at *Oak School*.

### **Theoretical perspectives**

#### ***The Loss of Knowledge and Subject Matter***

Frank Furedi (2009a, 2009b) is one of the most prominent critical sociologists scrutinizing contemporary education. He claims that today's pedagogy is more of a social than a knowledge-based project, arguing that there is "an influential lobby of policy-makers, pedagogues and school psychologists who are determined to redirect

schools from academic subjects towards the provision of skills and emotional education” (2009a, p. 20). Kathryn Ecclestone and Dennis Hayes (2009) are influenced by Furedi and describe the same trend as a direct threat to the democratic, liberating ambitions of education:

...we regard therapeutic education as profoundly anti-educational, arguing that whatever good intentions lie behind it, the effect is to abandon the liberating project of education. (Ecclestone & Hayes, 2009, p. xxii)

Ecclestone and Hayes (2009, p 153ff) claims that emotions can never take the place of subject knowledge in education. Nevertheless, emotions are always present, in relation to the subject and the activities of teaching and learning. They continue to emphasize that the phenomenon of therapeutic education ends up in avoidance of educational questions of what to teach. They see risks connected to the popular trend of developing cross-curriculum topics, with starting points in every day interests. The lost faith in classical disciplines seems, in their interpretation, to show a lost faith in students’ abilities to master the classical subjects. They argue that we cannot let modern ideas replace our intellectual disciplines.

The question raised here is, as I see it, twofold: on the one hand it is about what kind of knowledge we risk to lose due to a shifting focus in education, on the other hand it is about what school as an institution and teachers as professionals should be.

### *Ethics of Care— an Educational Philosophy*

Nel Noddings offers an educational model that in quite many senses seem to coincide with the educational aims of Life Skill Education. Noddings is also named by both Furedi (2009b p. 185) and Ecclestone (2007, p. 467) as a representative for the unfortunate “happiness project” in education. Her work is therefore interesting to look into in relation to the issues of the present text.

Noddings claims that we live in “an age troubled by social problems” (2003 p. 173). A traditional organization of school isn’t the right way of handling the challenges we now face in education. Instead of just focusing measurable results, which is a general trend of today, school should work with educational goals that provide for happiness and fulfilled lives.

According to Noddings, the teacher has a holistic responsibility for his or her students’ personal development (cf 2003, 2005). The teacher guides the students in intellectual, domestic and existential questions (2005). Noddings mentions topics such as “making a home” and “birth and child upbringing” as crucial for education to touch upon, and welcomes what she calls “character education” (2003 p. 157).

The relationship between the teacher and the student is central to Noddings, taking her point of departure in the ethical perspective of care (cf. Noddings 2005, p. 91). Noddings therefore suggests qualities desirable in relations as desirable also as educational goals. Self-esteem is one of them. Besides happiness, it should be an educational goal,

especially in liberal democracies where people need a strong sense of their own worth. Other desirable qualities are mentioned as Noddings defines what we should look for when evaluating education:

...we should look for the positive signs we see in healthy family life: happy, healthy children; cooperative and considerate behaviour; competence in the ordinary affairs of life; intellectual curiosity; openness and willingness to share; a confessed interest in existential questions; and a growing capacity to contribute to and thrive in intimate relationships. (Noddings, 2005, s 109)

David T. Hansen (2007) is also interested in the relationship between the teacher and the student. He asks what kind of relationship teachers should develop to their students, how close it should be, and what distinguishes teachers' work– and relationships– from the work and relations of other professionals. *Moral* and *intellectual* attentiveness are mentioned as two qualities which distinguishes the student-teacher relationship from other types of relationships.

### **Analysis: Subject Knowledge, Caring for Students, and Life Skill Education**

#### ***Protecting the Academic Subject Matter***

Nina does not approve of the new phenomenon of LSE. When she considers the teacher task to foster and care for students, she feels that her ordinary lessons in language, together with the many meetings that occur in the corridor during breaks, are satisfying platforms. However, the specific lessons in LSE are, she claims, transforming her teacher role into something else, something that she can't handle with her own professional competence.

It is like playing a therapist... to take care of children who aren't... It's not a teacher's job.

Nina asks me, during our interview, what drives those teachers who appreciate LSE. The way in which she puts her question emphasizes her own skeptical view:

What is it that they think is so good with this? /.../ Is it that they don't have to be teachers? Is it that they can pet the students...socially?

When Nina is asked to describe her most important mission as a teacher, she says:

...that the students gain as much knowledge as possible, and that they have the courage to use it /.../ Courage to write and express oneself. You need courage to do that /.../ It is an important task to give it to them.

David is, like Nina, skeptical towards LSE as a new subject in school. He feels that the issues discussed within LSE are the same issues as teacher deals with every day, but without calling it a subject. "To make up a subject felt strained". During the interview, David tries to find ways of placing the goals of LSE within an already existing subject,

which in turn would create opportunities for certain teachers to become qualified to handle this special field of interests. A suggestion made from David is Drama. Nina also mentioned Drama as a possible way of including LSE in a legitimate school subject.

Both David and Nina confirm to some extent the concerns of the critics when expressing a current trend of repressing the focus on academic subject knowledge in schools. The subjects and the subject teacher identity are threatened by the increased focus on emotional care, manifested through the activity of LSE. David and Nina also claim their respective subjects to be sufficient as platforms for their own professional caring task. Nevertheless, they both search for other, alternative platforms for fulfilling the aims of LSE within another, already established subject.

An interpretation of both Hansen and Noddings is that the everyday activities in education should provide room for the development of the specific kind of relationship between teacher and student. In that sense both Nina and David are in line with Hansen and Noddings when claiming that caring for students should not be a separate activity but rather embedded in the everyday school activities. However, their attempts to place the issues of LSE within another subject aren't compatible with neither Noddings's nor Hansen's views upon the special relationship between teacher and student. This relationship is, according to both Noddings and Hansen, unique for the educational practice, and cannot entirely be reduced to an arena of a special subject matter. Nor can certain types of trained teachers take care of this area, since all teachers are involved in this very specific relationship to their students (cf. Noddings 2005, Hansen 2007).

In Noddings's writings, the teacher "receives and accepts the student's feelings towards the subject matter; she looks and listens through his eyes and ears" (Noddings 1986, p. 177) The receiving of the students is about understanding not the student, as an object, but to understand the subject matter, through the students' ways of thinking. The relationship is, in my interpretation of Noddings's viewpoint, very close and the feelings are in the centre of attention. However, and importantly, the feelings of the student are *not* the object of attention. Noddings writes: "The school- in particular, need not- because it is educational institution and thus committed to fostering ethicality- abdicate its essential responsibility to train the intellect. This notion is pernicious and silly". (Noddings 1986, p. 173).

### ***Self-esteem should be separated from academic achievements***

Carl is very positive towards LSE as a topic and as a general approach in educational contexts. He talks about how it has changed his views upon learning. The mental tools used in the program helps "not only for them to feel good, feel safe and calm, but also to improve their ability to learn things". He talks about good social relations to students as "factors of success". When referring to colleagues who don't wish to work with LSE, their approaches to their own subjects is mentioned as crucial factors. Carl gives an example of what they might say when marking distance from LSE: "I became a math teacher to work with mathematics".

Carl's own approach is "relation before lesson", and one crucial goal as a teacher is to "...make them [the students] see that they are talented in many ways even if they have failed in every subject".

The aim to separate self-esteem from academic achievements seems to be a central goal in Carl's practice as a teacher. This could, speaking to Smeyers, Smith and Standish (2007), be a problematic notion. Referring to Nozick's investigation of self-esteem, Smeyers, Smith and Standish concludes that self-esteem "is essentially competitive: we cannot evaluate our own standing separately from that of others" (p 19). This conclusion is in conflict with a notion of self-esteem as something that can be achieved without comparing oneself to others, strengthening the "idea that the development of self-esteem is connected with turning away from the world" (p 19). Another relevant critique in the matter is presented by Ecclestone, who is in controversy with Noddings since Noddings, according to Ecclestone, argues that students with difficulties in cognitive skills should be allowed to develop other skills, which in turn would keep their self-esteem intact. Instead, Ecclestone argues that teachers should encourage educational "risks, challenge and discomfort as part of striving for autonomy" (2007, p. 467).

### *Emotional well-being as a condition for learning*

Beatrice is, like Carl, very positive and committed to the work of LSE. When she talks about her mission as a teacher, she emphasizes the relationship between the teacher and the student, and the ability to influence the students as human beings. An important part of learning something is to get to know myself. In Beatrice's interpretation, self-esteem and emotional well-being seem to be a condition for learning. She says:

Because often you remember.... Well, the facts are gone, but you remember the feeling, how you succeeded in school, if you were good, bad or in the middle. You remember that. And if you can, as a teacher, influence the students to think good about themselves and find their strengths /.../ , then I believe you have reached quite far.

Understanding emotional well-being as a condition for learning can be a good argument for the need of socio-emotional training in school. It is, after all, a condition for learning subjects and therefore not a threat to subjects. Nevertheless, there are other ways of understanding this type of argumentation. Ecclestone (2007) strongly criticizes what she interprets as a current tendency to interpret almost all human experience as potentially emotionally damaging. Seeing ourselves –and students- as vulnerable and in need for protection can be a hinder not just for students to learn, but also for teachers to teach. This is especially worrisome since certain groups of students are regarded as more vulnerable than others.

Beatrice continues to develop her thought concerning helping students find their strengths. She says that

...it is all about giving them a positive time in school. Because, no matter what, I believe that a positive schooling is something you carry with you your whole life. The same thing goes for a negative schooling, it reflects on everything.

Both the critics (cf Smeyers et al. 2007) and the care oriented educational philosophy of Noddings points out that self-esteem shouldn't be a single, unilaterally focused goal in education. Although self-esteem is emphasized as an educational goal in the writings of Nel Noddings, "it has to be nurtured indirectly" (2005, p 183). Self-esteem is not possible to treat as "a learning objective", instead we should find those conditions that nourish self-esteem in the students. Doing so takes time and devotion, and Noddings puts a great emphasis on the relations and connections between the teacher and the students (Noddings 2003). The learning object is, thus, still an unconditional focus in school, speaking to Noddings, but it is placed within the very close and special relationship between teacher and student. Becoming a teacher is to enter, not a role as someone caring, but a special relation based on caring about the students (Noddings 1986, p. 175ff).

### **Concluding remarks**

The very idea of "traditional school" may still make us think of a subject oriented, knowledge based institution, colored by a never failing respect for the teacher as an authority with the right to judge right from wrong. This traditional image of teaching may have a revival in times of competition and market orientation in society. When comparing educational standards internationally, politicians and other parties of interest, tend to wish for more methods of measurement, quality check-ups and traditional thinking in school (Noddings 2005 p xx, Irisdatter 2010). These two discourses, the traditional one and the more market oriented one, can be understood as two separate ways of thinking and valuing educational aims. They may also be combined in an antithesis to a more caring- and student-oriented philosophy of education (cf. Nodding 2005). While some critics pay attention to the risks of a result- oriented school, others have put an emphasis on the risks of a non-intellectual, therapeutic oriented school discourse which is said to be on the front marching in a commercialized, superficial societal mentality.

The consequences may be a narrow-minded choice between two extremes: one which is occupied with nothing but caring for the students' emotional states, and one that pay attention to nothing but measurable academic results. An attempt to formulate a balanced way of handling the issues raised in LSE needs to be done. Some aspects have been brought up in the analysis above. They can be summed up as follows:

Some of the issues in LSE, for example working on students' self-esteem and emotional well-being, can be seen as crucial aspects of teaching. If the teacher-student-relation is built upon a genuine care for students, and the teacher has both moral and intellectual attention towards the student, it is doubtful if any special subject of care is required. Both the critics (Furedi, Ecclestone and Hayes) and the proponents of a caring approach in education (Noddings and Hansen), argue that the teacher-student relationship is based on a common attention to a subject matter and not a direct attention to the life situation of the student.

The aim to give the students a sense of self-esteem regardless of academic achievements seems to be a central line of thought within LSE. Critics of what sometimes is referred to as a “self-esteem movement” in education, claims that this can lead to an inward turn, making young people introvert and uninterested in other people (cf. Smeyers, Smith, Standish 2007). Noddings, on the other hand, emphasizes the goal of letting the child know his or her value as a person, regardless of academic result. She writes that the student “must be aware of always that for me he is more important, more valuable than the subject” (Noddings 1986, p. 174). This statement is consistent with the approach expressed by Carl when he says “relation before lesson”. Nevertheless, a potential risk worth taking seriously is the risk of defining groups of students as not ready or able to learn until they have come to terms with their emotional vulnerability (Ecclestone 2007). This is, in my interpretation, due to a lack of faith in the possibility to feel good about learning something, regardless of other problems in life.

The care for students can be understood as the core of teaching, although this care is expressed and practiced within a special, pedagogical relation and with a subject matter (widely speaking) as a clear object of focus. To care for the student means receiving the student, his or her feelings towards and notions of the subject matter (Noddings 1986, p 176ff). This statement, together with the statement referred to above, saying that self-esteem should not be an objective in itself, indicates that Noddings at all times presumes that there is a substantial object of content in focus, that is, a subject matter.

This point of view is enhanced by Hansen, putting the intellectual attentiveness, combined with the moral ditto, in the centre of the student-teacher-relationship. According to Hansen (2007), teaching is a unique practise, and we need to distinguish the specific aims of this practise. The teacher-student relationship is not a lesser or more distanced relationship than for example relations with a friend or a counselor, but simply another type of relationship with a specific goal to “place both intellectual and moral development at its center” (p.352). When identifying the general aim of teaching as “drawing or guiding students into new intellectual and moral terrain”, Hansen helps to outline two crucial qualities for teachers to develop: *intellectual* and *moral* attentiveness towards the student. The first focuses how students understand a special subject matter. The second focus partly on the characteristic of the student, partly on the teacher’s own “regard for and treatment of the student” (p 354). Hansen points out that this does not indicate a non-intellectual or anti-intellectual position, a position he names as “sentimental”. With that said, the two educational theorist who put care in the centre of their educational philosophy, seem to do so without compromising with subject knowledge, nor advocate a intimate relationship that changes the teacher profession into the one of a counselor or therapist or the student role into the role of a patient.

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