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CiCe
Institute for Policy Studies in Education
London Metropolitan University
166 – 220 Holloway Road
London N7 8DB
UK

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How much is a smile? 15 year-old Swedish pupils' view of solidarity and responsibility

*Bodil Liljefors Persson and Rune Jönsson
Malmö University, Teacher Education (Sweden)*

Part of the national Evaluation of the Compulsory School conducted by the Swedish Ministry of Education in 2003 deals with Religious Education, Ethics and Issues concerning life and its interpretation, called *What is right?* Pupils also got a questionnaire concerning attitudes to school issues in the broad perspective, as well as more specific questions about topics such as their views on immigrants and their religions. In total about 1,800 pupils in grade 9 answered the questions about Religious Education.

In constructing these questions for *What is right?* the starting point was the National Curriculum for Compulsory Schools (from 1994) and the Syllabus in Religious Education (from 2000) (Utbildningsdepartementet 1994, Skolverket 2000). In both these documents are central texts that emphasise that the basic principle for all public schools is democracy. Fundamental values such as the intrinsic value of each person, freedom and integrity of the individual, gender equality, solidarity and support for the weak are the basic guidelines for all work at school. Some of the exercises were also conducted in a National Evaluations in 1992 and 1995, which gives us the opportunity to compare these results with 2003. (Skolverket 1992, Skolverket 1995). We also made the assumption that multiculturalism was more established in Sweden in 2003 than it had been in the 1990s.

The Syllabus for Religious Education from 2000 deals with issues concerning life and its interpretation, ethics, belief and tradition. The questionnaires are based on these issues with exercises that focus on life vital questions, knowledge-based questions concerning world religions and traditions and ethical dilemmas.

This paper presents some of the results from this study. First we will focus on ethical dilemmas in which questions of solidarity and responsibility are at stake but some of the results of the other exercises will also be commented on. Secondly, this paper highlights the pupils' own demands for Religious Education.

Ethical dilemmas

Pupils were given five ethical dilemmas, in each of which they had the opportunity to argue and comment on different solutions in order to illuminate the pupils' way of thinking. It is possible to see the extent of their obedience to formal laws, and under which circumstances they consider it proper to break a law or a rule. It is thus possible to evaluate how far their solidarity reaches. The fifth dilemma (about man's right to use animals in medical research) is not relevant in this context and therefore will not be commented on in this paper (Jönsson and Liljefors Persson 2005).

Two of the dilemmas concern everyday life at school. In the first exercise pupils judge a situation in which a classmate cheats in a test to keep a high mark. They have to choose between four different attitudes. A small majority argue that it is wrong to cheat, 15% because it is against the law and the rules of the school, and 40% because it is not fair with respect to those who have worked for their grades, but did not succeed. 30% of the pupils consider it right to cheat, arguing that the result is important for their future life. 15% of the pupils do not think that it is a problem, arguing that 'everyone cheats'.

In their comments, about 50% of the pupils write that they would not care if a classmate cheats, many arguing that it is one's own business. However, many pupils write that cheating is a stupid choice, because in the long run you will lose. About 20% – twice as many girls as boys – say that they would talk with those who cheat afterwards, some would even try to get him or her to confess. Only 5% of the pupils say that they would talk with the teacher about it. It is clear that they are loyal to their classmates, even though it is also clear that there is a negative attitude against pupils that take advantage in an unjust way.

The second exercise that focuses on school is about a teacher who gives a great deal of time to a pupil with special needs. The majority of the pupils, almost 60%, consider it right to do so and only 20% consider it completely wrong and unfair. A comparison between this result and the results from the NE 1992 survey shows that almost the same number considers it wrong, but more pupils hesitate in 2003, and do not want to choose side. Maybe this is an indication that the climate in classrooms is getting tougher.

Other exercises show more clearly the limits of solidarity. On the question 'what to do if you are given too much change in a shop', 67% of the pupils say that they would keep the money. If the shop assistant has an unpleasant attitude, or if the shop is a distance from your own neighbourhood and you are only passing through, a further 10% would keep the money.

In their explanations only 5%, mostly girls, empathise with the shop assistant, while 15% put all the blame on the shop assistant and regard themselves innocent. 20%, mostly boys, argue that one will never say no to getting money. 19% declare that they are 'honest people' and would have had a bad conscience if they kept the money. On the whole it is clear that the majority would keep the money, and they do not care about the consequences. Comparing the result with 1995 there are small differences. Then also more girls than boys said that they would hand the extra money back, but the number has risen from 8% in 1995 to 17%, and more pupils than in 1995 say that they would pay back to the unsympathetic or anonymous shop assistant. We also find statements that emphasize the personal relation more than the economical gain; *'A smile from the shop assistant is more precious than 2 Euros'*.

The fourth exercise offers another wider perspective on solidarity. The investigations on moral development by Lawrence Kohlberg asked if it is just to break in and steal an expensive medicine that you cannot afford, if your wife's life depends on it. (Kohlberg 1969). According to Kohlberg, this example shows whether you take a legalistic point of view or if you consider that sometimes it is morally correct to break a law. In our exercise, the pupils also have to decide if it is righteous to steal if you are able to save the life of an old relative, a foreigner or a child. They also have the opportunity to write down their arguments. We wanted to see how far the pupil's sense of solidarity reached. As many as 71% of the pupils said that it is right to steal the medicine to save the wife. They also declare that life is more important than money and that medicine ought to be free for everybody. To steal in order to save an old relative is accepted by 57%, and when it comes to saving the life of a foreigner 41% still accept stealing. There is but a small difference comparing with the results with 1995 about stealing for the benefit of the wife, but the proportion of pupils showing solidarity with a foreigner has changed from 47% in 1995 to 41% in 2003. This may indicate a weaker sense of solidarity with 'the other'. On saving a child, as much as 83% declare that it would be right to steal. On this more girls than

boys show acceptance (88% versus 78%). In the other examples there is no difference between boys and girls, and this differs from 1995, when more girls than boys accepted stealing for the benefit of the wife.

About 30% of the pupils give no arguments for their decision, but the majority give extensive commentaries. We find that 25% declare that life is more precious than money and law, and 15% stress love as the most important argument for their choice. On the other hand 15% declare that it is important not to break the law and in their arguments stress it is important for society to uphold the law. 10% blame everything on the pharmacist, arguing he is greedy, and finally 2% discusses the situation from the pharmacist's point of view and his right to benefit from his work.

Most of the pupils show that they realise the ethical dimension in the dilemmas, and most argue on the basis of democratic and fundamental values. But there are minor differences comparing with the surveys of 1992 and 1995. The proportion of pupils who base their arguments on the idea of equal value of people are now less than in the 1990s, and they also show a higher degree of hesitation, and focus more on personal gain. There is less difference between boys and girls now than in 1992. The girls' arguments are now based less on solidarity and honesty, while the boys use this kind of argument to a greater extent.

Questionnaire on attitudes

About 1,200 pupils answered a questionnaire that focused on immigration, formal obedience to the law and solidarity. Here 90% consider it fairly important or very important to follow the law, but 59% state that one should be able to break the law follow one's conscience. This should be compared with the 70% who consider it ethically right to steal medicine for a family member. Only 15% refers to obeying the law in the dilemma about cheating for higher grades and only 33% would pay back the money when they got too much from the shop assistant. We see here that there is a great difference between their general view of obeying the law and the way they act in concrete situations.

Another part of this questionnaire dealt with immigrants, their culture and religion. 39% of the pupils agree with the statement that 'immigrants have dangerous religions'. 37% of the pupils agree with the statement that 'immigrants should not be allowed to conduct their religion in Sweden'. This can be compared with another part of the national evaluation that focused on knowledge and facts about major religious festivals in world religions, where pupils in general show a lesser degree of knowledge and understanding of the importance of religion for the individual. It seems clear that teaching in schools has not reached the goals formulated in the syllabus for Religious Education.

A third group of questions deals with attitudes to immigrants as a whole, and a large group of pupils, between 40% and 50%, show sympathy with statements that there are too many immigrants in Sweden, that immigrants won't work, that they are too expensive for society or that they take dwelling places from youngsters. As a counterpart to this xenophobic group, there is a majority of between 70% and 80% who say that it is important to show solidarity with people in need and that it is important that Sweden has the opportunity to help them. 60% state that it is important to work for human rights or that they would consider to join an organisation that works against racism and xenophobia. Almost two-thirds of pupils see immigration in Sweden as a positive, arguing that it brings new culture and new labour to Sweden. Also, 50% state that immigrants ought to get help to keep their national culture and traditions.

The syllabus and the demands of the pupils

The syllabus for Religious Education in Swedish compulsory school contains aims that are based on and develops the fundamental values that are also formulated as the guideline for school.

The subject contributes to an understanding of traditions and cultures, and thus provides a foundation for confronting xenophobia, as well as developing pupils respect for tolerance.

One aim of the subject is to increase the ethical awareness of pupils and thus create preparedness for action with regard to democratic, environmental, gender equality and peace issues.

These aims are also fundamental for teaching citizenship in an international society: the results from NE03 show that a rather large group of pupils do not reach these goals.

Pupils were asked questions about the subject of Religious education. They were given the opportunity to state what they thought the subject had focused on, and what they wanted it to focus on. Their expectations did not differ from the aim of the syllabus, but in many cases they wanted more than they had got from school. They say that they had been working on belief in different religions and they regarded that as important. But they wanted more of subjects like ethics, democracy, living in multicultural societies and causes of societal change. They also wanted more about environmental questions and about other cultures.

The part of the investigation that deals with vital life questions shows that although between 80% and 90% of the pupils say that the meaning of life is to 'be happy' or 'lead a good life now', 50% also suggest 'living for others'. The subjects they most want to discuss are the meaning of life, love, war, future and death.

Concluding remarks

The investigation indicates a great deal of ignorance concerning more personal attitudes to religion and pupils' solidarity does not reach very far. It shows a lack of consistency, and contradictions, between pupils stated values and their choices in simulated situations. We find wide gaps between pupils who value social relations and those who value economical gain. More boys than girls give the answer 'don't know', or give no answer, and girls show more compassion towards small children and animals, but the differences in their judgments are less than in earlier investigations.

The investigation also shows the need to discuss ethics and solidarity in terms of interest in the people they meet and interest in other peoples. This demands a great deal of knowledge about cultures, values and what is considered meaningful to different people. The subject Religious education in the Swedish compulsory school can and should be an arena for this meeting – a room of negotiation – between people with experiences from different religions and cultures, and between different ideas and arguments. Generalised statements about people, groups of people or cultures must be questioned and should be the starting point for further studies. Many pupils also show a positive attitude to others and a want to learn more. They also wished for more teaching about subjects like ethics, democracy, living in multicultural societies and causes of societal change. These demands from the pupils also have full support in the National Curriculum for Religious Education

and they are indeed important in the strive for teaching citizenship in the multi-cultural and multi-faith classrooms in Sweden – and in Europe – of today.

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