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## The lack of professional knowledge in values education

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## ABSTRACT

The aim of this study is to investigate teachers' perceptions of their practice of values education, and to explore their degree of professionalism in this matter. Qualitative interviews with 13 teachers have been conducted and analysed by a comparative analysis. According to their view, values education is (a) most often reactive and unplanned, (b) embedded in everyday school life with a focus on students' everyday behaviour in school, and (c) partly or mostly unconsciously performed. Furthermore, professional knowledge appears to be missing in the domain of values education among these teachers.

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## 1. Introduction

According to Macdonald (1977), there are two fundamental value questions that curriculum writers and educators have to deal with: (a) what is the meaning of human life? (b) and how shall we live together? He also argues that questions as what is a good society, what is a good life, and what is a good person are a critical part of curriculum. *Values education* is about an introduction into values and morality, to give young people knowledge of this domain about relating to other people, together with the ability to apply the values and rules intelligently, and to have the settled disposition to do so (Aspin, 2000). According to Taylor (1994) "values education, in its various forms, encourages reflection on choices, exploration of opportunities and commitment to responsibilities, and for the individual in society, to develop values preferences and an orientation to guide attitudes and behaviour" (p. 3). Taylor uses the term values education as an overarching concept including terms such as moral education, civic education, and citizenship education.

## 2. Values education in Sweden

Moral education has been part of the school curriculum since the first school started in Sweden. The teaching of Christian beliefs as well as moral values from a patriarchal perspective was the core content of the curriculum for the masses during the 19th century. Nevertheless, at the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century the influence of the Church on the Swedish school system gradually decreased. Especially after the Second World War, progressive ideals of democracy and democratic education as well as scientific ideals of rationality and objectivity challenged the traditionally moral values indoctrination in Swedish schools. The ultimate aims became the realisation of the political ideas of democracy, equality, and justice (Kärrby, 1978; Orlenius, 2001; Svingby, 1994). According to their current official curriculum policy document (Skolverket, 1998), primary schools in Sweden today have the task of forming, mediating, and firmly establishing democratic values and norms in their students. Schools should strive to let all students develop skills to make and verbalise ethical decisions, to respect the human dignity of others, to oppose and counteract offensive treatment of others, and to help others. Students should develop the ability to

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empathise with others and the disposition to act in the best interests of others. However, schools in Sweden do not teach values or moral education as a specific subject. Instead values education is more or less integrated in other teaching subjects, especially social studies and religion, but even in subjects such as history and physical education. Furthermore, a national report indicates that teachers undertake values education through conversations of many forms: formulating and implementing common school rules, trying to create a good social climate, handling conflicts between students, working against bullying, and so on (Skolverket, 1999). Nevertheless, survey studies in Sweden indicate that teachers receive poor training in values education in their teacher education (Bergdahl, 2006; Frånberg, 2004, 2006).

### 3. Teacher professionalism

According to Colnerud and Granström (2002), there are four characteristics that most professionalism researchers attribute to the academic higher-status professions. The first characteristic is *systematic theory*, which means that the profession is conducted from a view of a common scientific knowledge base. The professional has acquired a professional language containing concepts and most of all scientific theories and conceptions of the content and practice of the profession. The second characteristic is *authority*, i.e., the members of the profession have acquired a public and formal legitimatisation (e.g., doctors and psychologists). The third characteristic is *professional autonomy*, which refers to the professionals' right and responsibility to decide by themselves which tools and methods they will use in their practice. For example, a school principal cannot make the decision regarding which test a school psychologist should use in a particular case. The fourth characteristic is *self-governed professional ethics*, i.e., the professional group has developed ethical guidelines or principles regarding the professional practice. In the light of these four characteristics, Colnerud and Granström (2002) conclude that the group of teachers is yet not an academic higher-status profession in a strict sense, but rather semi-professional. Most of all, teachers lack a scientific common knowledge base, and in the daily practice, if they get ill, they can temporarily be replaced by substitutes without teacher training (in contrast to professionals such as doctors and psychologists). A professional language is a *meta-language*, i.e., a language that helps the professionals to reflect upon their practice and to make predictions and theoretical descriptions and explanations regarding their practice. A non-professional uses very little or no meta-language at all. Instead, s/he uses an *everyday language* as a working tool, which results in a more unconscious, intuitive, and routinised occupation role. Everyday language starts from concrete incidents and feelings instead of concepts and knowledge from educational philosophy, educational psychology, sociology of education, social psychology, and so on. According to Colnerud and Granström (2002), both meta-language and everyday language are required if a professional will do a good job.

### 4. The aim of the study

Values are expressed in the way teachers organise and manage classroom activity, in the way teachers present, value, and choose educational content, in what teachers choose to permit or encourage in the classroom, in their teacher style, disciplinary procedures, attitudes, treatment of and relations to the students, and in how they relate to school rules, etc. (e.g., Buzzelli & Johnston, 2001; Gudmundsdottir, 1990; Jackson, Boostrom, & Hansen, 1993). According to Halstead (1996), the values expressed in school are not fully explored or articulated, at least partly because these values are deeply embedded in school and in teachers' taken-for-granted world view, and because teachers have to make so many day-to-day decisions in the classroom without any further reflection. Very little research has been conducted in order to examine values education in the view of the teachers (for exceptions, see Powney et al., 1995; Stephenson, Ling, Burman, & Cooper, 1998). The aim of this study is to investigate teachers' perceptions of their practice of values education, and to explore their degree of professionalism in this matter.

### 5. Method

This interview study is part of a larger ethnographic research project on values and norms in the everyday life at school conducted in two primary schools in Sweden (a K-9 school and a K-6 school). The data for this paper are derived from individual qualitative interviews with 13 teachers. The interviews ranged in duration from 40 to 90 min. Of the 13 participants, 10 were women and three were men. Twelve of them were qualified teachers; one was not ("Torbjörn"). Three of the 12 were preschool (kindergarten) teachers, five were primary teachers, three were recreation instructors (a particular teacher category in Sweden, working both in classroom settings and in after-school centres), and one was a music teacher. The 13th teacher (who was not a qualified teacher) worked mostly as a physical education teacher, but also as a teacher in religious education in one of the six classes involved in the study. The interviews were recorded on a portable mini-disc recorder. The analysis procedure was inspired by grounded theory (e.g., Strauss & Corbin, 1998) but with a greater emphasis on abductive processes and more open to inspiration from established theoretical concepts and other research (cf., Kelle, 2005; Willis & Trondman, 2000).

### 6. The main focus on students' behaviour and personality

During the interviews, when teachers talk about values that they think are important to teach their students, they usually talk about values in terms of (a) behaviour and rules/norms (how to behave), and (b) personality and character (how to be as a person).

Those small simple things in everyday life. How to behave. How to conduct oneself in relation to other people. We work a lot with these issues. And you can

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