



<http://www.diva-portal.org>

This is the published version of a paper published in *Education 3-13*.

Citation for the original published paper (version of record):

Lilja, A., Franck, O., Osbeck, C., Sporre, K. (2018)

Ethical competence: a comparison between the Swedish and the Icelandic curricula and some teachers' views

Education 3-13, 46(5): 506-516

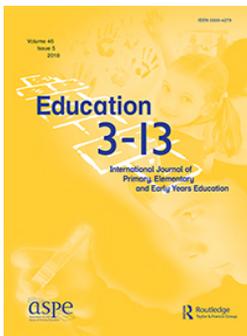
<https://doi.org/10.1080/03004279.2017.1284249>

Access to the published version may require subscription.

N.B. When citing this work, cite the original published paper.

Permanent link to this version:

<http://urn.kb.se/resolve?urn=urn:nbn:se:umu:diva-131726>



Ethical competence – a comparison between the Swedish and the Icelandic curricula and some teachers' views

Annika Lilja, Olof Franck, Christina Osbeck & Karin Sporre

To cite this article: Annika Lilja, Olof Franck, Christina Osbeck & Karin Sporre (2018) Ethical competence – a comparison between the Swedish and the Icelandic curricula and some teachers' views, *Education 3-13*, 46:5, 506-516, DOI: [10.1080/03004279.2017.1284249](https://doi.org/10.1080/03004279.2017.1284249)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/03004279.2017.1284249>



© 2017 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group



Published online: 14 Feb 2017.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 791



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

Ethical competence – a comparison between the Swedish and the Icelandic curricula and some teachers' views

Annika Lilja^a, Olof Franck^a, Christina Osbeck ^a and Karin Sporre^b

^aDepartment of Pedagogical, Curricular and Professional Studies, University of Gothenburg, Gothenburg, Sweden;

^bDepartment of Applied Educational Science, Umeå, Sweden

ABSTRACT

The aim of this article is to highlight some conceptions of ethical competence identified in interviews with teachers in religious education in Sweden, and within analyses of policy documents in a Swedish and an Icelandic educational context. As a starting point we take seven interviewed teachers' comments about what they view as important ethical competences for their pupils to have. A comparative analysis of Swedish and Icelandic policy documents with regard to the conceptual understandings of ethical competence is made, as well as a comparison between the policy documents and teachers' comments. The Icelandic curriculum is chosen because it differs from the Swedish one in a sense relevant to an analysis of the teacher interviews. The analyses imply a tension between theoretical and analytical conceptions of ethical competence and an action competence. Finally, some possible threads to consider in developing a broadened and deepened understanding of ethical competence are outlined.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 3 November 2016

Accepted 13 January 2017

KEYWORDS

Ethical competence; RE; policy documents; teacher interviews

Introduction

Why should children participate in ethics education and what ethical competences should they develop? These questions are interesting since teachers in the Swedish compulsory school have a commission to develop childrens' ethical values, but also to assess their ethical competences. In this article, we will investigate answers to this question given by some experienced Swedish teachers of religious education (RE). We will also investigate the answers given in the Swedish curriculum for compulsory school and in order to broaden the analysis, we will also make a short comparison with relevant descriptions in the Icelandic curriculum, since this signals a difference from the Swedish one at some crucial parts. Our purpose is accordingly to deepen the understanding of ethical competences that are considered to be important by teachers and policy-makers.

One answer that Orlenius (2010) gives is that young people need help in order to understand and act in accordance with fundamental norms and values, to be able to live as active moral subjects in a society where equity and respect characterise a – democratic – community. This answer could be interpreted in various ways, depending on where the focus in ethics education is located. One focus has been suggested by the Norwegian–Swedish philosopher Harald Ofstad when emphasising the development of the ability to be 'morally observant' as one main reason for engaging in moral issues (Ofstad 1990). According to this approach, pupils, as well as their teachers, have to practise

CONTACT Annika Lilja  annika.lilja@ped.gu.se

© 2017 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group
This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way.

being observant of when any fellow human is discriminated against, is excluded, is involuntary alone or is being ill-treated in other ways.

Such a focus captures an ethical core identifiable within many other relevant approaches that could be used as bases for strategic elaborations of ethics education. One approach is represented by Nel Noddings and her distinguished work on ethics, on care and on caring relations and encounters in education (2003, 2005). A related approach has been presented by the Polish–Swedish psychoanalyst Ludvig Igra, where he stresses that the ability to care and to be compassionate always has to be re-conquered on ‘the thin membrane between care and cruelty’ (2001). A third approach, elaborated by Martha Nussbaum, builds on virtue ethical foundations and justifies ethics education by insisting that such an education, highlighting fundamental human capabilities, may contribute to reaching *eudaimonia*, a self-realisation of a subject in its relation to other subjects (1997, 2010, 2013).

Considering these approaches, one might reflect with a critical eye upon the question of the significance that could be assigned to any kind of ethics education where the aim is wider and more comprehensive than just making space for personal development. What might the relevance of such a kind of education be, in times where, as Zygmunt Bauman has repeatedly discussed, human beings are morally ambivalent and where universal values do not exist as stable authorities in human consciousness (1992, 1993)? Bauman’s interpretation of present-day moral relations is that they are not, and nor should they be, relativistic. Ethics is important in the lives of humans and in the societies in which they live. Bauman refers to Lévinas’ discussion on how the concept of the Other cannot be seen as inseparable from a vision of moral closeness and a presence of responsibility: standing before the Other, a human being has to face a responsibility to act, and the moral actions required do not presuppose knowledge in an ordinary sense, but are carried out in virtue of the mutual closeness that is initiated when humans encounter each other (Bauman 1993). Human beings have the capacity for moral action and the challenges of our – post-modern – time need to be handled in creative and encouraging ways, which may represent a variety of strategic steps.

The tentative lines drawn above imply that there is reason to examine the question of why children and young people should be obliged to participate in ethics education – and it is particularly interesting to discuss what form and what content such an education should involve. What is the aim of ethics education? To guide the pupils *in* moral behaviour? To teach them *about* ethics? What kind of *competence* are the pupils expected to develop by participating in ethics education in school? In order to identify some relevant strands, we have carried out interviews with teachers, and related their approaches to ethics education to descriptions found in two of the curricula that are the objects of the research project within which the present examination is performed.

Research questions

The question regarding how ethical competence is highlighted and interpreted within educational contexts is at the centre of the research project *What May be Learnt in Ethics? Varieties of Conceptions of Ethical Competence to be Taught in Compulsory School*.¹ In this article, we start with an analysis of the interviewed teachers’ comments about what ethical competences they teach and then compare these with both the Swedish and the Icelandic curricula. The following research questions are in focus:

- What conceptions of ethical competence can be identified in teachers’ responses in the interviews?
- What conceptions of ethical competence can be identified in the Swedish and Icelandic national curricula?
- In what way can an interpretation of the curricular conceptions contribute to an interpretation of teachers’ conceptions of ethical competence, and vice versa?

Two lines in ethics education

Pupils in most countries study ethics in school but the approaches to the subject differ. Some researchers emphasise a more practical ethics education (e.g. Carnevale et al. 2015; Kretz 2015) and some a more philosophical one (Gardelli, Alerby, and Persson 2014; Hartner 2015). Research about teaching in ethics (e.g. Mayhew and King 2008) presents a number of different models which build on Rawls' (1971), Kohlberg's (1984) and Rest's (1986) theories and which indicate different stages of moral behaviour. Narvaez, Block, and Endicott (2003) present a model answering the questions of what tools, skills and knowledge moral and value education could foster. They highlight a more practical ethics education where the pupils learn ethical sensitivity, ethical judgement, ethical motivation and ethical action.

Both Hartner (2015) and Gardelli, Alerby, and Persson (2014) suggest a philosophical approach. Hartner (2015) suggests that doing ethics requires consistency, and consistency is a condition of rationality, and rationality, that is, giving reasons, is what distinguishes moral philosophy from moral opinion. To get good opportunities to cultivate moral motivation, the pupils need to have a traditional ethics training. Gardelli, Alerby, and Persson (2014) argue that a philosophical ethics in school involves the strongest arguments for pupils to become well-functioning, active citizens, as well as developing decisional abilities, and that philosophical ethics also has a strong impact on pupils' capability of problem-solving and logical reasoning. According to Gardelli, Alerby, and Persson (2014), philosophical education teaches pupils to reason critically about ethics, and critical thinking is needed for a democracy to function. Such a philosophical approach also develops pupils' self-esteem, which is of importance for the ability to make choices in life. These two abilities have an impact on the pupils' learning in other subjects. Bosco et al. (2010) state in their study about developing pupils' moral judgement competence that in classes in which ethics was discussed, the pupils developed their moral reasoning and competence scores. The same study also shows that there was no relation between the number of hours spent on ethics and a higher moral judgement competence.

The interviews

To deepen the understanding about what teachers view as important ethical competences for their pupils to learn, individual semi-structured interviews (Kvale 1997) with seven experienced teachers teaching RE in grade six to nine in Swedish compulsory school have been carried out. The teachers are chosen since they all work in different schools in three different municipalities. Since the study builds on a limited amount of interviews, the ambition was to get a picture as broad as possible by choosing teachers working in schools situated in different socio-economical areas. Some of the schools have a larger share of children with immigrant background, and some of the schools have an almost homogeneous group of children with a Swedish background. The teachers have been interviewed at their schools and the interviews lasted for about 40 to 60 minutes each. The interviews have been recorded and then transcribed. In this article a limited selection of the teachers' responses has been used. The statements are selected since they mirror a common picture of the teachers' views about ethics as a school subject.

To interpret the interviews, a hermeneutical approach has been used. A hermeneutical situation should, according to Gadamer (2005), be built on an anticipatory openness. To use hermeneutics means a constant contextualisation as an oscillation between part and whole goes on. It is often in the meeting between the known and the unknown that we have to interpret (Berndtsson 2001). When you interpret a text, Gadamer (2005) asserts that it must be according to the principle of an open questioning. We must accept our lack of knowledge and that we risk being changed by the answers the material gives. Interpreting also means that we have to find out what questions the material brings up.

According to Palmer (1969), Gadamer considers that interpreting a text does not mean being the master of the text, but becoming the servant. It is about hearing what is said by the text. This deeper

ontological understanding gives the hermeneutical experience its significance for the present life of the interpreter. The ambition has been to have an openness to both the RE syllabuses from Sweden and Iceland and to what the teachers have said about the topics of the interviews. In order to become the servant of the texts, it has been important to strive to catch the diversity of meanings both in the written and spoken texts.

Interviewing is a method directed towards learning about events and activities that cannot be observed directly (Taylor and Bogdan 1988). The interviews have been designed to be like a conversation with structure (Kvale 1997). The structure has been formed by some topics relevant to the study, for example, ethics as a school content area, assessment and national tests in RE. During the interviews, follow-up questions have been asked based on the participating teachers' answers.

The policy documents

It would be possible to develop various strategies in order to capture and identify what conceptions of ethical competence are present in educational policy documents. For several reasons, this task may be challenging. One reason is that an effort to develop 'ethical competence' may be expressed in many different ways, which means that a reading of the documents in question demands a careful but also creative use of interpretive tools. Second, not all references to what may be described in terms of 'ethical competence' are explicit: more or less hidden signals regarding which abilities or skills are presumed to support or express such a competence have to be identified, made visible and analytically highlighted (Franck, forthcoming).

One strategy that may be fruitful when investigating educational policy documents is one where a distinction between 'normative' and 'analytical' conceptions of ethical competence is in focus (http://idpp.gu.se/english/Research/research_projects/what-may-be-learnt-in-ethics). The normative conception refers, on a general level, to what in the Swedish syllabus for RE is described as the ability to 'reason and discuss moral issues and values based on ethical concepts and models' (Curriculum, 176), while the analytical conception covers an ability to understand how to dissect, but also to synthesise, complex ethical issues and challenges, for example, by using relevant methods and concepts (Franck, forthcoming). This strategy, though useful and in important senses illuminating, has limitations, specifically if it is taken to constitute an analytical toolkit that could be used to carry out a more or less comprehensive analysis of the concept of ethical competence as identifiable in educational policy documents.

Important ethical competences according to the teachers

The seven interviewed teachers were asked to explain what ethical competences they view as important for their pupils. Their explanations differ with regard to the competences they consider important for their pupils' lives and what they consider important for good grades.

Three of the teachers describe ethics, as they consider the pupils' needs for their future lives, in the following way:

Well, ethics is about how to encounter other people, not only about right and wrong, but also what you actually do in practice. So an ethical competence is about being able to relate to other people in a good way. (Teacher 1)

How we are as human beings. It is a lot about morality I believe. Right and wrong, not the way right and wrong is written in the laws, but how you behave in different situations. (Teacher 5)

Acting according to some values. (Teacher 7)

The seven teachers all say that they want their pupils to be able to act in a good way towards other people. But they do not interpret the syllabus as indicating that this is what gives good grades. The conceptions highlighted in the syllabus are, according to the teachers, theoretical and analytical.

They [the pupils] are very interested in ethics, in ethics and morality and in ethical dilemmas and reasoning about difficult issues. That I think the pupils are very interested in. But now the focus is more on the ethical theories and the ethical models. And when we had the previous syllabus we did not teach as much about this as we do now. Then it was more about what the pupils experienced as right and wrong, that you can have different views and perspectives and that it can be quite complex, so to say. (Teacher 2)

And the teaching will surely be about how to put it [the ethical theories] into words and to show that there are different ethical models that you can use as a guide in different situations. It is not written in the knowledge requirements what you are supposed to think, but it says how you should argue about what you think. (Teacher 7)

All the interviewed teachers highlight ethical competences that are useful in order for the pupils to be good citizens and good fellow human beings. To a question about the purpose of teaching ethics, two of the teachers answer as follows:

That you bring the pupils up to be good citizens, that they know what is right and wrong. I have noticed a big difference from when I started as a teacher ten years ago; [now] it is all about 'I'. We are just thinking about how to self-realize and we lose much of this how to be a good citizen. That's when I think ethics comes in. I would like to encourage them [the pupils] to think about these questions. (Teacher 5)

I do not think that the purpose of ethics is to give good examples ... but that you have opportunities to think over the choices you want to make. To give tools for thinking. Not to say what is right or wrong. Not to judge others, but to see that there are different reasons for different decisions and that all people have a right to make decisions from their point of view. To create an open dialogue and an open mind. Not to condemn. That's the purpose of ethics, I think. (Teacher 1)

To sum up this part: the examples above of responses from the teachers illustrate tendencies in the material where the teachers express differences between what they regard as important for their pupils' abilities to live a good life together with others and what they regard as demanded from pupils for getting good grades. An important ethical competence, according to the teachers, seems to be having an open mind and tools for thinking as well as knowing how to act towards fellow human beings in a right and good way, promoting the well-being of others. This in contrast to the teachers' interpretation of ethics in the syllabus as a theoretical subject and this is also what they are to assess and grade.

We then want to compare our interpretations about what the interviewed teachers view as important ethical competences with our analyses of the Swedish curriculum since this is to guide the teaching in ethics, but also with our analysis of the Icelandic curriculum since it differs from the Swedish one in an interesting way.

Ethical competence in Swedish policy documents for schools

What about this conclusion from the interviews? Is it possible to find ways for approaching the dilemma the teachers' experience which could help to constructively interpret and contextualise their striving for a combination of theoretical and practical aims in ethics education?

We will in the following outline one way that is worth trying in order to develop such an approach. We will relate our conclusion about the interviewed teachers' views on important ethical competences to the analyses made of the Swedish and Icelandic curricula.

Starting from an analysis of the present Swedish syllabus for RE in compulsory school, implemented in 2011, presented in Franck (forthcoming), one may notice that this syllabus, as others that are in focus in the research project mentioned above, is multidimensional. In its introduction, the ability to understand and respect people's various life styles and ethical, existential and religious life views is emphasised, while, as critical commentators have pointed out, when highlighting the core content of the teaching of ethics and relevant knowledge requirements, more formal, analytical competences are emphasised. In particular five ethical competences are, in the analysis presented, stressed:

- **'reflective'** - the competence for personal reflection with reference to ethical issues
- **'conceptual'** - the competence for understanding and using what are called 'ethical concepts'
- **'normative'** - the competence for critical analysis of ethical standpoints and approaches, including the ones represented or asserted by oneself
- **'analytical'** - the competence for analysis of 'ethical models' and relevant theoretical frameworks
- **'action'** competence - the competence for acting responsibly in relation to oneself and one's surroundings. (Franck, forthcoming)

These five competences have been used as points of reference in the analyses of other Nordic curricula and syllabuses, for example, the Icelandic one. An intention has, however, been to examine these other policy documents in an explorative way, making space for alternative conceptions of ethical competence, as well as for holistic conceptions where presumed ethical competences are related and integrated with each other (Franck, forthcoming)

These analyses are still ongoing but some preliminary results have been identified. Those conclusions which are drawn with reference to the Icelandic curriculum are the ones that in the present context will be used, in order to develop such an interpretive and contextualising approach that was mentioned above. We will come back to this later on.

Let us, however, start by emphasising that those 'fundamental values' [*värdegrunden*] that are presented in the initial parts of the Swedish curricula, present challenges that may be identified when teachers, pupils and principals are going to apply the values in question, values that are described as

The inviolability of human life, individual freedom and integrity, the equal value of all people, equality between women and men, and solidarity with the weak and vulnerable are the values that the school should represent and impart. (Curriculum, 9)

The curricula, here represented by the *Curriculum for the compulsory school, preschool and the recreation centre* 2011, state that

The task of the school is to encourage all pupils to discover their own uniqueness as individuals and thereby be able to participate in the life of society by giving of their best in responsible freedom. (Curriculum, 9)

What seems to be beyond doubt is that certain abilities are here explicitly prescribed to be in focus as goals for pupils' *moral development* while participating in the daily life in school, abilities which, with a formulation used especially in contexts where Education for Sustainable Development is in focus (Almers 2009; Schnack 1994), could be described in terms of *action competence*. Being 'able to participate in the life of society by giving of their best in responsible freedom' seems to imply an ability – or a competence – which comes close to what, within supranational policy documents such as the ones published by OECD, is described in terms of 'social and civic competences' and 'cultural awareness and expression' (OECD 2005).

It is not possible, at least not at first sight, to highlight such a competence with an analytical toolkit that limits the interpretive approach to using and applying the distinction between 'normative' and 'analytical' dimensions – that is to say dimensions focusing on the competence for critical analysis of ethical standpoints and approaches, including the ones represented or asserted by oneself, and the competence for analysis for the understanding and application of 'ethical models' and relevant theoretical frameworks, respectively. Looking deeper into the issue, one may, however, discover traces of the distinction mentioned and an application of the concept of action competence, and one approach to take in order to catch sight of these is to notice one of the criticisms often presented with regard to the 'fundamental values' and their place in the curricula. Several reports and studies regarding the 'fundamental values' have pointed out that the democratic basis of these values allows for a huge interpretive freedom at the same time as the values in question are prescribed as fundamental and non-negotiable for all kinds of enterprises in school (Orlenius 2010). Discussions regarding the interpretation of these values – for example, deliberative ones (Englund 2000) – are

encouraged, but the curricula do not exemplify, at least not in detail, conditions for when someone could be said to break the rules thought to follow from the 'fundamental values'.

The general impression is that the curricula signal a vague and perhaps even untouchable conception of ethical competence, which seems most interesting particularly with regard to what may be seen as an opposite approach among critical readers of the parts of the curricula dealing with values and ethics. Following Thornberg (2014), we may say that *values education* can be seen as an umbrella concept that refers to several educational approaches where ethics and values are at the core. Swedish values education rests, according to the present argument, partly on an approach that emphasises the striving for a personal development of social, civic and cultural competences by 'giving their best in responsible freedom'. This implies mastering a certain morally relevant action competence.

On the other hand, ethics education, which also falls under the umbrella concept mentioned (Thornberg 2014), has been criticised for paying too much attention to normative and analytical competences (Selander 2011). Ethics education is mainly carried out in the subject of RE, and, looking to the relevant knowledge requirements regarding ethics, with reference to which the pupils' work will be assessed, it seems that normative and analytical conceptions seems to be to the fore. For years 7–9 it is, for example, stated that a pupil, in order to reach the highest grade when studying ethics, must be able to

reason and argue about moral issues and values by applying **well developed and well** informed reasoning, and use ethical concepts and models in a **well** functioning way. (Curriculum, 184)

There are, according to the present line of reasoning, few visible connections between this normative and analytical focus on the one hand, and the development of a socially, civically and culturally relevant ethical action competence on the other.

The problem with this way of handling values and ethical issues is that it may seem to express some kind of 'doublethink': the aim of values education is said to be personal, moral development, while the aim of ethics education is stated in terms of bureaucratic, which are silent on the subject of moral action and moral choices, but express an exclusive focus on normative and analytical competences. The aims of providing moral guidance for the pupils and of contributing to their knowledge about ethical reasoning and ethical theory are both identifiable in the curricula, but they never or seldom seem to meet.

Ethical competence in Icelandic policy documents for schools

There is no reason to assume that challenges regarding the conjoining of these two aims are unique to the Swedish curriculum. The aim of providing moral guidance and the aim of contributing to the development of knowledge about ethics seem to be present in many, if not in most, educational policy documents. This means that it would be of interest to investigate whether and how their relation is formulated in an explicit way outside the Swedish arena.

In the research project that was presented at the beginning of this article, an investigation of Nordic and other national educational policy documents is being carried out (Franck, forthcoming). We will here give an example of another way to treat the two aims, namely one to be found in an Icelandic context, highlighting the question of whether the reading of Icelandic educational policy documents would contribute to the identification of a more integrative way of relating the aims to each other.

In *The Icelandic National Curriculum Guide for Compulsory Schools* six 'fundamental pillars', on which the curriculum guidelines are based, are presented: literacy, sustainability, health and welfare, democracy and human rights, equality and creativity (The National Curriculum Guide, 14). Each of the pillars derives from laws on preschool, compulsory school and upper secondary school (The National Curriculum Guide, 14).

In 2013, the subject of Christian studies, in which ethics education was performed with reference to Christian tradition, was changed to RE, a subject that became part of social studies (Gunnarsson 2014, 137–138). In Gunnarsson (2014) the aims of these studies are formulated as follows:

They are expected to enable students to approach social and moral issues with the help of dialogue and let their position be shaped by logical arguments. Furthermore, students should learn fairness, value judgments and responsibility, which, among other things, involve the ability to put themselves in others' shoes and the ability to anticipate the consequences of their actions on their own welfare, the environment and society as a whole. (Gunnarsson 2014, 138)

It seems to be possible to formulate these aims in terms of action competence with regard to certain values, but there is also room for an interpretation according to which normative and analytical conceptions of ethical competence come into focus in terms of 'dialogue' and 'logical arguments'. And in fact in the elaboration of the fundamental pillars, there are already signs of an intention to integrate the various dimensions of ethical competence presented above: action competence, normative competence and analytical competence. It is stated in the Icelandic policy documents that the concept of competence 'consists of knowledge and skills and is interconnected with the pupils' ethical views' and that skills 'are both intellectual and practical, involving methods, practice and logical thinking' (Gunnarsson 2014, 84). More precisely, competence is said to involve an

overview and the ability to use knowledge and skills. It requires a sense of responsibility, respect, broadmindedness, creativity, moral awareness, communicative competence, capability for action and that individuals understand their abilities. (Gunnarsson 2014, 84f)

What is here described is a personal moral development, which includes a competence to act in ways that are both rational and guided by social sensibility and self-reflection.

Such an integrative interpretation of ethical competence can also be identified in the RE syllabus. One example is the list of abilities that pupils are expected to master at the completion of year 4. This list has consistent correlations with the abilities related to ethical competence mentioned in the general curriculum. And it includes, for example, the abilities to

- understand that people live in different family forms, have different backgrounds, and show respect for different views of life and lifestyles,
- listen to and analyse different views,
- discuss selected social and ethical issues ...
- express their knowledge and attitudes in various ways,
- understand the value of equality in everyday life,
- show consideration and respect in relations and cooperation with others,
- understand the various effects of their actions,
- show that they respect rules, both written and unwritten, in their relations with people, and give examples of such rules. (Gunnarsson 2014, 201)

What is interesting to note for our present purpose is, of course, that the various abilities represent a range of dimensions of what may be described as 'ethical competence', but also, and primarily, that these dimensions are mixed, since the abilities in question are listed in a way that does not indicate a separation of, for example, 'action competence', 'normative competence' and 'analytical competence'.

Elaborating an integrative conception of ethical competence

This holistic way of presenting abilities that are thought to make up the content of the concept of ethical competence (which, as we have seen, is also supported by the general parts of *The Icelandic National Curriculum Guide for Compulsory Schools* where the fundamental pillars are elaborated) differs from the approach identified in the Swedish educational policy documents. There the

competences presented were treated as representing separate abilities to be developed. This separation seems to be one reason for the obstacle to uniting, or at least relating, the aims to provide moral guidance and to contribute to the development of ethical knowledge.

Does the Icelandic approach then present a solution to how to bridge this separation in a satisfying way? The answer is that this is a question that requires further examination. Interpreting the parts of the curriculum dealing with the competences that make up the complex concept of ethical competence as 'holistic', is not automatically the same as saying that they support an integrative conception of how the aims for moral guidance and personal development on the one hand, and for contribution to the development of ethical knowledge on the other, could be united.

The Icelandic approach may, however, give some clues when trying to carry out an integrative analysis, where the complex concept of ethical competence could be understood and communicated in ways that not only would support a responsible reading of the relevant parts of the educational policy documents, but also would encourage teachers, pupils and principals to look for creative ways of uniting the aims for moral guidance and ethical knowledge.

We can see a difference between the Icelandic and Swedish RE syllabuses when it comes to how they present ethics as a subject in RE in compulsory school. Expressed in a brief and simple way, one may say that the Swedish syllabus can be interpreted as focusing bureaucratically based knowledge requirements and the Icelandic one as highlighting a comprehensive action competence among the pupils, a competence which could be interpreted in terms of 'being morally observant', an apprehension mentioned earlier with reference to Ofstad (1990).

Discussion

The teachers interviewed in this study are Swedish and accordingly they have to follow the Swedish syllabus in RE, which emphasises theoretical and analytical skills, which they do when they teach for the grades. As shown in the results, the teachers in this study consider it more important to give the pupils an idea of how to live a good life in an ethically responsible way, and that the pupils learn how to behave in a good and correct way towards other people, that is, they consider dimensions of action competence to be an important thing for the pupils to learn. This understanding can be compared with Nussbaum's theories (2013, 2010) highlighting ethics with reference to a capability approach. But as the syllabus is formulated as it is, the teaching is mostly aimed at giving the pupils opportunities to understand and use ethical models and ethical concepts. How well the pupils manage to reason and argue about moral issues is what is to be assessed (Curriculum Lgr 11, 2011). These theoretical and analytical skills are what is needed to develop good action competence according to Hartner (2015). This is, however, something that the teachers do not agree with. Their teaching is carried out with regard to an intention that the pupils will reflect upon what it means to be a good fellow human, and that they will express these reflections in moral practice. One may argue that seven interviews are a too limited empirical material for justifying any conclusions. In this article we intend, however, to highlight and discuss only some different ways to view teaching about ethical competences, and for that purpose it seems that the interviews may illustrate a tension between what has been described as theoretical competences and the competence of acting ethically.

This tension seems to be in need of a constructive analysis. One main conclusion from the foregoing analysis is that the teachers' apprehension of what ethics education ought to focus on is disregarded in the RE syllabus where ethics is one of the compulsory subjects to be treated. This does not, however, mean that we would like to sanction the idea of a version of ethics education which exclusively focuses on issues of moral practice. A theoretical foundation is needed in order to offer the pupils the possibility of putting forward and justifying ethical claims, claims that make visible some possible foundations for both ethical analysis and moral practice. A second conclusion is consequently that theoretical and practical dimensions both have to be integrated within an education about ethics and morals.

By discussing also the Icelandic curriculum, which is one of several that are examined within the presently ongoing research project on ethical competence, we have highlighted a concrete example of how an integrative way of handling theoretical and practical dimensions of ethics education within a curricular context may be elaborated. This example certainly does not express a conclusive or final solution to the tension described above. But it shows that it is possible – and worthwhile – to search for constructive ways of relating ethical theory and moral practice to each other within a reasonable and well-founded ethics education.

The foregoing analysis that points in the direction of the Icelandic curriculum is highlighting a more complex and more holistic conception of ethical competence than the one found in the Swedish curriculum. This does not, however, guarantee a successful implementation of fundamental democratic values. To achieve this, those working in the school system must get and give support of a constructive kind. A necessary starting point is then that human moral creativity has to give rise to the development of conceptions without relying on any kind of conclusive a priori solutions.

Note

1. http://idpp.gu.se/english/Research/research_projects/what-may-be-learnt-in-ethics.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

ORCID

Christina Osbeck  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-9238-7676>

References

- Almers, E. 2009. "Handlingskompetens för hållbar utveckling. Tre berättelser [Action Competence for Sustainable Development. Three Stories]." Dissertation No. 6, School of Education and Communication, Jönköping University.
- Bauman, Z. 1992. *Intimations of Postmodernity*. London: Routledge.
- Bauman, Z. 1993. *Postmodern Ethics*. Cambridge, MA: Basil Blackwell.
- Berndtsson, I. 2001. "Förskjutna horisonter. Livsförändring och lärande i samband med synnedgång [Offset Horizons. Change in Life and Learning in Connection with Vision Loss]." Doctoral thesis, Studies in Educational Sciences, 159. Göteborg: Acta Universitatis Gothoburgensis.
- Bosco, S. M., D. E. Melchar, L. L. Beauvais, and D. E. Desplaces. 2010. "Teaching Business Ethics: The Effectiveness of Common Pedagogical Practices in Developing students' Moral Judgement Competence." *Ethics and Education* 5 (3): 263–280.
- Carnevale, F. A., A. Campbell, D. Collin-Vézina, and M. E. Macdonald. 2015. "Interdisciplinary Studies of Childhood Ethics: Developing a New Field of Inquiry." *Children & Society* 29 (6): 511–523.
- Englund, T. 2000. *Deliberativa samtal som värdegrund – historiska perspektiv och aktuella förutsättningar* [Deliberative Discussions as Fundamental Values – Historical Perspectives and Present Conditions]. Skolverket: Stockholm.
- Franck, O. Forthcoming. "Varieties of Conceptions of Ethical Competence and the Search for Strategies for Assessment in Ethics Education: A Critical Analysis." In *Assessment in Ethics Education: A Case of National Tests in Religious Education*, edited by O. Franck. Dordrecht: Springer.
- Gadamer, H. G. 2005. *Truth and Method*. London: Continuum International.
- Gardelli, V., E. Alerby, and A. Persson. 2014. "Why Philosophical Ethics in School: Implications for Education in Technology and in General." *Ethics and Education* 9 (1): 16–28.
- Gunnarsson, G. J. (2014). Religious Education at Schools in Iceland. *Religious Education at Schools in Europe. Part 3: Northern Europe*, pp. 127–150. Göttingen: Vienna University Press.
- Hartner, D. F. 2015. "Should Ethics Courses Be More Practical?" *Teaching Ethics* 15 (2): 349–368.
- Igra, L. 2001. *Den tunna hinnan mellan omsorg och grymhet* [The Thin Membrane Between Care and Cruelty]. Stockholm: Natur och Kultur.
- Kretz, L. 2015. "Teaching Being Ethical." *Teaching Ethics* 15 (1): 151–172.
- Kvale, S. 1997. *Den kvalitativa forskningsintervjun* [The Qualitative Research Interview]. Lund: Studentlitteratur.

- Mayhew, M. J., and P. King. 2008. "How Curricular Content and Pedagogical Strategies Affect Moral Reasoning Development in College Students." *Journal of Moral Education* 37 (1): 17–40.
- Ministry of Education, Science and Culture. 2013. *The Icelandic National Curriculum Guide for Compulsory Schools*. <http://sprogkoordinationen.org/media/1118/is-national-curriculum-guide.pdf>.
- Narvaez, D., T. Block, and L. Endicott. 2003. "Who Should I Become? Citizenship, Goodness, Human Flourishing, and Ethical Expertise." In *Teaching in Moral and Democratic Education*, edited by Wiel Veugelers, and Fritz K. Osed, 43–63. Bern: Peter Lang.
- Noddings, N. 2003. *Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics and Moral Education*. 2nd ed. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Noddings, N. 2005. 'Caring in Education', *The Encyclopedia of Informal Education*. Accessed August 11 2015. <http://infed.org/mobi/caring-in-education/>.
- Nussbaum, M. C. 1997. *Cultivating Humanity: A Classical Defense of Reform in Liberal Education*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Nussbaum, M. C. 2010. *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Nussbaum, M. C. 2013. *Creating Capabilities. The Human Abilities Approach*. Cambridge: The Belknap Press.
- OECD. 2005. Executive Summary of the DeSeCo Study. Accessed September 15 2014. www.oecd.org/dataoecd/47/61/35070367.pdf.
- Ofstad, H. 1990. *Vi kan ändra världen. Hur bör vi ställa frågorna?* [We Can Change the World. How Should We Ask the Questions?]. Stockholm: Prisma.
- Orlenius, Kennert. 2010. *Värdegrunden – finns den?* [Is There a Foundation of Values?]. Stockholm: Liber.
- Palmer, R. E. 1969. *Hermeneutics. Interpretation Theory in Schleiermacher, Dilthey, Heidegger and Gadamer*. Evanston: Northwestern University Press.
- Schnack, Karsten. 1994. "Some Further Comments on the Action Competence Debate." In *Action and Action Competence as Key Concepts in Critical Pedagogy*, edited by B. B. Jensen and K. Schnack, Vol. 12, 185–190. Copenhagen: Royal Danish School of Educational Studies.
- Selander, S.-Å. 2011. "Från livsfrågor, etik och reflektion till samhälle, kunskap och analys [From Life Issues, Ethics and Reflection to Society, Knowledge and Analysis]." *Religion och livsfrågor* 2011 (2): 18–21.
- Skolverket. 2011. *Curriculum for the Compulsory School, the Preschool Class and the Recreation Centre (Lgr11)*. Stockholm: Fritzes.
- Taylor, S. J., and R. Bogdan. 1988. *Introduction to Qualitative Research Methods*. New York: John Wiley & Sons.
- Thornberg, R. 2014. "Värdepedagogik. En introduktion." In *Värdepedagogik. Etik och demokrati i förskola och skola* [Values Education. Ethics and Democracy in Preschool and School], edited by E. Johansson, and R. Thornberg, 19–34. Stockholm: Liber.
- What May be Learnt in Ethics? Varieties of Conceptions of Ethical Competence to be Taught in Compulsory School. http://idpp.gu.se/english/Research/research_projects/what-may-be-learnt-in-ethics.