

# Children's right to spiritual development

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The theme of the conference is about children's right to spiritual development and before I go into this theme from an educational perspective (not theological) it is important to raise awareness of how this right appears in competition with other influences that characterize the European countries.

During the conference, we will take part in Per Ewert's thesis 'Moving reality closer to the ideal' and how political agendas can change Sweden into one of the world's most secularized and self-realized countries. See Welzel's Cultural Map!

Based on this, I want to highlight some other perspectives that can be interpreted as obstacles to children's right to spiritual development.

### 'EGO logic'

Many social trends influence our thinking and our actions. One such influence is the EGO logic that over time characterizes our way of thinking. An EGO logic that impulsively promotes man's need for self-satisfaction rather than a solidary desire to strengthen a common value base. Paul Robert's socially critical perspective 'The Impulse Society' (2015) which considers how this consumer logic is based on people following their immediate desires by visiting an online marketplace in the fastest/easiest/cheapest way (Amazon and similar web services compete to be able to have shortest delivery time). This logic is about satisfying my need and desire for something new. This logic shows itself in an increased desire: to constantly get a new mobile phone even if I don't need it; vote for policies that cater to my own motives rather than society's; depleting the planet's limited resources just to satisfy my (infinite) needs. In the school world, this is shown through the student's and parents' superstition in schools that should 'fix' everything for the family, rather than parents' and students' self-critical acceptance of responsibility and dialogue as the biggest influencing factor in the child's development.

The risk with this 'EGO' logical view of school gives consequences that deal with 'pick and choose' learning based on what pleases the student. The teaching role is measured based on students' experience of satisfaction rather than degree of upbringing. Here, the focus of value-based work can have a major task of opening up the student's understanding of a reality that does not place itself at the center. Where an increased tolerance for other people who are different on a planet that does not have infinite resources and where we understand how others see ourselves is put on the agenda. To be in the middle of the world without placing oneself in the center. Based on this EGO logic, values that deal with a non-self-centered worldview are in demand.

### Juridification of school

Another influence is the so-called juridification of the school. Legal concepts and legal perspectives have gradually gained a stronger position in the educational policy management of the school, similar to an 'over-regulation' and 'juridification' that becomes subject to implementation processes that are influenced by different logics. The phenomenon that is often named 'juridification of school' wants to make visible how legal structures are incorporated that contribute to emphasizing interpersonal values (Bergh & Arneback, 2016; see also authors Enkvist & Scheutz, 2021; Nordfeldt, 2012; Stigendal & Liedholm, 2018). Within this phenomenon there are different perspectives such as: legal concepts and principles; governance processes; power shifts; practical language use; teaching profession and relationships between school, students and guardians (Bergh & Arneback, 2016, 2019; Carlbaum, 2016; Fransson, 2016; Hult & Lindgren, 2016; Møller & Ottesen, 2016; Runesdotter, 2019). This juridification,

which is also called the era of New Public Management (NPM) or as the philosophy professor Jonna Bornemark (2018) coined the era of the "förpappning" (=managed by paper), where what used to be about value-driven interpersonal relationships is now about how schools and care live up to different measurable requirements. Here it can easily be about quality, such as sending in documents and reports for the authorities' quality assurance to be fulfilled. Professor Lena Lindgren (2014) likens this situation to satisfying the 'evaluation monster' that has characterized Swedish society since the end of the 1990s, where evaluation and closely related activities such as follow-up, quality measurement, supervision and auditing have escalated more and more with each passing year.

Andreas Bergh (2010), docent in pedagogy, demonstrates how this shift has successively taken place within the world of schools. In his thesis, he highlights how concepts taken from industry have become central concepts that should capture and define the school's quality. This includes industry concepts such as inspection, quality control, documentation, goal achievement/results, market reputation, transparency, customer selection system, legal certainty and efficiency. These concepts displace and challenge concepts such as education, formation, democratic upbringing, knowledge, equality, influence and citizen, that is, concepts that have long existed in the world of schools. The latter are often reduced to 'soft values' and at some schools it will mostly be about well-being. Bergh's research shows how teaching quality in the 21st century is overshadowed by result quality, market quality and system quality. What is valued simply becomes what can be measured and he summarizes the movement of development as an instrumentalization and juridification of the school. The shift away from teaching also creates templated systems where the teacher becomes increasingly tied to the back and cannot independently shape his teaching in the best way. It also means that questions of an instrumental and administrative nature are given more and more space at the expense of pedagogical questions and questions about the goals and purpose of the education. The core business itself is being pushed aside by growing control activities around the core business.

### **A broader purpose of school**

In the middle of this tension field of the individual's self-realized EGO logic and the juridification of society, voices are raised that demand a sensitivity for what is important in the practical situation and that emerges from interpersonal everyday practice rather than something that can be controlled from the outside with predetermined manuals that schools must live by up to. Values derived from the old ideal of education are experiencing a renaissance that highlights the importance of schools that offer a holistic view that is not one-dimensional but also includes the soul and spiritual dimensions. Here it is about qualities and characteristics that, like the most successful Anglo-Saxon universities, have a multidimensional view of education that encompasses the 'whole person' based on sports, health, music, art, aesthetics and existential aspects. This refers to a versatility beyond subject knowledge that deals with upbringing and character building.

Properties and qualities with an uncomplicated connection between a scientific approach and the spiritual part of life are housed here. An interaction between science and spirituality. This refers to quality, which the economics professor Lars Strannegård describes in his book 'Kunskap som känns' (knowledge that one feels) both about measurable as well as immeasurable values. A broader view of values that can be exemplified in how we view things and people. For example, the strength of the bridge and its appearance based on the aesthetics of the recipient/viewer, and the bridge as a symbol of how we create understanding for dissenters and empathy for the weak and vulnerable in the name of tolerance.

With these perspectives, the social question regarding education and school and what knowledge and values are necessary for future generations is brought up to date. What approaches and perceptions of knowledge should schools form based on school legislation and curricula, how should these shape teachers' didactic considerations, what knowledge should be assessed and what teacher skills and competences need to be developed in order to meet the knowledge and values that should be conveyed in the common schooling (T. Englund m.fl., 2012; Wahlström, 2022)? As an example, I choose to highlight the Dutch pedagogy professor Gert Biesta's discussion about the fact that we live in a time when the measurement of educational results has displaced the question of the purpose of education. Biesta asks the questions: "-what should we have education for? -what is its aim and purpose? - is it only about qualifying, i.e. undergoing training that leads to a job, and thus taking one's place in society, or is it about training that leads to a kind of education where the student is included in a freedom that also requires their responsibility for this freedom?" (Biesta, 2018, p. 8). Biesta also highlights these perspectives based on his threefold view of education in terms of qualification, socialization and subjectification (Biesta, 2015, p. 78, 2018, p. 23).

With socialization, Biesta does not only mean preparing children and young people in traditions and behaviors, ways of being and doing, such as cultural, professional, political, religious traditions etcetera. Socialization, he believes, also includes the interaction between students and teachers, for example in ways that education reproduces existing social structures, divisions and differences (2015, p. 77). The third domain, subjectification, assumes that education has a positive or negative impact on the student as a person. It has to do with the way in which children or young people exist as subjects of initiative and responsibility rather than as objects of others' actions.

Biesta believes that "Subjectification processes make it possible for the educated to become more autonomous and independent in thought and action" (2015, p. 77). Biesta's threefold premises are exemplified in the teacher's didactic choices and priorities. This can be the choice of a more student-centered teaching that promotes student influence, creativity and innovation as well as more teacher-directed and knowledge-centered teaching that promotes the student's responsiveness to the teacher's guidance and correction (2015, p. 80). By this, Biesta means that there is no opposite relationship between what the teacher is required to convey and what the student is expected to perform and at the same time the teacher's choice to give room for, as he says, "a sense of openness and mystery" in areas where even the teacher does not have clear answers on how to behave in, for example, moral, political or spiritual matters (2015, p. 80).

### **Children's right to spiritual development**

In national as well as international literature that deals with 'children's right to spiritual development', the concept of 'spirituality' refers to a wide range of expressions both from secular and religious views that refer to religious/non-religious experiences in different contexts (Sagberg, 2017, p. 24; Westerlund, 2016). Spirituality appears in the literature as a fundamental human dimension of modern man with different expressions in different forms in different times.

Examples of aspects related to: differences of approach in an individualized secular context; experiences of spirituality in terms of tolerance and diversity; teachers' promotion of individual and existential conversations; teachers' protective role for vulnerable children (Westerlund, 2016; Bone & Fenton, 2015; Sagberg, 2017; Stockinger, 2019; Adams, 2009). Here, religion can be one of several forms that respond to man's need to express his spiritual dimensions (Haugen, 2018, p.307). In general, there is a taken-for-granted view of children's spirituality as an innate and universal characteristic that often relates to the interaction with others and that connects to both their inner self and at the same time to something outside themselves as an

integrated aspect of human development (Westerlund, 2016, p. 217). Central to the literature, Nye & Hay's so-called "relational consciousness" often emerges for children's spirituality within four elements: "awareness of the self; awareness of others; awareness of surroundings; and awareness of the transcendent other" (for some people called God or a higher power) (Hay & Nye, 2006, p. 115; Westerlund, 2016, p. 217; Haugen, 2018, p. 307; Adams, 2009, p. 115). For non-religious people, the transcendent may include different dimensions such as human conscience/wisdom, generosity/solidarity, aesthetics/art or simply the belief that man is a spiritual being (Haugen, 2018, p. 307). Children's right to spiritual development and religious interpretations in a school context is not entirely straightforward as it can be a sensitive area. It can be associated with fears of being ridiculed or rejected for their inner spiritual thoughts and beliefs, which leads to the student's voice being silenced (Adams, 2009, p. 117; Berglund, 2017; Kittelmann Flensner et al., 2015, p. 117, 2015; Mohme, 2017; Vikdahl, 2018). Such a conflict, based on this study, can be the child's right to spiritual development in the dilemma of negative and positive religious freedom. Voices in society that promote children's rights in view of marginalized group affiliations or contexts where some consider it to be contrary to the value base and others who claim that they constitute the very foundation of the value base.

### **Definition**

Children's rights in the spiritual area undoubtedly open up sensitive and important viewpoints and therefore it may be important to find a relevant and guiding definition. I have chosen Sturla Sagberg's definition as follows: Taking children's rights perspective on children's spirituality could mean 'exploring sources of children's rights in one's own faith and culture as well as entering into dialogue with people of other faiths'.

This is a great, but urgent task in a world of religious and cultural diversity. It requires ethical awareness and reasoning as well as a serious discussion of educational policy and practice. (2017, p. 33)

Sagberg believes that children's right to spiritual development entails responsibility at several levels in society as well as moral obligations to:

1. respect children as autonomous religious and spiritual subjects with the right to be heard,
2. protect children from all kinds of abuse or manipulation in the name of religion,
3. provide support for the child to develop as a full, contributing member of a fellowship,
4. and contribute to children's spiritual literacy in cultural and language learning, including their getting to know rituals and practices of religious faith. (2017, p. 33)

### **Values strengthening efforts**

Based on Sagberg's definition, we understand that efforts to strengthen schools' values need to be developed. Schools' work to concretize normative as well as descriptive value issues is actualized, which raises awareness of the school's promotion as well as counteracting values-based practice (Davidsson, 2018; Hartman, 2014; J. Lindgren et al., 2003; Orlienius, 2010, 2014). It is often highlighted which aspects of values foundation/values foundation work have been used in the school such as: school governance, attitudes, democracy, equal treatment/ plan against offensive behaviour, gender equality etc. Values foundation work often goes together with the Christian profile's set of themes which can be values or character words. In the school debate over time, it is often a matter of more corrective and normative practice where efforts to a greater extent are about countering what violates the school's value base rather than strengthening what promotes the value base.

At the same time, there are studies that show that more promotional work in combination with student influence is an important success factor. Regarding democracy and citizenship

education, there is a synergy of both promotion and counteraction - in terms of increased understanding of tolerance, solidarity, equality and human dignity and at the same time counteraction in terms of xenophobia, Nazism, racism and segregation. Normative - what schools "should" or Descriptive - "how" schools promote / discourage. Normative value-pedagogy research considers the normative mission of the school to convey the values expressed in curricula and policy decisions. Descriptive value-pedagogical research, on the other hand, is interested in how and in what way value perspectives are expressed in preschool/school or in governing documents. Furthermore, values-based aspects related to 'culture' are presented, such as expected school culture in terms of 'teaching values' and actual school culture in terms of 'perceived values' which can relate to value-based strengthening interventions that are either integrated and/or program-based (Colnerud et al., 2003; A.-L. Englund & Englund, 2012; Forsberg & Lundgren, 2003; Halstead & Taylor, 1996; Howard-Hamilton, 1995; J. Lindgren et al., 2003; Merson, 2018).

There is research that relates to program-based as well as integrated interventions (integrated in all subjects), where the latter refers to teachers' constant influence of the daily interaction that takes place between teachers and students as a kind of indirect, often for those involved unconscious, intuitive influence, which often within the core value area is named as "hidden upbringing" alternatively "the hidden curriculum" corresponding to the English "implicit curriculum" or the hidden curriculum (Halstead & Taylor, 1996, p. 12; Jackson, 1992, p. 10; Wahlström, 2016, p. 132).

### **Teacher's awareness and ability**

With the aforementioned value perspective and children's right to spirituality, it is ultimately not only about the local school's broadened view of education, but also the individual teacher's value-pedagogical considerations in the meeting with the individual student as well as the group. On a more educational philosophical perspective, corresponding to the teacher's value-pedagogical choices between the individual's upbringing and education based on the teacher as given authority (Kant, 2008) and the teacher's responsiveness and interaction based on the student's agency and experience (Dewey, 2015). Furthermore, teachers' choices between the teacher's care for each individual student (Noddings, 2013) and the development of the student's understanding and tolerance for others (Kumashiro, 2002). This requires an awareness, creativity and discernment on the part of the teacher to relate to both "ethical values of care, democratic values, disciplinary values and knowledge values" (Colnerud, 2004; Davidsson, 2018).

Carsten Hjorth Pedersen (2020), describes in his book 'influence with respect' the importance of teachers' developed sensitivity in the meeting with children's spirituality, which is about two ways of influencing with respect, which is about both coming forward and sometimes withdrawing. Here, Hjort Pedersen highlights two different pitfalls that teachers can fall into. One extreme with the adult's influence so that it becomes so intrusive that it intimidates the student and the other extreme where the adult has the opposite effect by withdrawing so much that the adults abdicate their mission.

Overall, children's right to spiritual development highlights the individual teacher's need for judgment prudence or Aristotle's Phronesis. A judgmental ability that is tied to an action that is right then and there. This action, as we have seen, is not arbitrary but grounded in a complex ability to take the situation into the classroom, be part of the situation and drive the situation in a certain direction. A good assessment that assumes an interaction between both activity and passivity on the part of the teacher. To both actively act, while the teacher stops and passively listens and takes in the situation with the students. As a father, I have experienced my wife's

births of our children. The labors of a woman who is about to give birth cannot be controlled by her, they come and go as they wish. But that does not make the woman passive. She uses the power found in labor to become active. At the same time, she cannot be active without passively receiving. Bornemark (2020) has invented the word 'pactive' (=passive+active). An expression of judgment that works both active and passive. This translated into Biesta's view of a broader purpose of education where the teacher both actively conveys what the student is expected to perform and passively chooses to give room for, as he says, "a sense of openness and mystery" in areas where even the teacher does not have clear answers to how to behave in, for example, moral, political or spiritual matters (2015, p. 80).

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