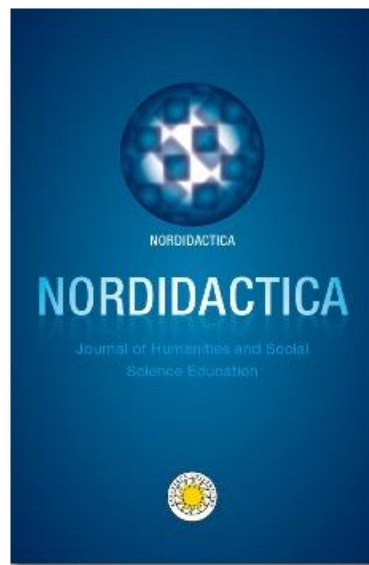# Fiction-based ethics education in Swedish compulsory school – reflections on a research project

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Fiction-based ethics education in Swedish compulsory school – reflections on a research project

Karin Sporre [a], Christina Osbeck [b], Annika Lilja [b], David Lifmark [b], Olof Franck [b], Anna Lyngfelt [b]

[a]Department of Applied Educational Science, Umeå University; [b]Department of Pedagogical, Curricular and Professional Studies, University of Gothenburg

Abstract: In this article we draw conclusions from a research project in which a unique model for a fiction-based approach to ethics education was developed and used in three Swedish schools. Nine lessons were carried out during the 2019-2020 school year in five school classes: two in Grade 5 and three in Grade 8. Participating teachers worked with the researchers before and during the project to reflect on and develop the model. Moreover, five classes and teachers with their ordinary ethics education were engaged in the project. Theoretically, the project draws on the works of Martha C. Nussbaum in its choice to employ fiction reading in ethics education, and has a foundation in a sociocultural theory on moral development elaborated by Mark B. Tappan. The article's aim is to critically reflect on the results and design of the project in relation to the theoretical underpinnings, with the purpose of offering reflections on ethics education for further development in both research and educational practice.

KEYWORDS: ETHICS EDUCATION, FICTION READING, MULTIDIMENSIONAL ETHICAL COMPETENCE

About the authors:

Karin Sporre is a Professor in Educational Work at Umeå University with a focus on values, gender and diversity, and a Researcher at IDPP at the University of Gothenburg.

Christina Osbeck is a Professor in Subject Matter Education, specialising in Social Studies, at the Department of Pedagogical, Curricular and Professional Studies at the University of Gothenburg.

Annika Lilja is an Associate Professor in Educational Work at the Department of Pedagogical, Curricular and Professional Studies at the University of Gothenburg.

David Lifmark is a Senior Lecturer in Educational Work at the Department of Pedagogical, Curricular and Professional Studies at the University of Gothenburg.

Olof Franck is a Professor in Subject Matter Education, specialising in Social Studies, and an Associate Professor in Philosophy of Religion at the Department of Pedagogical, Curricular and Professional Studies at the University of Gothenburg.

Anna Lyngfelt is a Professor of Subject Didactics, with a focus on Swedish, at the Department of Pedagogical, Curricular and Professional Studies at the University of Gothenburg.

Introduction

As in many other countries, the Swedish national curriculum expresses high expectations for schools when it comes to developing young citizens' ethical competence. Simultaneously, research shows that this task can be difficult for teachers and that there is an obvious lack of teaching tools (Anderström, 2017; Gardelli, 2016; Thornberg, 2006). In ethical theory, there are quite a few works that consider the potential of fiction reading for growth in ethical competence. However, there is a lack of empirical research that has studied such an education. These circumstances constitute the rationale and background of the research project on fiction-based ethics education that this article presents and critically reflects on. As an introduction, first we provide a description of the curricular context of ethics education in Sweden; we then give a few examples of research on ethics education from the Nordic countries and, finally, specify this article's background and aim.

The curricular context of ethics education in Sweden

Ethics education in Swedish compulsory school has its particular curricular place as part of the school subject *religionskunskap* [Knowledge of Religions], a knowledge area that is referred to in international research as both Religious Education and Religion Education – not necessarily based on being confessional or non-confessional. The Swedish subject, which since the 1960s has been non-confessional and plural, will hereafter be referred to with the widely accepted abbreviation RE.[1] After recent curricular revisions, the broad Swedish RE school subject focuses on three themes: 1) religions and other views on life [Sw. *religioner och andra livsåskådningar*]; 2) religion and society [Sw. *religion och samhälle*]; and 3) ethics and existential questions [Sw. *etik och livsfrågor*] (Skolverket 2022). According to its overall aim, the subject is to provide knowledge about religions and worldviews, create an understanding of the relationship between religions and society, and help prepare students for taking a personal stance on ethical and moral issues. Regarding the theme of ethics and existential questions, the aim is to build an ability 'to discuss ethics, moral issues and existential questions from various perspectives' [Sw. *'att resonera om etik, moraliska frågor och livsfrågor utifrån olika perspektiv'*] (Skolverket 2022). In the former curriculum, which was in effect when the study discussed here took place, the ability involving the development of ethics was expressed as follows: 'to reason and discuss moral issues and values based on ethical concepts and models' [Sw. *'att resonera och argumentera kring moraliska frågeställningar och värderingar utifrån etiska begrepp och modeller'*] (Skolverket 2019). Thus, the emphasis in both curricula is on an argumentative capacity. The main change between the two regarding ethics education is that the former curriculum separated out the theme of existential questions while the

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[1] Particularly South African researchers have insisted on using Religion Education to emphasise the importance of a non-confessional approach in school (cf. Chidester 2003; du Preez & Simmonds 2021). There are also researchers who argue that the school subject should be called Worldview Education (cf. Bråten 2021; Valk, Selçuk & Miedema 2020).

new one combines it with ethics, bringing the two themes into dialogue with one another, so that the previously four themes have become three (cf. Sporre, forthcoming). Furthermore, in Sweden the RE subject is studied jointly by all students, irrespective of the beliefs of the children or their parents, and takes place throughout the nine years of compulsory school. This subject can be said to have an informative and knowledge-orienting emphasis, whereby experiential and meaning-reflective elements are not those that are foregrounded (cf. Franck 2021). Regarding curricula from a number of European countries, Korim and Hanesová (2010) presented an overview of ethics education in school and its relationship to RE (as well as other school subjects), noting for example whether the ethics education was optional, compulsory, or substitutive for RE, and considerable variations emerged. In such a European perspective, the Swedish ethics education can be described as being for all students and compulsory, and having its place within a non-confessional RE subject.

Examples of research on ethics education from the Nordic countries

While national curricula are often clear when it comes to what should be achieved, they seldom express how to carry out the education itself. However, there a few research examples from the Nordic countries that address this issue. For instance, Sando (2019) has proposed an approach to challenges in education using ethical theorists such as Aristotle, K.E. Løgstrup, and Karen Barad, to address the problem of cyberbullying between children and youth in school. Sando concludes by underlining the need for face-to-face encounters, as opposed to digital meetings, if ethical awareness is to grow. In other studies, the focus can be on teacher education and how it can be enlightened through a particular theoretical approach, for example in a study by Lindström and Samuelsson (2018) in which a group of students in teacher training were exposed to constructed ethical dilemmas. Their responses were analysed vis-à-vis previous similar studies based on the theoretical work of Jonathan Haidt, pointing to a need for teachers-to-be to reflect on their own values and methods for teaching ethics. Regarding curricula, international comparative studies demonstrate differences and similarities between the goals of curricula, based on which suggestions are made for how to develop various aspects of ethics education. What can vary can entail, for instance, the focus on action competence (cf. Lilja et al. 2017) or the treatment of aspects of social justice (Sporre 2020), or how matters of cultural plurality or climate change are related to ethics (Sporre 2021). Studies can also focus on other curricular aspects, for example the presence or absence of global aspects in Swedish curricula for ethics education (Sporre 2017) or the treatment of ethical aspects in the school subject of History in Finland and Sweden (Löfström, Ammert, Sharp & Edling 2020).

From what-focused to how-focused research – and the aim of this article

At stake in this article are more immediate questions of classroom didactics in ethics education in compulsory school, and how this topic can be approached through research. Findings from an earlier three-year project, aimed at studying varieties of conceptions of ethical competence possible to teach and learn in compulsory school, formed the

point of departure for the fiction-based project we report on and discuss here. With this new project, the research interest moved from *what* questions to *how* questions concerning ethical competence.

Still, the overarching conclusion of the former what-focused project has been important for this fiction-based ethics education project, as that project provided an understanding of what ethical competence education could aim for. It emphasised the importance of a *multidimensional ethical competence* (Osbeck et al. 2018; Sporre et al. 2020) as its conclusion. Findings from the diverse empirical studies on students (Osbeck & Lilja 2021) and international curricula (Sporre 2020; 2021) indicated the need for certain contemporary issues of ethics to be brought up, and interviews with teachers (Lilja & Osbeck 2020) pointed to crucial competences to be developed. A research overview of 1,940 articles from the field of moral education showed how central dimensions of what is stressed as ethical competence in literature can be summarised to be in line with James Rest's (1986) and his research partners' (Bebeau 2002; Narvaez & Rest 1995) conceptualisations of acting morally, described as four psychological processes. However, the review identified three more dimensions than Rest's as being important for a multidimensional ethical competence, with the studied 1,940 articles representing not only psychological approaches but also pedagogical and philosophical ones, while Rest's (1986) categories were extended. According to our findings, the dimensions of a multidimensional ethical competence are, firstly, moral sensitivity, which includes seeing situations, interpreting them and identifying possible ways to respond to them; secondly, moral judgement, i.e. coming to decisions concerning what actions are morally right; thirdly, moral motivation, prioritising moral values – defined as social values concerning human cooperation in the service of furthering human welfare – over other kinds of values; and fourthly, acting morally, including implementation, which presupposes perseverance and ego strength. Besides these dimensions, expanded from Rest, the three other dimensions that arose from the literature review were being informed/knowledgeable, context-sensitive, and communicative (Osbeck et al. 2018). This conclusion – a broad multidimensional ethical competence – and the need for such a competence was articulated against the narrow reasoning and argumentative focus of the Swedish curriculum, as also expressed in national tests on ethics education (Sporre 2019). This required a new approach to teaching and learning ethics, an understanding that later came to point in the direction of a fiction-based approach.

Given this background, the *aim* of this article is to report and critically reflect on the results and design of the EthiCo II project in relation to its theoretical underpinnings, with the purpose of offering reflections on ethics education for further development in both research and educational practice.

Below we present the material and method used for this article, as well as the theoretical framework, research design and didactical model used in the project. Thereafter, we summarise the findings from the project and conclude with reflections on theory, results and design.

Material and method

Material

The aim of this article is to both present the findings from the conducted studies and critically reflect on their results and design. Thus, the article's specific contribution is that it gathers the findings presented in articles published elsewhere and makes it possible to see what kind of bearing the respective findings might have upon each other; but also, it provides an opportunity for overall reflection on the results and design of the project in relation to the theoretical underpinnings. While at the time of writing the project is still ongoing, all analyses (except one) of the research material have been concluded; and we refer to articles – one in manuscript, two in review process and one about to be published at the time of writing. It has been necessary to make a choice as to what among all the detailed empirical material to discuss in this article. In general, the main findings are reported, but on two occasions additional material from the rich data is also presented. References in the text indicate the articles from which the respective findings come.

As the material for this article is generally articles from the fiction-based (i.e. literature-based) project, the purpose of this project deserves mention: 'to plan and investigate with school teachers to what extent and under what conditions a fiction-based ethics education designed in collaboration can develop students' ethical competence and which difficulties can be identified'.[2]

Method

The method applied to the material for this article is a hermeneutical close reading, firstly in order to concisely summarise the findings of the texts (presented below in the *Findings based on…* sections) and secondly to identify reflections in relation to the design and theoretical framework of the project. Serving as important background to this work were discussions carried out within the research team during the processes of data interpretation and analysis.

For these reflections – our meta-reflections over the project and its results – we draw on a methodological discussion regarding qualitative research and its design and theory

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[2] Purpose translated from project description. See footnote 11 for original wording in Swedish. The research questions were as follows:

1. What kinds of ethical competences do students express at ten participating schools at the beginning and end of the academic year (Grades 5 and 8, respectively)?
2. What kinds of development in ethical competence can be identified during an academic year at students' individual as well as group level, among those who have had fiction-based ethics teaching and those who have had their regular ethics teaching?
3. Which variation concerning dominant speech genres as well as concerning the implementation of the teaching can be identified between the five fiction classes?
4. What insights about the possibilities and difficulties of the teaching do the teachers express during the school year?
5. Can teaching factors and classroom factors be identified that can benefit or limit the development of ethical competence? Research application, project description, p. 7.

as articulated by Robert Thornberg (forthcoming). Thornberg distinguishes between two types of research design: *linear-sequential* and *iterative.* In the first case one designs a study, formulates its research questions, conducts the data collection, and then draws conclusions based on the project one has carried out. In the second type, an iterative design, the research process can be characterised as an 'interplay between literature [i.e. previous research and theory], the research problem, data-gathering and analysis' (Thornberg forthcoming, p. 244). The research problem is then gradually developed through the research process in an interplay in which the researchers move back and forth between data gathering, analysis, and the theoretical framework. The two ways of looking at research design are described as contrasting ideal types, and are also possible to view as being on a continuum. Characteristic of the iterative design is how it opens up for possibilities to formulate explanatory hypotheses based on an interplay between theory and observed data, with the possibility to expand knowledge by formulating new hypotheses in the process of drawing conclusions. Important in such a design is how it takes into account that data may not fit with earlier observations, or what would theoretically be expected but for which new explanations must tentatively be sought, theory developed, and further investigations conducted (Thornberg forthcoming, pp. 245–256). This distinction between designs, *linear-sequential* and *iterative*, has provided the methodological perspective for the reflection of this article on design and result.

What is reported on?

Regarding the summaries of the studies reported in this article, they are: the conditions for *successful group discussions* (Lilja et al. submitted); the complexities of *evaluating ethics education through tests* (Sporre et al. forthcoming); the participating *teachers' views on the possibilities* offered by a fiction-based ethics education (Lyngfelt et al. 2022); and the teachers' views regarding ethical competence in relation to the concept of *a multidimensional ethical competence* (Franck et al. forthcoming).[3] As indicated above, the reflections part of the study is presented as the final section.

Theoretical framework

The theoretical framework of the fiction-based ethics education project – which in this article is also placed in relation to results and design – combines three perspectives. Firstly there is the multidimensional ethical competence, described in the introduction. This understanding of ethical competence forms a crucial background to this project, as it was intended to be the goal for the competence that students were to develop.

Secondly, inspired by Martha C. Nussbaum, we considered it fruitful to apply a fiction-based approach to ethics education (Nussbaum 1990, 2001, 2008). According to Nussbaum, through the reading of fiction, possibilities to know situations, people's

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[3] In the project, central research questions are also directed towards whole class discussions and classroom discourses – analyses we are presently working on.

motives, and feelings, are facilitated and the complexities of ethical challenges may thereby be opened up. Nussbaum (2008) stresses how readers through fiction texts can come into contact with destinies they will never have the chance to be part of themselves; this allows them to develop a sympathetic imagination, a capacity that is cultivated through reading fiction that readers can then become skilled at using in everyday life as well. Furthermore, readers can develop a knowledge of possibilities (through the expanded capacity to imagine) so that they are able to see and be prepared for scenarios that might happen, and to realise alternative actions that do not seem to be at hand but might indeed be present. Furthermore, new visions, hopes, possibilities and beliefs can develop that can shape and have an impact on the readers' future (Nussbaum, 2008).

Thirdly, the theoretical framework includes Mark B. Tappan's sociocultural perspective on how learning and moral development take place (e.g. 2006, 2010; Tappan & Packer 1991). Tappan – who has drawn on Vygotsky and Bakhtin – has stressed how higher psychological processes such as moral functioning are mediated through cultural tools, among which words, language, and forms of discourse are the most central (2006). Moral discourses profoundly shape our moral thinking, feeling, speaking, and acting. In line with Tappan's work, used by us in our educational context, the expansion of students' access to repertoires of moral discourses through narratives is understood as being of utmost importance. Stories, both read and acted socially, can be understood as central and as affecting the available discursive resources. However, which voices are used and privileged depends on the specific context and its conditions. The basic presuppositions of Tappan's work underline how, in moral reflection, an individual tends to be dependent on the available and contextually possible moral discourses to be used in his or her own reflection and communication with others.[4]

Project design and research-ethical considerations

The design of the project needs an overarching description. The research involved five teachers (two in Grade 5 and three in Grade 8) and their classes in the work with and development of the model for fiction reading as part of their ethics education. Five additional teachers and five classes at schools in similar socioeconomic areas, conducting their ordinary ethics education, were involved to a lesser extent. The research team's intent was to create conditions for comparing the development of ethical competence between the classes. To evaluate this, all ten classes were tested at both the start and end of the school year. The test was built on earlier tests used in Sweden for national testing or evaluation of ethics education. Furthermore, all ten teachers were interviewed, also at the beginning and end of the school year, concerning their teaching and what they regarded as important in ethics education. In addition, the research team

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[4] From a research methodological point of view, our sociocultural understanding of learning means that, e.g., students' utterances in group discussions and classroom conversations as well as their written texts are possible to study as expressions of their learning as well as other aspects of the learning situations.

observed and audiotaped all nine lessons in the five classes with the fiction-based ethics education. Notes were taken from the in-between seminars during the school year with the research team and the teachers from the classes using the fiction-based model. Weekly plans from the five teachers conducting their ordinary ethics teaching were gathered, but no observations were conducted in these five classes. In sum, this research project has had a considerable amount of data of various kinds at its disposal for analysis and conclusions.

From a research-ethical point of view, a project involving a large number of students, and not least considerably influencing the teaching of five classes through the testing of a specific model, raises a number of questions. Additionally, being about ethics, it comes close to the kinds of personal philosophical convictions that in Swedish law are to be treated as protected personal information; thus, the project needed to undergo a thorough process of research-ethical vetting by the responsible national body. Permission was sought and granted.[5] All participating students gave written informed consent, and for those under age 15 consent was also given by both their parents/guardians. The participating teachers also consented to their participation. With the close cooperation between the research team and the schools and classes, the provision of information to students, parents/guardians, and teachers was facilitated and carried out by the researchers.

As the funder of this project, the Swedish Institute for Educational Research [Sw. *Skolforskningsinstitutet*], has a clear direction involving research that directly serves actors in the Swedish school system by contributing to the development and learning of students, their system of application demands close cooperation between schools and researchers. This is reflected in their demand that letters of intent of cooperation, between a specific research team and the schools that will participate in a specific project, be included in the application. This assures the funder that there will be cooperation. On the other hand, it causes a research-ethical dilemma: According to official Swedish regulations, research applications are public acts and must be provided on demand to those who request them. This affects researchers' possibilities to, for instance, anonymise the schools where a study has taken place. However, as a research team, we have been careful not to reveal the names of the participating schools, teachers, or students in our scientific reporting and publication. Moreover, as is regularly done, we have anonymised the transcriptions of our audiotaped recordings from both the classrooms and teacher interviews, as well as the students' test results, and stored them according to university regulations.

Regarding the research-ethical matter of having two working models (the ordinary ethics education and the fiction-based model), which could be seen as privileging one or the other of the two student groups, we deem it correct to have carried out our nine lessons over the course of a school year, as time was needed to evaluate the effects of the ethics education assisted by fiction reading. Furthermore, in the light of nine years of compulsory school, any negative effects on the teaching that our model may have

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[5] Dnr 2019-02726.

caused, as compared to ordinary ethics education, can likely be considered minimal, or possible to compensate for. The consumption of time from the teachers and classes conducting their ordinary ethics education is also legitimised as a source of comparison; however, it should be noted how difficult it is to design research in education that is comparative, given the number of factors that influence a particular educational setting. For instance, it is a challenge to construct comparable conditions, as so many other surrounding factors besides the teacher's plans influence what happens in a classroom.

Description of the fiction-based teaching model

In the fiction-based model that was developed in the project, the texts that were chosen are central. The choice of fiction texts for the Grade 5 students (aged 12 years) and the Grade 8 students (aged 15 years) was guided by previous research showing problem areas in which students had indicated a need for ethical competence (Osbeck & Lilja 2021). The four themes that students mentioned were: migration, relationships, climate, and education and the future. Based on these themes, and with the help of teachers and librarians as well as competence within the research team, ten examples of fiction texts were chosen for Grades 5 and 8, respectively, all of them examples of literature for children and youth. Extracts from these books, rather than the complete books, were read. In the tables below, the books' original Swedish titles are listed, with the authors' names and English translations in the footnotes. However, not all the texts shown in the table are fiction; the speeches of Greta Thunberg constitute an exception, as does the text by Alexandra Pascalidou, which is autobiographical.

TABLE 1

The texts used for reading in Grade 5

Themes	From the book[6]	Author
Migration	En ö i havet	Annika Thor
Relationships	George	Alex Gino
Education and future	Risulven, Risulven	Nina Ivarsson
Climate	Kometen kommer	Tove Jansson
	Tal till FN	Greta Thunberg
Education and future	En annan Albin	Johan Unenge
Relationships	Slottet av is	Janina Kastevik
Relationships	#tillsammans #utanför	Camilla Gunnarsson
Migration	Om jag får stanna	Kajsa Gordan
Climate	Emil i Lönneberga	Astrid Lindgren

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[6] English titles (literal translations or existing titles): An island in the sea; George; Risulven, Risulven [a name given to a boy]; Comet in Moominland; Speech to the UN; Another Albin; The castle of ice; #Together #left out; If I can stay; That boy Emil.

TABLE 2

The texts used for reading in Grade 8

Themes	From the book[7]	Author
Relationships	Bortom mammas gata	Alexandra Pascalidou
Climate	Mitt klimat-katastrofala liv	Saci Lloyd
Migration	Alltid flykting	Monica Zak
Migration	Om det var krig i Norden	Janne Teller
Climate	Det eviga regnets dag För lat för klimat	Ray Bradbury Hedvig Ljungar
Education and future	Svenhammeds journaler	Zulmir Becevic
Education and future	Inuti huvudet är jag kul	Lisa Bjärbo
Relationships	När hundarna kommer	Jessica Schiefauer
Relationships	Pojken i randig pyjamas	John Boyne

The nine ethics lessons were carried out during the 2019-2020 school year. During the previous semester, preparatory seminars had been held with the participating five teachers, who also met regularly with the researchers during the course of the school year. Each of the nine ethics lessons started with 20 minutes of the teacher reading aloud a chosen part of the fiction text for that specific lesson. Thereafter followed a task, for individuals or pairs, intended to allow them to 'dig deeper' into the themes of the specific text. After this followed a group discussion among the students themselves based on the same questions each time, which first were to be answered in close relation to the specific narrative and then, when asked a second time, the students were to leave the specific text behind and take a more general approach. The questions were:

What would you say the story you have been working with is about?
Do you consider that it has a specific message, something it wants to say? What?
What thoughts about right or wrong does it evoke?
…about good or evil?
…about what a good person is?
…about what a good life is?
If we leave this specific story, what do you regard as important thoughts about…
…right or wrong?
…good or evil?
…a good person?
…a good life?

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[7] English titles (literal translations or existing titles): Beyond Mum's street; The carbon diaries 2015; Always a refugee; If there were a war in the Nordic countries; All summer in a day; Too lazy for the climate; Svenhammed's journals; Inside my head I am funny; The eyes of the lake; The boy in the striped pyjamas.

As can be noted, the first two questions address the specific story and its content. Together with the third question, the tasks address several of the seven dimensions of an ethical competence that we have stressed in our multidimensional understanding of ethical competence. The third question, with its four aspects, is intended to address moral, or ethical, dimensions of human co-existence and is partly modelled on a definition involving three questions concerning ethics both ultimately and generally, as formulated by Göran Bexell: 'Ethics, ultimately and in general, is about three questions: What is morally good and evil? What is morally right and wrong? What is a good human being like and what does a good society look like?'[8] (Bexell 1997, p. 13) [Our translation]. It needs to be noted that, in comparison to Bexell's definition, the last question posed to the students did not address societal aspects like Bexell's question of what characterises a good society; instead, it asked what the students considered to be a good life. We will return to this matter in the concluding discussion. In sum, the questions were formulated in order to direct the development towards a multidimensional ethical competence, which was the aim of the teaching.

After the students had discussed the questions in their small groups of three to five, the teachers summoned their attention and asked them to present to the whole class what they regarded as the most important aspects of their discussions. The lessons generally lasted 80 minutes.

Findings from the project

Findings based on analyses of group discussions

In the five participating classes, 128 group discussions were recorded during the course of the project among the small groups in which the students discussed the questions indicated. As a result of the analyses, four conditions were found to be crucial for the development of a multidimensional ethical competence in the small groups: 1) a focus on task; 2) interest in each other's contributions; 3) knowledge about the context; and 4) the encounter with different ethical positions. Through empirical extracts, examples of these tendencies are shown in the article (Lilja et al. submitted). One group discussion exemplified in the article (Lilja et al. submitted) contains an example of knowledge of the context that helps in a discussion on the climate. It becomes obvious that one student moves the discussion forward, again and again, by responding to the questions of others and by feeding her/his knowledge into the discussion. In another example, from a Grade 5 group, the students are to discuss a text about Emil of Lönneberga, by Swedish children's author Astrid Lindgren, originally chosen by the researchers to represent an older and assumedly simpler lifestyle from a sustainability perspective. However, one of the groups sees an entirely different dilemma: that of the

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[8] Swedish original text: 'Etik handlar ytterst och i allmänhet om tre frågor: Vad är moraliskt gott och ont? Vad är moraliskt rätt och orätt? Hur är en god människa beskaffad och hur ser ett gott samhälle ut?'

domestic violence Emil's father inflicts on his son, threatening to hit him and repeatedly forcing him to seek refuge in the family's woodshed. The children's discussion evolves around whether it would not be morally right – or almost a duty – for Emil's mother to divorce his father and thus secure a better environment for her son, but that she would likely have the problem of not being able to earn a living if she did this (Lilja et al. submitted). Interesting to note here is that in the discussion within this small group, the chosen text, with one intention behind its selection, opened up to a different moral problem that the children saw, allowing them to use and share the knowledge they had. The format of a non-teacher-led activity involving free group discussions allowed for this freedom in the educational setting.

To also be noted in relation to the analyses of the group discussions is that, in one of his works, Mark B. Tappan (1998), drawing on the work of Vygotsky, discusses the role of what he calls 'more competent others'. In an educational setting, this can refer to either adults or peers in a class. This can be seen to be the case when someone provides knowledge of importance, for example in the cases above, feeding in that a woman might have difficulties in economically sustaining herself and a family in a divorce situation, or being more knowledgeable than the other students about the matter of climate. Generally speaking, through small group discussions, educational situations arise in which students can take on the role of more competent others.

When analysing the fourth aspect, different ethical positions expressed in the small group discussions, the analysis placed special focus on responses to the question of what a good person is, as these responses were rich in the material. Four aspects stood out. A good person is someone: 1) with moral expectations on themselves, 2) who acts to solve moral problems, and 3) who knows how to treat others fairly. There were also examples in which the students rather 4) problematised the possibility to state meanings of a good person, since this tends to vary depending on the angle from which the situation is viewed (Lilja et al. submitted).

In relation to Tappan's work (1998), the group discussions exemplify learning situations as being zones of proximal development. It is also obvious in studying the material that the students again and again express what Tappan (2010, 1991) calls moral authorship. Additionally, the fiction texts function as opening up to situations, as well as bringing in knowledge about them; in Nussbaum's (1990) terms, providing examples of the complexities of how to live, which in educational settings add and might connect to students' experiences. This testifies to the capacity of literature to depict the ambiguity of ethical dimensions of human life.

One matter that the participating teachers brought to our attention as researchers was that there may be a need to change the composition of members in the small groups, as some groups did not function well. The group composition remained the same during the course of the research project, however, to offer possibilities to note the development over time within the groups. Regarding development, it was noted that the Grade 5 students discussed ethical matters closer to themselves while the Grade 8 students could take a more general approach to matters. On the other hand, the chosen texts for Grade 5 depicted slightly more personally close ethical matters, for example relational challenges.

Findings based on pre- and post-test comparisons

As indicated, we tested the ten classes at both the start and end of the school year. With the prevailing focus in the Swedish curriculum on an argumentative capacity as the goal of ethics education, also represented in the national tests (cf. Sporre 2019), we were eager to construct a different test with a less severe focus on argumentative and reasoning capacities. Still, however, to create conditions for comparison with results from students in earlier tests of ethics education, we opted to reuse tasks from earlier tests. We developed a test with nine tasks for Grade 8 and six for Grade 5. These were taken from the national test (NT) from 2013-2014[9] and two earlier national evaluations [Nationella Utvärderingar] (NU), from 2003 and 1995[10], with content as sketched in Table 3. The two tests were almost identical, but Tasks 3 to 5 in Grade 8 were not given in Grade 5. For Task 9 we constructed a new question using a different picture. For the earlier tests, it is noted in parentheses the grade in which they were given, 6 or 9. This could be of interest as it does not correspond with the grades of the students in our study.

TABLE 3

Content of tasks in the constructed tests for Grades 5 and 8, respectively.

Grade 5 – six tasks	Grade 8 – nine tasks
How to be a friend – NT (6) 2013	How to be a friend – NT (6) 2013
Victimisation – NT (6) 2013	Victimisation – NT (6) 2013
'Stealing' medicine – NU (9) 2003 & 1995	Forgiveness – NT (9) 2013
More attention to a student in need – NU (9) 2003, 1995 & 1992	Ethical theories – NT (9) 2013
Too much money back – NU (9) 2003 & 1995	Death penalty – via ethical theories – NT (9) 2013
The boat task – new version of NU task 1998	'Stealing' medicine – NU (9) 2003 & 1995
	More attention to a student in need – NU (9) 2003, 1995 & 1992
	Too much money back – NU (9) 2003 & 1995
	The boat task – new version of NU task 1998

With an interest in a more multidimensional ethical competence, we invested considerable time in analysing the chosen test tasks to construct an assessment scheme that would do better justice to more dimensions of ethical competence than merely the argumentative, and therefore classified the items in relation to a multidimensional

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[9] Available on the website https://www.gu.se/didaktik-pedagogisk-profession/nationella-prov-i-religionskunskap, retrieved 2022 05 08.
[10] Skolverket, (1997). *Utvärdering av grundskolan 1995 : UG 95. Resultat från en kunskapsmätning 1995*, Stockholm: Skolverket; Skolverket (2003). *Nationella utvärderingen av grundskolan 2003*. Stockholm: Skolverket.

understanding of ethical competence, i.e. the seven different dimensions (see *Introduction*).

The test results showed no statistical differences in performance between the classes that had used the fiction-based model and those that had conducted their ordinary ethics education; rather, the results pointed in various directions and showed no consistent patterns (Sporre et al. forthcoming). Thus, given these test results, the students in the fiction-reading classes showed neither more nor less of a multidimensional ethical competence after the school year with the fiction-based model of ethics education as compared to those who had received their ordinary ethics education.

Important to note is that there are three entities that came to have a bearing on one another in the testing. What was sought was a multidimensional ethical competence; what was tried were two teaching models, one based in fiction reading and one being an ordinary ethics education; and thirdly, a testing instrument was used that was built on previously used test tasks, but with new assessment instructions. As findings of this study, central reflections have emanated in the form of questions like:

Can a *multidimensional ethical competence,* which is supposed to have several dimensions, be tested when some of the dimensions are underrepresented in the test used, given the limited number of test tasks? Is it not the case that tests presuppose a certain similarity between the tasks included in a test, with several items testing for the same aspects, while it is difficult to test something with many dimensions, especially on a fairly short test?

What correspondence was there between the *fiction-based teaching approach* and the test; was there a tension between the practice of interpreting specific fiction stories and a demand for a more general ethics ability, which the tests were directed towards, in tasks with examples not focused on in the teaching series?

Finally, how might a test of *ethics education* with two test occasions, and with considerable time elapsing between the occasions, and the presentation of the **same** test twice be received by students? Instances could be noted in which it was obvious that some students found it hard to motivate themselves to perform a second time.

Findings based on analyses of teacher interviews focusing on fiction reading

Central questions in the analysis of the interviews with the five teachers who used the fiction-reading model in their classrooms (Lyngfelt et al. 2022) concerned what teachers perceive to be the opportunities that fiction reading provides in developing ethical competence within ethics education. Does fiction, for example, have the potential to encourage students to accept certain conditions as imaginable, or create motivation for ethical change, by means of its capacity to evoke feelings?

In the works of Martha C. Nussbaum (1990, 2001), literature is understood to assist in developing 'moral imagination' by widening readers' empathy and thus helping them understand people in circumstances different to their own. Central to Nussbaum's (2001) work is also her understanding of emotions. She explicates how emotions are

tied to specific objects of special personal value, but are also linked to evaluative judgements of what seems good to do.

In the analytic framework of the current study (Lyngfelt et al. 2022), another element is brought in as well; namely, a discussion on play and learning as elaborated by Pramling, Wallerstedt, Lagerlöf & Pramling Samuelsson (2019), who emphasise various dimensions of play, for example its capacity to help those who are playing to distinguish between what is and what could be. This distinction is developed in the analyses of the teacher interviews when the teachers, for example, point to the capacity of the literature to open up possibilities for students to accept what they encounter in the fiction reading as a matter that *is*; i.e., to accept something that is being told in a story as possibly real, and not question something simply based on the fact that it is unfamiliar to them. Additionally, the interviewees point to how emotions seem to play a crucial role in determining when a move is possible from what the reality of the fiction texts is to what it could be – i.e., what could be a justified or wished-for change (Lyngfelt et al. 2022). In this way, Nussbaum's theory of emotions (2001) and the role literature can play (Nussbaum 1990) form the background to an analysis in which the didactical potential of fiction reading is confirmed, to help students go beyond their own experiences and see other situations as real, while also being prepared to see what could be changed.

In the interviews, the five participating teachers are clearly in favour of using fiction reading in ethics education. They elaborate on the advantages of the approach, not least the possibilities it offers not only to expand the experiences with the potential for students to both relate to and identify with characters in the texts, but also to be able to bridge gaps that the lack of experiences on the students' part may have created. The teachers stress the possibilities to relate to the concrete situations as told in the literature, but to also move beyond them (Lyngfelt et al. 2022).

What is not mentioned in the article is how a joint reading in the classroom can create common references that might be used later. One example of this comes from the teacher seminars after the concluded year of ethics lessons. At one of these seminars a teacher told the researchers that the year following the study, when his/her students were in Grade 9 and were to plan for their own future in making choices as to how to continue their studies (a fairly decisive moment for most Swedish students), they spontaneously returned to one of the texts they had read the year before. This text was about the teenager Svenhammed, whose father more or less hindered his son from finding his own way. In these students' real-life situation in which they were to choose their own future – their own way ahead – they could look back, have a joint reference, and draw on their own earlier discussions from their ethics education. Thus, there might also be long-lasting effects of a research project that interviews at the formal end of a project cannot capture – a matter to reflect on regarding research design.

Findings based on analyses of teacher interviews focusing on ethics

In the interviews, not only the five teachers who worked with the fiction-based model but also the other five teachers in the study gave their more general perceptions

regarding how to teach ethics in compulsory school in order for an ethical competence to develop.

In the analyses of these interviews, five themes are first articulated in an inductive analysis involving what the opportunities and challenges in teaching ethics are (Franck et al. forthcoming). The teachers mention *the frames* (such as the time set aside for ethics), *the students* (their age, interest in ethics etc.), *relationships* (teacher-students, and students-students), *the planning of lessons*, and *the use of fiction texts*. A general conclusion from the teachers was that teaching ethics is different to teaching other subjects, as it involves not only values in general but also the values of the students themselves (Franck et al. forthcoming). One matter to note regarding lesson planning is that, among the teachers who did not use the fiction-reading model and planned alone in relation to the curriculum goals, the teachers in the project consistently followed the joint lesson planning, assisting one another in this, and could also draw on the work from the seminars with the researchers.

As all teachers were interviewed twice, at the beginning and end of the school year, opportunities arose to compare their views over time (Franck et al. forthcoming). Over the course of the school year, the teachers who had been part of the fiction-reading project seemed to have deepened their views regarding ethical competence, seeing it as more complex after the year. They still found it difficult to define, but were definitely more elaborate about what an ethical competence could consist of. According to the teachers, part of the *complexity* involves the matter that ethical dilemmas can have several answers and need to be approached with *sensitivity* and respect for the approaches of others. A third concept that marked the teachers' understanding of the character of ethics and ethics education according to the analysis, in addition to sensitivity and complexity, is *ambiguity*. Furthermore, the authors (Franck et al. forthcoming) conclude that a multidimensional ethical competence is to be seen as a whole and cannot be torn into parts. In the interviews, sensitivity in the encounter with ethical challenges stands out as a crucial ability to be developed.

Reflections on the results and design of the project

In this concluding discussion we bring together the different parts of the article and reflect on the project's results and design in relation to the theoretical underpinnings, with the purpose of offering reflections on ethics education for further development in both research and educational practice. Even though the results and design of both research and teaching are tightly linked to each other, the ambition is to start with a discussion of research design, and thereafter focus more on results that are relevant to ethics education.

Design – How to do research on effects of a fiction-based ethics education?

In the EthiCo II project we carried out nine lessons in five classes, audiotaped them, twice interviewed ten teachers, tested ten classes, and held seminars between the research team and five teachers before, during, and after the school year. We had three

starting points: a sociocultural theoretical approach to moral development, focusing on language resources as crucial for the expansion of moral discourses; fiction reading as a chosen strategy to provide for more moral discourses in the classes; and an interest in the development of a multidimensional ethical competence. How can such an approach to ethics education reasonably be evaluated? We will start with some reflections on the project's theoretical perspectives.

Firstly, it is necessary to note from a meta-ethical point of view that the choice of Mark B. Tappan's understanding of moral development (Tappan 1991, 2006, 2010), with its focus on language and moral discourses, implies a stance in which language is seen as carrying value elements in itself; i.e., language is not neutral. Such a standpoint is philosophically developed in, for example, the work of Philippa Foot (1958/2002). Her argument is that our everyday language carries values within its expressions and is not value-neutral. This means that in communication between human beings, for understanding to arise, it is necessary that our use of words is guided by the same criteria. When Foot discusses this, her example is the word 'rude'. She demonstrates how common criteria guide the human use of such a word, also including moral dimensions and moral evaluation. Her argument also demonstrates how moral dimensions of language are sustained by understandings and evaluations of facts (Foot 1958/2002, pp. 1–11); i.e., facts and values cannot be separated. Tappan's (and our) focus on language and discourses is sustained by such a philosophical understanding of language.

Secondly, we did not choose to work with Martha C. Nussbaum's theoretical perspective to foster virtues in the students in our study; neither are we convinced that fiction reading can be said to be *the* best way to develop ethical competence. However, we do share the interest expressed by Nussbaum in the potential of fiction texts to form a forceful complement to philosophically created and phrased ethical dilemmas often used in ethics education; this, as fiction texts present more situational aspects of a situation to readers and may engage a person's emotions and imagination at the same time as their reflective and intellectual capacities (see e.g. Nussbaum 1990, p. 46). So, basically, the use of fiction reading in this project's design was intended to provide more exemplary human experiences for students to relate to, in various tasks and group discussions.

Thirdly, as stated, the multidimensional ethical competence that was of interest to develop through these ethics lessons was based on a review of research articles in the fields of moral, ethics, and character education reviewed in the EthiCo I project (Osbeck et al. 2018). The seven dimensions that emerged as central have been summarised as moral sensitivity, judgement, motivation, implementation, informed/knowledgeable, context-sensitive, and communicative (Osbeck et al. 2018). This gave us a more complex understanding of ethical competence than is present, for example, in Swedish curricula.

Given this theoretical framework as a background to the EthiCo II project, with its aim 'to plan and develop, together with teachers, a fiction-based ethics education to determine the extent to which and under what conditions it can develop students' ethical

competence and what difficulties might be encountered in doing this'[11], one can note that the chosen design is one of several possible ones. For us, Thornberg's discussion on qualitative research and the distinction between a linear-sequential design and an iterative design offered valuable insights and stimulated our reflections regarding the relationships between theory and empirical results in relation to our research design and ways of drawing conclusions.

Analysing the design and results of this project in relation to each other has provided several insights. If one understands research processes as linear-sequential studies in which the gathered data give clear-cut and direct answers to the research questions, this has not been the case in the current project. Instead, the results have given the research team impulses to return, critically review assumptions, understand the chosen theoretical starting points in more depth, re-evaluate the chosen methods, and understand the research project in a different light. So, the project can be understood from an iterative, abductive perspective. However, it might have also been beneficial to use a design that deliberately planned for such iterative processes from the start, like in, for example, action research with repetitive loops (O'Grady, 2009).

A planned iterative project design might have affected, for example, the way we worked with the evaluation of development in ethics on the individual level. The current tests did not assist us in knowing what kind of development took place among the students. The efforts, though, offered us several insights into the complexities of test construction, and we realise that this is indeed a complex matter, not least in ethics education. The assessment of knowledge might better be done by teachers close to their classes and their teaching, but testing cannot be ruled out in principle. Instead, the experience can encourage researchers to be more skilled in this area and better reflect on the important triad of target knowledge–teaching–test. It is important that teaching that is known for its good results can also evidentially show this. For our project, our testing leaves us lacking knowledge on an individual level even if, from the work in small groups and later also from analysed whole class discussions, we know a considerable deal about students' learning. A systematic iterative design might have made us aware of this earlier and instead, also on the basis of the sociocultural perspective on moral development, we may have been able to develop another way to grasp the individual level such as interviews in which students are given opportunities to verbally show their moral discourses and possible development.

A planned and systematically conducted iterative design of the project might also have affected the teaching model and perhaps stressed the importance of explicit teaching of specific concepts such as different dimensions of ethical competence. In the group discussions, these concepts might have functioned as summarising checklists in order to determine whether the case had been sufficiently explored. Also, a more explicit teaching of other kinds of ethical concepts – for instance, those that are distinct and

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[11] Translated from the Swedish project description, original wording '*Projektet syftar till att med lärare planera och undersöka i vilken utsträckning och under vilka förutsättningar en i samverkan utformad skönlitteraturbaserad etikundervisning kan utveckla 14-åringars etiska förmåga samt vilka svårigheter som kan identifieras.*' (Project description, p. 7).

useful in clarifying the nature of a relationship, situation, or action that is the target of an ethical analysis – could have been focused on. For example, it has been shown that students' reasoning about forgiveness is sharpened through the use of concepts like remorse, restitution, and conscience (Osbeck 2017a). Proverbs can also serve a clarifying purpose in this regard (Osbeck 2017b).

Results – conclusions for ethics education

In general, we conclude that a sociocultural learning approach to ethics education as suggested by Mark B. Tappan, along with a fiction-reading model like the one we developed inspired by the works of Martha C. Nussbaum, has a great deal to offer. It provides a variety of language resources and opens up for more moral discourses to become present in the classroom. Combined with small group discussions, it offers students opportunities to experiment with language, formulate their ideas, and assume moral authorship (Tappan 2010, 1991; cf. Sporre, Lotz-Sisitka & Osbeck 2022). Furthermore, in bringing the works of Nussbaum (1990, 2001) into dialogue with the work on play by Pramling et al. (2019), our analysis of teacher interviews clarifies aspects of the possibilities for students to engage emotionally with texts, and the importance of this in the development of ethical sensitivity (Lyngfelt et al. 2022). When it comes to a multidimensional ethical competence, our overall results indicate that it is important to regard ethical competence as complex and in need of personal involvement from both teachers and students for its development (Franck et al. forthcoming). Expanding one's repertoire of moral discourses is demanding and, as shown from the group conversations, it is important to be focused on the task (Lilja et al. submitted).

Regarding the matter, indicated above, in which we deviated from the definition of what questions are foundational for ethics as stated by Göran Bexell (1997, p. 13) using the question about what a good life consists of rather than what characterises a good society, we note that we would do this differently today. We regard it to be of the utmost importance to open up ethics education to societal questions even when they are not close at hand. In line with Vygotsky's thoughts on the zone of proximal development, stressing the importance of pointing out what is not present, such a focus would most likely contribute to ethical development. Although our students articulated societal questions in relation to the chosen themes, such as migration, climate etc., a more explicit didactical focus on societal aspects would likely strengthen an approach like ours as contemporary discussions of what constitutes a good life can run the risk of taking on overly individual dimensions. As pointed out already by neo-Aristotelian moral philosopher Bernard Williams (1985), the question of ethics is not 'How should **I** live?' but rather 'How should **one** live?', thus opening the individual ethical question towards others, and indeed all of humanity.

Returning to both Tappan and Nussbaum and the contributions of narratives in the expansion of moral discourses, it could be valuable to work more thoroughly with the sample of texts. The potential for expansion would be greater if one – deliberately, concerning each theme – tried to ensure that different, and perhaps conflicting, perspectives were represented by the texts. Systematically following how such a change

in the choice of texts affects the rest of the teaching model, for instance allowing for different kinds of discussions, seems to be an interesting and important research task for further research in this area.

In relation to the Swedish RE curriculum, approaching ethics education in the way our project has suggested, with its open approach to the fiction texts and not opting for, for instance, a more specific virtue-based character education, is in line with the non-confessional and pluralistic approach of the curriculum. Our model also, we argue, offers creative, possibly new, ways for students to engage, personally, with ethical challenges. However, the focus of our project might have meant that the participating teachers focused more exclusively on a fiction-based ethics education and that other aspects, such as concept-building, knowledge of ethical theory, and training of argumentative capacity may have been set aside or given less attention. Having said this, however, we still believe that the combined theoretical approach – with its sociocultural learning theoretical base, the fiction reading and discussions to provide discourses, and seeing ethical competence as multidimensional – provides crucial elements both for work in classrooms and for curricular development. For the participating teachers, we believe that the opportunity to develop theoretical lenses has been most valuable and will certainly affect their further reflections and development of their ethics education but also more generally their understanding of teaching and learning and their daily educational practices.

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