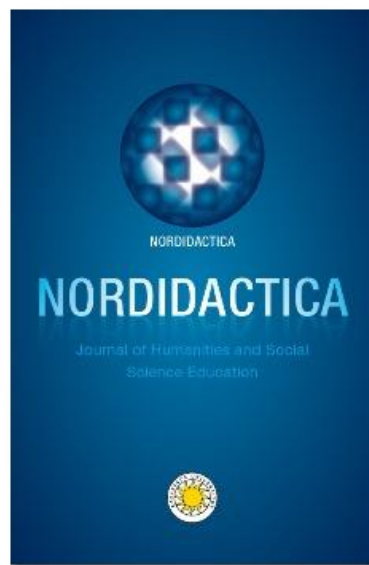


## **Editorial 2022:2**

**Teaching and learning ethics in the Humanities and Social  
Science school subjects**

**Jan Lofström & Merete Wiberg**



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## Editorial 2022:2

### Teaching and learning ethics in the Humanities and Social Science school subjects

Jan Löfström & Merete Wiberg, guest editors

As Philip Jackson and his colleagues in the book *The Moral Life of Schools* (1993) have shown, explicit and implicit messages about moral right and wrong circulate in innumerable ways in the everyday-life of schools. They range from curriculum documents and “The Rules of the Class” to unconsciously expressed non-verbal signals that convey moral judgment on what is the right thing to do. This is a major part of what the school as an institution does in moral education. However, also the more formalised, explicit and purposeful processing of ethical issues as part of teaching takes place in many different contexts in school.

In some of the Nordic countries, there is a school subject where discussions on ethical questions are central in the curriculum. For example, the subject that in Finnish schools since the 1980’s is the alternative to the non-confessional subject Religion is named ‘Secular Ethics’. The name is a little narrow, considering that in Secular Ethics also questions that are generally about world views are addressed. Obviously, school subjects like ‘*kristendomskundskab*’ in Denmark, ‘*religionskunskap*’ in Sweden, and ‘*religion og livssynsfag*’ in Norway are subjects where ethical questions are as if by definition in the curriculum. The same applies also to the subject Philosophy. However, educational aims connected with development of the students’ moral judgment and processing of ethical issues can be present also in school subjects such as History, Biology, Economics, and Drama. The ethical dimension in the subject may not be found in the curriculum under the heading “ethics” but it may be present in references to how teaching aims to support sustainable future, democratic citizenship, human rights, or some other positive societal goal.

However, it may not be clear in the curriculum what teachers should do, and how, when addressing ethical questions in the subject(s) that they teach. There is probably a widespread agreement among teachers that teaching to identify and reflect ethical questions is important when educating students to be good and just members of society. Nevertheless, the question remains what this entails and how the teacher can practice moral education, for example in the History classroom or Biology classroom or Mother Language classroom? Teachers of these subjects may not have got further training in ethics or moral education. This can be a shortcoming, considering that many topical questions about technology, social media, bioscience, economy, history, etc. are ethically heavily loaded and the students may like to discuss their moral aspects in the classroom. Thus it would be good that the teacher has some knowledge of moral philosophy and moral psychology. Moreover, such questions are characteristically cross-disciplinary which underlines the need to collaboration between teachers of different school subjects.

Processing ethical questions is a cognitive skill that can be developed, but moral education can also be seen as a wider question. “Moral education” covers a narrow and a broad interpretation of what is also referred to as values education. In the Nordic countries the concept of *Bildung* (bildning) has had a prominent place in education. In the *Bildung* framework teaching and learning ethics typically is not seen as a separate part but integrated in all subjects and school activities. A tension may exist between promoting particular moral values or character virtues and emphasising skills of reflection and reasoning on ethical questions. Such a tension can be set against the relief of the developments in education policy where the keywords are competences and assessment. How does this impact the content and practice of moral education and teaching and learning of ethics? In the current Finnish Core Curriculum for Basic Education, for example, one of the teaching aims in Social Studies is to help the students develop their ethical judgment in societal questions. This ability, however, is not to be assessed when grading the student; it is something that the students are advised to reflect by themselves as part of self-assessment. Whether ethical judgment here should be seen as a skill that is assessed and graded by particular criteria connects with how moral education and learning ethics is interpreted in terms of the *Bildung* tradition or the present-day discourse of competences.

For this issue of *Nordidactica*, contributions were invited that focus on teaching and learning ethics in the school subjects History, Social Studies, Religious Education, Geography and Philosophy, and in cross-disciplinary settings that these subjects are part of. The contributions could be theoretical, empirical, or methodological. The topics could include the following, for example:

- The past, the present and the future of ethics education in the Nordic countries.
- Ethics education in relation to values education, character education, and other approaches to moral education. Ethics education as part of the Nordic *Bildung* tradition.
- Tensions between normative ethics and critical reflection in ethics education.
- The conceptual and institutional framework of ethics education in the Nordic countries. The questions of providing ethics education as a separate subject or an integrated subject in the Humanities and Social Sciences or in cross-disciplinary contexts in relation to these school subjects.
- Analyses of curriculum, learning materials, and classroom teaching.
- Concepts and theories of subject didactics in ethics education.
- The educational backgrounds, identities and perceptions of teachers who teach ethics.
- Assessment in ethics education: approaches and problems.

The invitation resulted in the following five articles that we are delighted to present.

Carla Nielsen's article, “Preparatory remarks concerning an 'existence didactics' in ethics education in the subject Christianity (Kristendomskundskab) in the Danish primary and lower secondary school”, deals with the existential perspective of the

Christianity curriculum in Denmark. In Denmark, ethics education is part of the subject 'Christianity'. The paper draws on Frede V. Nielsen's idea of 'existence didactics', Paul Tillich's existential view on religion and Hartmut Rosa's concept of the uncontrollable. Nielsen argues that an existential aspect is required when dealing with ethics because of the content of the curriculum of Christianity, which includes themes such as the meaning of life.

In their article, "Students' performance in ethics assignments in the Finnish Matriculation Examination 2017–2021", Mika Perälä and Eero Salmenkivi discuss Finnish students' knowledge in metaethics and normative ethics. They suggest that students' competences in metaethics and normative ethics intertwine, and the challenge for the teacher is how to support the development of both of them. In their view, ethics teaching should support the students moving from basic competences of thinking in normative ethics, towards more elaborated thinking in metaethics, which entails problematising also morality as something distinct from legal norms and cultural conventions, for example. Hence metaethical considerations would be important to raise in the context of issues of normative ethics. As the authors contend, this challenge is relevant in many school subjects but here their focus is on Philosophy which is an obligatory school subject in the Finnish Upper Secondary School. Their empirical data is from the Philosophy Exams in the national Matriculation Examination which is a methodologically interesting case of using data from a large-scale national assessment.

The article "Ethics as intended, actualized and evaluated content in the subject Christianity/Religion in teacher education", by Hanne Fie Rasmussen, Julie Nørgaard and Pernille Julie Østergaard Nielsen, discusses ethics as incorporated in other subjects in the Danish teacher education programme. The paper uses the Danish educational researcher Frede V. Nielsen's approach to didactic content and interviews with teachers in teacher education, conducted by the authors. The theoretical framework focuses on ethics as an intended content, an actualized content and ethics as an evaluated content. Further, Rasmussen et al. discuss how teacher students are prepared to dealing with ethics in their future teaching profession.

In her article Maren Lytje discusses what knowledge content to use in order to support democratic education in History teaching. In the article it is suggested that also when ethics appears central to democratic education, it is problematic if democratic education is reduced to ethics where ethics is about good life rather than justice. The question of good life may look more relevant to pose in school because it is easily connected with the ethical-psychological aims in education, whereas the question of justice closely relates to political and structural issues that seem to go beyond what the school institution can impact. Lytje ponders upon the notion of recognition but wants to avoid its sometimes narrow focus on identity politics. For that purpose she mobilises Nancy Fraser's theory of justice. To bring these theoretical considerations in contact with life in school she discusses how the concept of powerful knowledge can be used to combine Fraser's insights on the material nature of justice with a plausible argument on what content in History teaching can promote social justice and democracy.

The paper "Fiction-based ethics education in Swedish compulsory school – reflections on a research project", by Karin Sporre, Christina Osbeck, Annika Lilja,

David Lifmark, Olof Franck and Anna Lyngfelt, takes its starting point in a research project on fiction-based ethics education. The project builds on an earlier project concerning ethical competencies in Swedish compulsory schools. The article presents the results from research in three Swedish schools involving five teachers and their classes (Grade 5 and 8). Five other schools were involved in a comparative study. The teachers used a fiction-reading model in the classroom in order to promote the students' ethical imagination and reflection. In its theoretical base the article draws from Martha Nussbaum and the sociocultural theory on moral development by Mark Tappan. The purpose of the project is to offer reflections on ethics education for further development in research and educational practice.