

**Building a Human Rights Culture**  
South African and  
Swedish Perspectives

Karin Sporre &  
H Russel Botman [eds.]

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**SOCIAL CONDITIONS  
AND HUMAN RIGHTS**

## PRETENDING DEMOCRACY

### LEARNING AND TEACHING PARTICIPATION IN TWO SWEDISH SCHOOLS

BY ÅSA BARTHOLDSSON

In this article, I will try to sketch the complex of ideas that forms the actual practices that enable children to participate<sup>1</sup> in democratic processes concerning their everyday school life or disables them. “Participation” refers to both having “a voice” and being listened to. The Swedish National Curriculum (Utbildningsdepartementet 1994) states that the teacher should ensure that all pupils, irrespective of sex, social or cultural background, are given real influence over their own education. This influence should increase with advancing age and maturity (Ibid.:14). This corresponds with the Convention on the Rights of the Child, Article 12, where similar formulations are found:

States Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child.<sup>2</sup>

When reading these documents, I cannot find that they elaborate on the concept of maturity. Therefore, in an implicit way, they seem to refer to some general assumptions about maturity. How children’s opinions are to be treated seems, as I see it, to be left to doxic (Popkewitz 1998), and sometimes subjective ideas about what constitutes a mature human being. To be in position to define who is mature and who is not means possessing power over the object being defined. The French philosopher, Michel Foucault (1998), states this is the case with most power relations; they manifest themselves more on an interactional micro level than through national policy (see also Rose 1999). In most societies, power is distributed unevenly with age being one important structural principle.

As a social anthropologist, my starting point is that ideas about what constitutes childhood and the nature of the child are culturally defined and, the-

1 By “participate” I refer to processes that active agents take part in, in order to come to some kind of understanding about something of concern or interest for those involved .

2 Convention on the Rights of the Child, Article 12. <http://www.boes.org/un/engun-c.html>

refore, social and cultural constructions (James & Prout 1997; Poluha et al 2000; Norman 1996). Different ideas of childhood shapes actual childhood and children in different ways. This has consequences for how social practices take shape (James & Prout 1997). Whether, and in what ways, children should have influence depends on how children are viewed within a given society, at a given time. Adult ideas about the autonomy of the child influences children's own conceptions of what is possible to influence and how this should be done (Lovshal Nielsen 1998). Ideas about children's participation, therefore, exist in a complex of ideas concerning culturally specific ways of viewing children as well as ideas about what teacher professionalism is all about.

In order to illustrate the complexity surrounding ideas about children's participation, I will deal in this paper with how the teacher's task of turning children into nice persons is carried out in two Swedish schools. I will also give some examples of how children's participation is practiced and, at the same time, undermined by expectations that children should display a positive attitude, should be reflexive and emphatic (rather than negative, critical and angry) and the strategies children employ in order to meet/resist the expectations on them to have "the right attitude". Positioning research at this micro level, a clash between policies, practice, ends and perspectives is exposed.

In this ethnographic description, the examples presented come from field notes and interviews taken during my anthropological fieldwork with a pre-school class (16 children, 5–6 year olds, that I followed between August 1999–June 2002) a class in the fifth grade (27 children, 11–12 year olds) where I conducted intensive everyday participant observation from January to August 2001. During my fieldwork I have attempted to maintain a child-centred focus, but I have spent considerable time together with the teachers too. My two schools are situated in two different municipalities in central Sweden and could be described very simply, as socio-economically heterogeneous with a slight middle-class overrepresentation.

In Sweden, children attend compulsory school from the age of seven and for the next nine years. The pre-school class is open for children from the year they celebrate their sixth birthday. It is not compulsory but, since 1998, it has been integrated into the general school system. This is a well-attended activity and during the school year of 1998/99, 91.2% of the six year-olds were registered as attending (Skolverket 2003).

## **Bringing up a generation**

In recent discussions in the Swedish media and in schools themselves, today's generation of young people are often said to lack empathy and respect for teachers. Parents are accused of being too weak in framing their children's life with authority. According to teachers I meet, school has increasingly become an arena where "upbringing" competes with academic education. One of these teachers told me that, nowadays, they send homework in mathematics and spelling home for the parents to take care of while they spend a lot of time in school with children's upbringing and teaching children how to behave. Something is wrong, she concluded.

At the same time as I hear teachers try to resist their role as "upbringers", the task of moulding children into socially competent, respectful and empathic persons is closely linked to the teaching profession. Teachers put lots of energy into reproducing their own standards of behaving and thinking. In teachers' stories, parents appear to represent in many respects the opposite of what the teachers stand for – controlled development of crucial skills and disciplining of the children together with routines that stand for stability in the children's lives. These are important elements that help constitute the teacher's professionalism – a professionalism to a large extent defined in opposition to what is described as weak parenting and lack of resources in schools (Bartholdsson 2003).

## **Hunting the right attitude**

During fieldwork with these classes, strongly outspoken expectations for the children to be "positive", "alert" or "cheerful" are regularly observed in everyday interactions between teachers and children. Children behaving in accordance with these expectations are considered "nice to deal with" by teachers. In addition to such words as "positive", "cheerful" and "on the alert", words such as "negative" and "sullen" are used as comments about and to children. Here I will present some of the forums where these expectations and problematic attitudes are dealt with.

### **"Progress review sessions"**

Progress review sessions are held every term with each student and his or her parent/s. In these discussions, judgements on the child's attitudes are made and the student is encouraged to look at him/herself and work on improving him- or herself both when it comes to skills in mathematics, doing homework

or behaving in the classroom. Almost every student is said to have at least one minor behavioural problem such as talking too much, too loud, too little, at the wrong time, bothering too much about others, not remaining in his or her chair, complaining too much or having a tiresome, negative attitude. No one can be entirely successful. Social skills are discussed and the teacher tells the parents about how friendship relations are progressing and, hopefully, about how nice and cheerful he or she is. The discussion aims at having the child identify problems, agree to work on correcting them and to seal this, a contract is written between the three partners present: child, parents and the school, represented by the teacher.

In one progress review session in the fifth grade I listened to Frida taking on all responsibility for her bad relationship with the teacher. This was a surprising turn for my ears because I had earlier listened to her complaints about how unjustly she is treated by the teacher. Other girls in the class reacted to this too and gave Frida support. But in this discussion, she was talking about herself as being insecure and often moody. The teacher was responding to this in a positive way. She told Frida that people who know and who can admit they are doing something wrong have a good potential for change and people that do not see their own deficiencies can never improve themselves.

To be reflexive is a quality that forgives almost any wrongdoing. It is an act that would, in the end, produce positive, empathic and socially competent children. It is, thus, besides being positive, important to be self-critical as a child. The teacher might stand as a role model in this by admitting her own minor shortcomings but the focus is on the child. And the reflexivity expectation inclines more heavily towards the child than the teacher.

When I interviewed Frida later, she told me that she did not consider there was any point in being oppositional and saying what she really thought about her relationship with the teacher at the progress review session. She said her parents would believe the teacher because she was an adult and that they want her to be successful and well liked by everyone.

“The week-book”

Different ways of achieving reflexivity with the children were practiced. In the fifth grade, they have sporadically been writing a personal “week-book” since the fourth grade. In order to understand their writing, we need to consider the circumstances the “week-books” are written under. This is something that the

teacher has initiated and she is the audience to whom the writings have been directed since long before I came into the picture<sup>3</sup>. For a period, they were instructed to write down something that was good and something that was bad during the past week. Good things were often connected with being/playing with friends, being with a parent for the weekend or having a favourite school task. Bad things were often injuries, sickness, too much noise in the classroom and fights. At the time when I came into the class, the writing was to be carried out a bit differently. Now they were supposed to write expectations for the week ahead and evaluate the past week. For the first two months, these expectations were supposed to be relevant for the time spent in school. Before the first break in the spring term, they were instructed to write about expectations about both school and their free time. In the expectation/evaluation writings made by the children, one thing stands out as maybe more important than many other things. This was about being nice, being good to classmates and teachers followed by reflections on whether you succeeded or you failed. In the expectations part, they often wrote about hoping to be nice, positive and working hard. They also wrote about being treated well by others. The most frequent things that occurred are listed below.<sup>4</sup>

#### **Expectations**

Hope to be positive  
 To be nice to everyone  
 To be treated nicely by others  
 To work hard in school  
 Learn a lot  
 Everything should be fine  
 To have fun  
 To finish school tasks  
 To do the homework  
 Looking forward to school holidays  
 To be helpful  
 To be friendly  
 To have nice breaks  
 To be nice to siblings at home  
 To improve in athletics (swimming, football)  
 To think harder  
 Having a good time with friends

#### **Evaluation**

Everything turned out as expected  
 It was a good week  
 It was fun  
 It did not turn out well  
 because of injuries or sickness  
 Schoolwork did not turn out well  
 because classmates talked to much  
 I have been positive  
 I think I have been positive  
 I have not been in any fights

3 I always asked permission from each child to read the week-book.

4 More rare opinions are: to expect to be freed from playing in the class orchestra or writings about the possibility of “freezing” and “falling”. Practising being “just”, managing in school, but remaining fuzzy at home. There are also expectations for better achievements in school in order to do well in the “national tests” that are done in the 5th grade.

The teacher told me she does not read these books although she has instructed the children to hand them in regularly. She regards it more as being a question of having the children reflect on their ways of behaving and attitudes towards schoolwork. Since their writings do not reveal any of the dissatisfaction expressed in more informal situations, they can be read as a way of presenting themselves as having the right attitude, a positive attitude towards learning and towards people. Expectations have the character of “promises” and since the children do not know that the teacher does not read their books, their writings are in some way constraining/obligating. They become a way of controlling children by their own doings.

### “Friends’ talks”

Another example of a way for the teachers to have the children reflect over themselves and over other children’s actions were so-called “friends’ talks” (*kompissamtal*), which occurred during the second term of the pre-school year. I have understood that these kinds of talks are practised in many schools all over Sweden. Children who thought that someone had been bad could turn to the teacher and she would immediately arrange a friends’ talk. These had to be carried out at once because, otherwise, according to the teachers, the children would not know for sure what it was all about. The whole class gathers and everyone that knows something about the actual incident can speak. A friends’ talk means a moment in the middle of everything for the child requesting it. For some time the children were requesting friends’ talks about almost any incident. The perpetrator was supposed to confess and regret any misdoings in public. The party that had been offended in some way was supposed to tell the group about how he/she feels. Greater focus is placed on confession and reflexivity than on understanding the conflict that gave rise to the whole thing in the first place, according to my observations. This is an action that directs focus away from the conflict and you are forgiven (by teachers) through your confession. With the friends’ talk, another teacher goal is achieved: talking about feelings. This is also considered an important step towards developing another “quality” – empathy – learning to understand how other people are feeling. Another aspect of this is to understand that teachers have feelings too and, in the fifth grade, one of their teachers repeatedly told the children, when they were not paying attention to her, that she felt they were insulting (Sw. *kränkte*) her.

On the other hand, the children also express their feelings of being insulted

by teachers. They discuss this with friends, but also with me, the participant observer in their class. When some children oppose demands that they be “positive” persons, this means taking real risks. Being oppositional with teachers may be considered tough in some groups of children. Daring to challenge teacher authority could be a way of showing strength. This, however, is risk-taking, and a delicate balancing act. You need to have a fairly good relation with the teacher between the conflicts and, in most cases, your relation with the teacher is not entirely bad or entirely good. In some cases, children and teachers are unable to like each other but, nevertheless, they have to make things work.

### **Among friends?**

The balancing act becomes even more complicated if we consider that a “negative attitude” not only lowers your chances of being liked by the teachers, but could also jeopardise your peer-group status. The teacher’s “dislike” of some children is used as a guide to whom it is rewarding to report or refer to as an oppositional personality. In different situations, it is possible to use these “bad” classmates as a way of appearing nicer yourself. The children in both the pre-school class and the fifth grade also refer to other children who represent the wrong attitude or are explicitly considered by the teachers to be negative. For instance, during a progress review session with Marie in the fifth grade, the teacher brought up the subject of being positive. The teacher said she appreciated that Marie did not object to doing things. Marie said she was not like “Amanda” (a rather oppositional girl in the class, often considered “sullen” by the teacher) and the teacher agreed.

Friendship – being a friend and being among friends – is one of the most important aspects of school life, for most of the children both in the preschool class and the fifth grade. Friendship and peer-group status are parallel projects going on beside history class or multiplication while children are working on their internal relations. They mimic or whisper to each other, send notes, make plans, leave their places, even shout across the room. This is something that explodes into the open whenever the teacher leaves the classroom, even though this is not approved of. This disturbs classroom order and is something you should do during the breaks.

“Telling” on friends is also a way of reproducing rules and morals set by the teachers. Even if a child does not agree with these rules he or she may still be eager to have others obey them. This is a kind of justice and peers act as moral

policemen. In some cases, it is unacceptable to complain about classmates doing bad things if you are considered to be a negative personality yourself. Such complaints will not be taken seriously by teachers. At the same time, as Tommy in pre-school class can tell you, if you are too much into doing things right according to teachers' standards, you can be called an "ögonjånare" – a toady – being "nice" in front of teachers and not so "nice" when they aren't looking. Children do this all the time but they don't usually overdo it, like Tommy. He was, however, very popular within the peer group.

Peers that can be used as bad references, mentioned as examples of how not to behave, are easily identified through their own behaviour in class and by the teacher's harsh treatment of them. This is often justified by the teachers in order to restore classroom order or to "sätta någon på plats" (put someone in their place). The ways in which teachers act authoritatively and try to keep the class in order reveal that double standards exist, with a difference between the behaviour you prescribe and the one you yourself act out. I often heard children describing their teachers as angry, sullen, screaming and disrespectful. This is often considered by the children to be unpleasant and unfair. The very same kinds of behaviours are condemned by teachers when displayed by children. Acting in such ways, teachers are not considered to reflect on their own actions or being suitable as role models for their own discourse. Children who resist point to this circumstance again and again – often with the consequence that the teacher gets even angrier and children are accused of not being able to "take" a reprimand. Children that have "problems" with this can expect the issue to be on the agenda for their progress review session.

### **Expressing oneself**

Protecting one's integrity, claiming rights, pointing out unjust conditions or being tough in the eyes of friends are children's own explanations for why conflicts with the teacher may occur. Children that are disobedient or oppositional often have a tough time as they stand out and stand up for their own opinions and what they consider to be their rights in class. Many children are reluctant to express criticism since this is connected with taking risks and not considered to be the proper way to do things right. Teachers often disregard children's opinions. In interviews, I discussed this with the children. I asked if they thought that they could express their opinions about things. Here follows a transcript from an interview with Lucas in the fifth grade:

Lucas: No, they won't listen.

Åsa (Interviewer): No?

Lucas: Like this: "I think you should stop this"... If you say something like that...

Åsa: Yeah?

Lucas: Then you'll get a bad reputation.

Åsa: Among the teachers?

Lucas: Yeah, I think so.... anyway.

Åsa: Does it matter? Is that important?

L: Yeah. Otherwise they think they have to treat you harder.

Åsa: Yeah?

Lucas: So you get nicer... sort of.

Åsa: But... what would you like them to do things differently from how they are doing things now?

Lucas: I think they could learn more about what it is like being a young person.

Åsa: Mm. If you could change things around here, what would you do then?

Lucas: Get rid of all the old ladies and take in young men and women instead.

Another implication is expressed by Kajsa in the pre-school class as she complains to me about having to do the same things over and over again, singing the same song day after day and wishing they could do more work in their "school book". She thinks preschool class is boring. I ask her why she does not tell the teacher about this. She answers:

Kajsa: No, I don't want to tell the teachers.

Åsa: Why not?

Kajsa: I may make them feel sad.

Åsa: So you think they get sad?

Kajsa: I don't know...

Åsa: Do they cry?

Kajsa: (Giggles) No, I don't think so.

Åsa: No?

Kajsa: A little like this: "hrm, hrm" (looks severe)

Åsa: Angry or...

Kajsa: Yeah, I think so... They may scold you a little like this...

Åsa: So, you think that when they are scolding you they are actually a bit sad?

Kajsa: Mm.

Considerations about what the consequences might be prevent the children from expressing their opinions. The teacher's feelings can, as with the "offended" teacher earlier in this text, be used as a means of upholding order and attitudes. Kajsa expects the teacher to be hurt and angry if she expresses her own feelings – something she does not want to do.

### **Orchestrated Voices**

The difficulties of true participation are deepened further through existing forums where formal participation is exercised. These formal occasions for participation take place as part of a more explicit political socialization process, where school democracy is exercised. Teachers provide the correct time and place to participate in questions concerning school. One such forum is the class council held every two weeks in the fifth grade. A chairman, a secretary and someone to approve the minutes are elected for each meeting. Everyone in the class is supposed to act in each of these functions at least once.<sup>5</sup> Here the children can raise questions. But these questions are conditional. You are not allowed to raise questions concerning "private" interests and here the teacher acts as gatekeeper. When Ayla, one of two girls in the class who do not eat pork, complains that she always has to eat vegetarian food although she isn't a vegetarian, the teacher informs her that this is not a forum for such a question. Questions concerning individual matters should be raised by the parents. She stresses that the subject must be of interest for the class as a whole. Even though the teacher is not part of the class council she often disqualifies questions she considers to be unsuitable for the children to discuss. She often sidesteps the council's chairman in discussions.

The next level of pupil's participation is the pupils' council. Here two children from each class act as representatives. The pupils' council has a chairman and a secretary from the fifth grade and the meetings are supervised by one of the resource teachers who circulate in the school. This teacher does intervene in the discussions that are brought up. At one meeting, she informed the council that they had plenty of money in the council's funds. She thought that they had better spend this money and she also put forward an idea about what they

5 These elections have a double function for the children since it also manifests the status ascribed to different children in the class. The children considered most popular were always elected first. When I went through the minutes of meetings during a year the children first elected corresponded with my imaginary sociometric map of groupings and status within the class.

could do with it. Her idea was to invest in a number of land hockey sticks and basketballs for each class. At this point, a girl from the third grade raised her hand and said that she did not think it was a very good idea to use up all the money in one go. She believed it would be better to save some of it. A boy in second grade also remarked that they already had sticks and balls and that they really did not need any more.<sup>6</sup> The teacher told the council that money should be spent and not saved and without further discussion, everyone in the council voted in favour of the teacher's proposal. The girl in the third class, that was sitting next to me mumbled: "I still don't like this" as she raised her hand to vote. This is an example of how children, in spite of being at their own pupils' council, nevertheless, are orchestrated in a direct manner by a teacher.

Children often discussed their teacher relations with me. They expressed criticism of the way teachers treated them and talked about school being boring. The problems with today's young generation, as described by teachers and discussed in the media, call for a transmission of democratic values that are thought to prevent bullying, sexual harassment and racism among peers rather than being implemented in processes within school's authority structure.

One example: learning to speak out is emphasised by the teacher in the fifth grade in order to prevent group pressure. When the teacher wanted to hear how my interviews went, she commented on my positive response, that she had been working in order to encourage the children to speak out, to stand up for their opinions irrespective of what peers thought. This statement is contradicted if, for instance, I consider the conduct policies (*trivselregler*) that are common in many Swedish schools. These rules often state that children should not object when being corrected by adults. While teachers considered peers to be potentially oppressive with each other, adult authority over children is not problematized.

I have also noted that there were no joint actions taken by the children. They acted individually whenever it came to expressing critical opinions even if the speaker knew he or she had support among peers (see Lundgren 2000). At the same time, a democratic decision, as the teachers in pre-school class would have it, is considered to have been made whenever a majority decision is taken. Opposing majority decisions is treated as being destructive for everyone else. This was particularly the case in pre-school class whenever someone resisted

6 Girls did not use these kinds of equipment. This buy was an investment for boys.

or objected to doing something. Teachers often refer to things “we” (children and teachers together) have decided, when in fact no decision has taken place. This is often done when referring to regulations whenever someone infringed them in some way.

### **Managing multiple expectations**

What is considered to be competent behaviour is, also within a culture, relational and situationally defined in different ways by different actors representing different discourses within one and the same setting and between settings that you pass during the day. Children move through many contexts everyday, where different aspects of who they are come to light. They even, for example, describe themselves during interviews as somehow different persons at home and at school.

But contexts also mingle. At school, you must handle multiple expectations about who you are and how you should behave. You have to cope with being a child within the authority structure in relation to adults, a student in relation to adult goals and aims for your being there. In the progress review session you have to be the student child and the family child at the same time. There are many systems, many standards, all working at the same time. You have to learn to manage multiple expectations in one and the same situation. Besides maintaining a good relation with your peers, another important competence in school is the ability to “read” the teacher. This is crucial for one’s well-being, as is performing as positive, reflexive and empathic persons – qualities that the teachers want the student to possess. Reflexivity is then seen as a means to many ends – proving to be a person willing to change your ways, trying to do your best, working harder, being nicer and more positive. Reflexivity is constant evaluation of the self in relation to expectations flourishing around you. Empathy is a way of constantly considering someone else’s feelings in response to your own actions, needs and expectations. The mastery of these qualities means taking on responsibility for problems and solving them as a personality problem instead of making opinions clear. Children are encouraged to turn their dissatisfaction over their educational situation into a personal question, turning inwards for solutions at the same time as the questions that can be raised within the democratic forums available are not supposed to be personal at all.

## And?

This is, as Foucault (1998) would have had it, the level where power relations are carried out in everyday practice, beyond national policy. My findings are that, from a teacher's perspective, there is an inconsistency between different intentions and a threefold discrepancy between policy, practice and achieved ends. Following the National Curriculum, schools implement democratic forms and emphasise the transfer of democratic values to the next generation. At the same time, at a micro level, real participation is, in practice, undermined under the supervision of empowered teachers concerned with classroom order and the development of socially competent children at the bottom of the authority structure. Social competence, as defined by the teachers and as a goal for teacher professionalism, is a question of conformity and attitudes (about being nice, reflexive, empathic and positive). Social competence, as it comes as a response from children, is a complex performance. You have to come through as "right" according to both peer group standards and in line with the teacher's culturally defined conceptions about what being a child is all about. Children have to work both systems, and the different ends they represent, at the same time. To adopt (internalize) the "right attitude" might look like submission. But this does not necessarily mean that children actually *adapt to* the expectations in any tangible way. An alternative interpretation is that we are witnessing performances from, not very old, but truly competent cultural and social actors positioning themselves and being positioned within an authority structure. Through the means of modelling children's positive, reflexive and emphatic attitudes and making participation conditional, children learn another lesson: Being angry, sullen and oppositional are not qualities of the democratic citizen. In order to be successful in your relations with the teacher you have to "*fjäska*" (suck up to her) as Frida told me.

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What societal processes contribute to a human rights culture? What violations are actually taking place? How can gender, ecological and global economic perspectives enlighten these issues?

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