

Essential Frameworks and Principles for Ethics Pedagogy

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In the field of ethics, which is a part of the subject religious education (RE) in Sweden, there is still insufficient research related to powerful knowledge. The aim of this article is to contribute knowledge to the field by examining what teachers see as important perspectives and concepts in ethics education. To fulfil this aim, eight teachers in Swedish compulsory schools have been interviewed about central perspectives and concepts related to their teaching in ethics. The results show that the interviewed teachers emphasize three perspectives which concern: (1) society locally and globally, (2) different ethical dilemmas and (3) the students' experiences in school and at home. The teachers also believe that certain concepts are needed for students to understand what a democratic society means, to succeed in subsequent stages of education and to understand their own lives. The teachers' descriptions of what they view as important perspectives and concepts relate to knowledge that has power and potential for social justice. They want to prepare and engage their students in relation to questions that they may face both now and in their futures.

Keywords: Ethics Education; Teachers' Perspectives; Powerful Knowledge

INTRODUCTION

An interest in powerful knowledge (PK) has engaged many researchers in recent years. The important work of Young and Muller (e.g., Young 2013; Young and Muller 2013) is the basis for the understanding of powerful knowledge. Powerful knowledge, according to Young (2013), is specialized and differentiated knowledge. It is specialized in the sense that the knowledge comes from an academic field, and it is differentiated from everyday experiences. This understanding has since been developed and discussed by several researchers in the field of social studies (e.g., Maude 2015; Gericke et al. 2018; Chapman 2021; Hudson et al. 2023; Franck and Thalén 2023). The focus in this article is directed towards how PK appears in the religious education classroom, especially during

lessons in ethics, by investigating what teachers describe as important perspectives and concepts for students to acquire in ethics education.

Examples of research related to RE are to be found in a recently published anthology about powerful knowledge, involving researchers from different European countries (Franck and Thalén 2023). Most research related to PK in religious education (RE) is occupied with the fields of religions and other worldviews. In the field of ethics and existential questions, which are parts of the subject RE in Sweden, there is still insufficient research related to PK and this is especially true of empirical studies (Osbeck et al. 2023).

The aim of this article is to contribute to the field by examining what teachers see as powerful knowledge, understood in this study as important perspectives and concepts in ethics education that give students opportunities to develop powerful knowledge which provides them with resources to face challenges in their own lives and those our society is facing.

The Swedish RE Subject

With regard to the question of what PK is in ethics, one answer can be found in the RE syllabus, which is supposed to be transformed in the classroom into content that gives each student opportunities to develop PK (Gericke et al. 2018). At the core of this transformation is the teacher, who “interprets” both the syllabus and the students in the class and plans the teaching on the basis of this. To better understand the Swedish RE subject, of which ethics is a part, the Swedish syllabus will be briefly described here. The syllabuses for different subjects in the Swedish curriculum have the same structure: the aim of the subject, the central content, criteria for assessment of the students’ knowledge and criteria for different grades. In Sweden, RE is a broad school subject focusing on three themes: (1) religions and other views on life, (2) religion and society and (3) ethics and existential questions (Skolverket 2022). The aim with the theme of ethics and existential questions is to build an ability “to discuss ethics, moral issues and existential questions from various perspectives” (Skolverket 2022, p. 188). The emphasis is on an argumentative capacity. The subject can be said to have an informative and knowledge-oriented aim (Sporre et al. 2022). The core content related to ethics and existential questions for students in Grades 7 to 9 stresses basic principles within some ethical models, for example consequentialist ethics and duty-based ethics, and analysis of and reflection on ethical issues based on the students’ own arguments, on interpretations within religions and other views of life, and on ethical models. Such questions can, for example, be about freedom, justice and solidarity. It also highlights the importance of conversation about and reflection on life issues based on the students’ own thoughts and based on interpretations within religions and other views on life. Such questions can, for example, be about identity, love, sexuality and the meaning of life (Skolverket 2022, p. 192).

Comparative curriculum studies show that conveying democratic values, as well as countering arguments that conflict with them, constitutes a central goal of ethics education in most European contexts (Törnégren 2023). RE is compulsory in Sweden and plays a role in relation to students' need to be able to orient themselves and function together with others in a pluralistic society, where religious and outlook-related issues are becoming increasingly visible in the public space. The subject is concerned with society-related issues of both a moral and political nature that today's students need to be able to relate to in an independent way. This means that the ability to judge is relevant within the subject of RE, not only within ethics but also in relation to the ability to make independent assessments of the political significance of various expressions of religion in the public space (Törnégren 2023).

Teaching That Provides Resources to Meet Future Challenges

It is often taken for granted that the subject of RE should contribute to developing students' capacity to think critically in relation to knowledge and truth claims. Stones and Fraser-Pearce (2021) refer to many prominent RE researchers who all emphasize this in different ways, for example Erricker's conceptual enquiry, Jackson's interpretive approaches and Shaw's worldviews literacy, although at the same time RE is assumed to contribute to social harmony. This could be a challenge, especially in relation to teaching that engages the students to care about the truth and to recognize truth. According to Young (2008), knowledge is not only a matter for education; it is also important for society as a whole. The big questions and answers in RE, for example "How do you know what being good or bad is?" or "How do you know if something is true or false?", are not only relevant in RE; they also exist in the students' private lives, as well as in society in general (Stones and Fraser-Pearce 2021).

To avoid teaching that simplifies the content, Stones and Fraser-Pearce suggest that teachers develop their own, as well as their students', epistemic literacy. An epistemic literacy implies a competence to identify, to interpret, to understand, to ask questions, and to navigate and to communicate about knowledge, according to Stones and Fraser-Pearce (2022). They argue, in line with research from Young and Muller (2010) and Deng (2021), that there are disciplines that "have power and potential for social justice through their facilitation to imagine the not yet imagined". Epistemic literacy is a prerequisite for epistemic justice, i.e., to prepare students to engage appropriately with issues and questions they may face in their futures (Stones and Fraser-Pearce 2022, p. 372).

In exploring the possibilities for a non-egological worldview and a non-egological moral education, i.e., an education which does not only begin with and centre on the self, Biesta (2021) suggests a teaching which manifests itself as gifts

that occur beyond teaching (Biesta 2021). The first gift is “Being given what you didn’t ask for”. It can be described as the opposite of a teaching where students must set their own goals for their work, as well as the opposite of a school where students and their parents are seen as customers whose requirements must be fulfilled through the teaching. It means not just giving students what they ask for but engaging them in a process of understanding what they might need. The second gift is about “Double truth giving”, which can be explained as not only giving the truth, but giving the students the necessary conditions to understand truth. The third gift, “Being given yourself”, implies that the school is needed so that the students have time to create a relationship with the outside world and space to keep a distance from the world. The school is also needed to give students the chance to create a relationship with their inner passions in order not to be controlled by them (Biesta 2021, 2022).

Important Knowledge in RE

According to Franck (2021), knowledge in RE, as well as in other social science subjects, differs from other subjects such as natural science and mathematics that are often used as examples in relation to PK: “Argumentation in these arenas differs from, for example, that in physics or mathematics: it is horizontal rather than vertical; i.e., it does not necessarily follow existing logical structures in which the relationship between subject-related concepts has a mutual order” (Franck 2021, p. 169). Franck states that this difference is not a problem for the credibility of the social sciences or the humanities. It is a sign that the know-how that characterizes and develops the subjects has a different basis and structure than that in, for example, physics or mathematics (Franck 2021).

Swedish teachers’ intentions with their ethics education have been described in a study based on group interviews (Anderström 2017), in which ethics education was found to relate to being nurturing in a social context where empathy, an understand of rules and norms, and an ability to handle conflicts, are developed in interaction with others. The study also shows that ethics education is linked to democracy, i.e., that the students develop knowledge about democratic rights and responsibilities. It is about values (e.g., gender equality and equality in general) and virtues (e.g., tolerance, respect and empathy), and finally, ethics education is about developing a way of thinking, i.e., reasoning, reflecting and thinking critically about ethical questions.

Narratives play a critical role in promoting moral development, according to Tappan (1998): an ongoing set of social interactions, mediated by narratives, is of importance for moral development. A focus on words, language and forms of discourse in human life is an essential part of a focus on narratives (Tappan 2010). Individuals give meaning to their life experiences by representing them in narrative form. Building on Tappan’s theories, Osbeck et al. (2023) emphasize

that PK involves both discourses of substantial and procedural knowledge. To reflect on and interpret life, language is needed and it varies depending on the context.

To identify what knowledge is central to the subject of RE, including ethics, Franck (2021) suggests that threshold concepts could contribute to the discussion and understanding of powerful RE knowledge. Threshold concepts can be understood as concepts through which a student can see something new. The concepts are supposed to work as gateways and give access to arenas offering opportunities to develop subject-centred knowledge. They need to be discussed in relation to relevant contexts. Threshold concepts can be compared to core concepts, which are necessary for a person to assimilate in order to master an area of knowledge (Franck 2021).

In a study built on interviews with teachers and students, as well as on classroom observations, the roles and the understandings of knowledge in RE were explored (Stones and Fraser-Pearce 2021, 2022). In the study, some problems related to the teaching were identified, for example that the teachers did not always use concepts in a nuanced way and this resulted in teaching where the students missed opportunities to understand one of the topics of the lesson, epistemic justice, in depth. In another study, where students in Grades 5 and 8 discussed ethical situations based on fiction stories, the results showed that a broad linguistic repertoire was needed to express thoughts and reflections in a nuanced way that developed the students' ethical competence (Lilja et al. 2023).

Osbeck (2020) concludes, in a study about ethics, that PK must be understood in a broader sense than as academic and generalizable knowledge. According to her, it also involves vernacular language and an openness to the circumstance that what becomes powerful is related to the context and the people present. Osbeck et al. (2023) have argued for a dialectical perspective where both the child and the curriculum are in focus when discussing PK. They suggest that having PK in ethics can be related to three arenas. The first is the arena of oneself and one's own needs, challenges and interests. The second arena is the societal and global one, to which the teacher needs to point in order to broaden the students' life world. The third arena is a meta-arena where the students need to understand ethics as a general phenomenon.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

To contribute to a broadened understanding of what teachers regard as important perspectives and concepts in ethics education that give students opportunities to develop powerful knowledge, eight interviews were carried out with teachers teaching the social science subjects in Swedish compulsory schools in Grades 5 to 9. The teachers work at eight different schools in four different

municipalities. The teachers were asked to take part in this study because they have either participated in a research study about fiction-based ethics education or are working with the national tests in RE for students in Grade 9 in Sweden. The reason for asking these teachers is an assumption that they have a conscious strategy for their ethics teaching. Despite the fact that ethics is an overarching theme in the Swedish curriculum in general, ethics as a separate area of knowledge is only a part of the syllabus for the subject of RE, and is often regarded as something you teach every day, for example in relation to conflicts between the students (Thornberg and Öguz 2013).

The interviews, which lasted for between 45 and 60 min, were conducted remotely on Zoom, and were audio-recorded and then transcribed with the aim of keeping the character of spoken language. The interviews can be described as semi-structured with a series of predetermined but open-ended questions. The central focus during the interviews was on what the teachers regard as important (powerful) knowledge in ethics for their students.

A deductive thematic analysis of the transcripts was carried out in the six steps suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006). The analytic process started with a first reading of the transcript, where patterns of meaning related to perspectives and concepts emphasized as important by the interviewed teachers were searched for. The next step involved initial codes being generated from the transcripts. In the third step, materials for potential themes related to both important perspectives and important concepts were gathered. The fourth step involved reading the notes related to all the materials and making a thematic map. In the fifth step, the themes were refined, and finally, in the sixth step, the themes were related back to the aim of this article.

RESULTS

The results will be presented in two parts. The first part will report on what perspectives the interviewed teachers emphasize regarding their ethics education. The second part of the results is about what concepts the teachers regard as important for their students to learn.

Central Perspectives in Ethics Education

During the interviews, the teachers were asked questions about what they regarded as central perspectives for their ethics education and how they viewed these perspectives in relation to knowledge that was important for the students to learn. None of the interviewed teachers had thought of some knowledge as being more important than others. One teacher said, for example, that knowledge is knowledge and everyday knowledge is not worth less than other knowledge (T2).

The teachers expressed thoughts about knowledge that they viewed as more important than other knowledge, and this knowledge is interpreted here as PK.

All eight teachers began their response, regarding what they see as important knowledge that affects their planning of the lessons in ethics, by referring to the core content prescribed in the RE syllabus. This is not surprising since the teachers are obliged to teach according to the syllabus. The teachers' understanding of the core content is then transformed into concrete teaching and the transcripts from the interviews show that three central perspectives related to: (1) society locally and globally, (2) different dilemmas and (3) the students' personal experiences in school and at home, were regarded as the most important perspectives for the student to gain knowledge about.

Ethical Perspectives Related to Society Locally and Globally

The knowledge described by the teachers that is interpreted as being related to society locally and globally is, for example, about current events such as the war in Ukraine, women's situation in Iran and the COVID-19 pandemic. We must talk about the war, about the women in Iran and some other things. We must talk about what happens and how you dare, how the women [in Iran] dare to do it. [. . .] We are one world. (T1). The teachers also emphasized more general questions related to justice and what is right or wrong, good or bad, such as poverty and injustice in the world, what a welfare state means, and politicians' responsibility when it comes to achieving the goals in Agenda 2030 in relation to the individual's responsibility. Informal and formal power were also mentioned as a topic that has become more important to discuss: We have mostly studied the formal system of power, but it is the informal power that is the big threat against democracy. From today's perspective with all those bloggers and 'instagrammers' . . . (T4). Another example mentioned is the rights of journalists to investigate and report. As mentioned earlier, ethics is a part of the subject of RE, and rules for living and rules regarding food in different religions are also emphasized as important ethical knowledge.

At the different schools where the teachers work, a considerable amount of time has been devoted to the knowledge field related to a sustainable society and climate change. It is a burning question and some of the teachers describe how their students have lost their hope for the future. They have been fed with knowledge about this; it is almost as if they are, not tired of it but, there is a lot of teaching about it, and they encounter it in their everyday life. [. . .] They have a very negative view of the future, many of the students. They think it's over, they have no hope for the future (T6). The topic is big and complex, and many students distance themselves and do not like to discuss it. Concrete examples of what the teaching is about include, for example, practical things like sorting refuse, but also, when it comes to the older students (aged 15), discussing poverty and

injustice in the world, what responsibility politicians have in relation to sustainability and what can be required from the students as individuals.

When describing important knowledge for the students to learn, the teachers also mention why this is central in their teaching. All eight teachers emphasize that they want their students to become good and democratic fellow human beings. Teacher 7 says They need important knowledge to be a good and conscious citizen of society. Another example of how this wish is expressed is the following quote: There are some things I think are more important than others in school, and it is this thing about democracy and dictatorship, to understand what our democracy is about and why must we protect it (T3). By discussing different events in society, the students develop their empathy and their knowledge about the world outside their own small world in school and at home.

Ethical Perspectives Related to Different Dilemmas

All the teachers said that a considerable part of the lessons in ethics is devoted to discussing different dilemmas that are prominent in, for example, different textbooks that are used in the schools. Examples of topics are the death penalty, euthanasia, abortion, genetics and animal testing. With regard to the question of why these dilemmas are important knowledge, it was hard to obtain a straight answer from any of the eight teachers. Teacher 1 said that her choice of these topics is unreflective, that it is a tradition. Some teachers explain that the important knowledge they want their students to obtain is to be able to argue and to use their own arguments in addition the ones from different religions and ethical perspectives, and by discussing what is right and wrong in these dilemmas the students are given a chance to practise these skills. The students should learn to use their own arguments, of course they should use religions and worldviews, and different ethical perspectives, but it is also their own arguments that we should [use] . . . (T5). In relation to these dilemmas, they learn to see a phenomenon from different perspectives and to think about responsibility, according to the teachers.

Ethical Perspectives Related to the Students' Personal Experiences in School and at Home

In addition to content related to local and global society and dilemmas that are far away from most Swedish students' everyday lives, the teachers in this study emphasize different areas of important questions that relate to situations specific to the students they meet in their classrooms. As described in the two previous sections, the teachers' expressed aim is to teach content that gives the students knowledge that contributes to quite unclear long-term abilities related to becoming a good fellow human being. When it comes to the ethical perspectives related to the student's own life, the expressed aims are more precise, even though

they are both short term and long term. By teaching about, for example, exclusion and bullying, love, sexuality and consent, the teachers hope that their students develop important knowledge that makes it easier to handle everyday situations in their lives, as expressed by, for instance, Teacher 7: What they worry about, it is about relationships, sexuality, bullying, relational things. That is what is close to them, that's their reality (T7). Another perspective stressed by all teachers is to discuss questions that give knowledge that helps the students to see through different agendas in social media: They learn what a trustworthy source is, but even so. They are at that age and trust very much what they see on YouTube. [. . .] You need to discuss this, but it is not easy. It might be one of the biggest problems that we have, a whole generation that do not know what to believe in. They need knowledge to handle this (T6). The question about information that is shared on different social media is described as an urgent topic that relates to the students' life here and now, but also to the future. It is important, according to the teachers, to acquire different methods for criticizing and to be able to make one's own decisions. We have five super questions, for example who is behind this information, what is their aim, is it facts or opinions? (T3).

Some of the teachers also emphasize that important knowledge related to ethics is that the students learn to behave and to crack social codes. This is important knowledge when it comes to progressing in life, and to being accepted and taken seriously. I have a lot of magical students, boys who are a bit unpolished, they need to learn the social codes that are so important here in Sweden (T4). It is also regarded as important to sit properly in the classroom and to bring the material you need; this type of knowledge leads, according to Teacher 8, to increased responsibility among her students who live a privileged life.

To sum up this part of the results, the interviewed teachers emphasize three central perspectives that are related to: (1) society locally and globally, (2) different dilemmas and (3) the students' experiences in school and at home, as important for their students to develop knowledge about. This can be interpreted as implying that the teachers regard it as important for their students to know about and to reflect on what is going on and what is right and wrong, good and bad, in the wider world they are living in and to which they are supposed to contribute, as well as to understand the life they are living in school and at home, in relation to for example friends, teachers and parents. It is also important knowledge to be able to develop one's own arguments and to be able to present them to others. In addition, the teachers want their students to have the knowledge that is required to critically review the information they meet in different channels in social media. To acquire this, both methods and deep subject content are needed.

Important Concepts in Ethics Education

A prerequisite for developing ethical competence is to master a well-developed language, according to the interviewed teachers. That is one reason why all eight teachers emphasize conceptual knowledge as important knowledge. All teachers express that they work consciously and systematically with their students' understanding of different concepts related to ethics education. The teachers see it as a concern that their students, regardless of background, do not read outside of school, which they believe is one reason that they see a limited vocabulary in their students. The analysis of the transcripts shows that the teachers emphasize three types of concepts as necessary for their students to know, that is, concepts that relate to what a democratic society means, concepts that are considered to prepare students for later stages of education and finally concepts that explain the student's own life.

The concepts related to what democracy means are regarded as important by the teachers partly because they see democracy as important, particularly at the moment, when it cannot be taken for granted, and partly because it is a prominent theme in the curriculum. Most of the concepts the teachers give as examples are listed in the introductory (not subject-specific) part of the curriculum. All interviewed teachers also emphasize concepts that their students need to prepare them for later stages of education. These types of concepts come mostly from the textbooks the teacher uses. These can be concepts in the text the class is reading but also special lists of concepts which are offered by the teaching material.

When it comes to concepts that explain the students' own lives, it is possible to see that some concepts are the same regardless of the students in question and some concepts differ in relation to what background the students have. Concepts related to relationships, exclusion and bullying are relevant and important in all student groups. The teachers also stress concepts related to sustainability and what each person can do to live more sustainably, such as sorting refuse and turning off the lights. One example of where there is a difference between students is when the teachers talk about what use they expect their students to have for knowing different concepts related to their own lives. Teacher 7, who works in an area where almost all students have Swedish as their first language and parents with high educational level, emphasizes conceptual knowledge where the students manage to use words and concepts to formulate well-developed sentences in several stages. What is powerful here is that by mastering this ability, students have opportunities to progress in life.

Teacher 4, who works in a school where very few of the students have Swedish as their first language and where the parents have a low educational level, views the teaching about important concepts in another way. I am quite careful that they know what social services are, aid and allowance. [. . .] I want them to understand their rights and it is possible that they will be in situations

when these concepts matter (T4). Teacher 4 explains why these and other concepts are important knowledge for her students: And then I think that if they know these concepts and know what they mean it will be easier for them to get ahead in society and to cope (T4).

Important concepts are of different kinds, according to the interviewed teachers: concepts needed to understand what a democratic society means, to succeed in higher education and to explain the students' own lives. Most of the important concepts are taken from the curriculum and from the teaching material, but when it comes to concepts related to the students' own life situations, the concepts are selected by the teachers based on their experience of their students.

DISCUSSION

The aim of this article is to contribute empirical findings regarding teachers' perspectives to the field of PK in ethics, and the results from the interviews with eight experienced RE teachers indicate that their goals with their ethics education relate to helping students develop into democratic fellow human beings who know their rights but also their responsibilities. In reaching these goals, the interviewed teachers emphasize the importance of knowledge about society, locally and globally, as well as knowledge connected to the students' own experiences. Knowledge about methods that contribute to an ability to critically review information is also regarded as powerful. With regard to these central perspectives, the students, according to the interviewed teachers, need to understand important concepts that are related to democracy, concepts that are needed to succeed in the educational system and concepts describing one's own experiences. As suggested by Osbeck et al. (2023), the knowledge seen as central by the teachers can be described as substantial, that is, having knowledge about different contexts in which the ethical question is relevant. This can be a context that is far away, such as a war, or a context close to the student, for example how the social security system works. The knowledge seen as central can also be described as procedural knowledge, that is, knowledge of a generic nature, for example the "five super questions" the students in Teacher 3's class are supposed to ask when they determine the value of a source. The results in this study are partly in line with the three arenas Osbeck et al. (2023) suggests as PK: the arena of oneself and one's own needs, challenges and interests, the societal arena and global arena. What not is clearly expressed in the interviews is the knowledge the students need to understand ethics as a general phenomenon.

The knowledge that the teachers in this study highlight as powerful relates, as already mentioned, to different arenas that may be closer to or further away from the students themselves. What is common regardless of the arena is the importance of the context for students to develop an ethical competence. This is in

line with what Tappan (2010) says, that individuals give meaning to experiences by representing them in narrative forms. In order to give their students opportunities to develop powerful knowledge in ethics, teachers need to introduce narratives that students can relate to in the teaching and give students concepts that they can use as tools, both when it comes to understanding the teaching (e.g., questions of good and evil, or right and wrong), and when it comes to being able to discuss, develop and deepen their knowledge.

Is it possible to understand the three gifts of teaching, as described by Biesta (2021), as relevant for what content becomes important, and in that sense, powerful knowledge in ethics? The three gifts have the common purpose of opening up the world to the students. The teachers want their students to develop knowledge that helps them to see through different agendas and in that way create a relationship with the outside world, and at the same time, to keep a distance from the world, for example, in relation to messages in various social media.

The results of this study are largely in line with previous research on powerful knowledge regarding ethics, even though the previous research does not have teachers' perspective as its point of departure. None of the interviewed teachers were aware of the educational discussions related to powerful knowledge or aware of knowledge as either vertical or horizontal. They did not express that they reflected on what content about ethics they thought was important for their students; what they expressed was what they wanted it to be possible for their students to achieve, i.e., what is referred to as "important concepts and perspectives" in this article, and is interpreted as powerful knowledge in ethics from a teacher's perspective. Young's (2013) theories describe powerful knowledge as specialized and differentiated. If we compare Young's definition with the teachers' descriptions of what perspectives and concepts they see as important, it does not seem as though this knowledge is powerful. Nevertheless, their descriptions confirm what both Young and Muller (2010) and Deng (2021) write about knowledge that has power and potential for social justice.

What the analysis of the interviews with eight experienced RE teachers empirically shows is how teachers plan their lessons in ethics on the basis of how they understand the core content presented in the syllabus. It also shows how the teachers emphasize ethical perspectives and concepts related to the students' personal lives as well as to society, both locally and globally. Powerful knowledge, according to the teachers, is knowledge that contributes to the development of young people who are prepared to take responsibility for themselves and society, that is, teaching where both the child and the curriculum are in focus.

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