

What is it is to know how to reason about justice in civics in upper secondary school? Combining a phenomenographic approach with an analysis of the educational practise.

Abstract

The field of didactics in Swedish social science and civics is narrow, with particularly few studies based in the practise of social science and civics. The study aims to present more knowledge about what the ability to reason about justice in civics consists of, and how it is constituted in and by the practise of civics education. The study is based upon empirical data from seven interviews and three Learning Studies (Pang & Marton, 2003; Pang & Lo, 2011) about justice in civics. The study examines a learning object – the ability to reason about justice in civics – with the use of a phenomenographic approach. The ability to reason about justice is explored through analysing both students' conceptions of justice, and students' conceptions of what it is to reason in civic. These conceptions are related to each other and to the practise of civics, focusing on communicative actions that enables students to distinguish critical aspects of the ability to reason about justice. This can be described as an alternative way to examine an object of learning in its different aspects and in relation to how it is constituted in the educational social science/civics practise.

Keywords: civics, phenomenography, teaching and learning

Summary

The study addresses the following research questions: What is it to be able to reason about justice in relation to questions of civics in upper secondary social science education? What are students' conceptions of justice and of reasoning in civics? What is the relation between these conceptions, and what aspects of them are critical for students' ability to reason about justice in civics? The study is based in a sociocultural understanding of learning as changed participation in practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991) and a phenomenographic understanding of knowing as intentional (Marton, 1981; Marton & Booth, 1997). Two theories of learning were used, both in the Learning Studies generating the empirical material and in the analysis; Variation Theory (Marton, 2014) and the theory of Intersubjectivity in Activity Theory (Matusov, 2000).

Teaching was first iteratively designed, tried and evaluated in three Learning Studies, in order to find and open up critical aspects of the ability to reason about justice in civics. This generated empirical material, consisting of nine filmed and transcribed research lessons and seven pre-interviews as well as written pre- and posttests. Students' conceptions of justice and of what it is to reason in civics has been investigated, using an approach based in phenomenography. Also, some conditions of the practise of civics that are of importance to the students' learning has been identified, using subject-oriented conversation analysis (Emanuelsson & Sahlström, 2008), Variation Theory (Marton, 2014) and Activity Theory (Wertsch, 1998; Matusov, 2000). Students' conception of justice was found to move between the conception of justice as a universal value, a personal value or a value of principle. Students' conception of what it is to reason in civics move between reporting, analysing causes or critical reasoning. These results are discussed in relation to political-philosophical theories of justice, especially Gailles concept of "essentially contested concepts" (Gallie, 1956; Ruben,

2010), as well as in the light of different discourses on civics education and their relation to different theoretical views on democracy. The critical aspects of knowing how to reason about justice in civics seem to be: the relativity of justice, the basis for arguments for principles of justice and the analysing as well as the criticizing aspects of reasoning. Conditions of the practise of civics that have been found to be of importance for the students' learning are the teachers' subject-knowledge expressed in their teaching, the assumed purpose of the practise of civics and a genuine need for the intended knowledge in the practice. Some communicative actions that seem to facilitate these conditions are activities that are real learning tasks, a subject-specific language as a mediating tool and variation of critical aspects as a mediating tool. The results can contribute to a discussion about what kind of subject-knowledge that is relevant for civics teachers to learn. It is also relevant for understanding how a phenomenographic approach can be combined with conversation analysis to investigate the relation between students' conceptions of the learning object and communicative actions in the educational practise.