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Possible competences to be aimed at in ethics education – Ethical competences highlighted in educational research journals

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ABSTRACT
The aim of this article is to present varieties of ethical competence that are highlighted in ethics and moral education research articles, and to discuss them in the light of competences stressed in the Swedish curriculum, understood as an example of ethics education in compulsory school. The material consists of 1,940 educational research articles published between 2000 and 2015, and the method of analysis is inductive, focusing on ethical competence. One finding is the similarity between the study’s tentative formulation of identified ethical competences in four categories, and Rest’s understanding of acting morally, captured in the four components: sensitivity, judgement, motivation and implementation. Based on the analysis of the articles, broader understandings of these focuses are developed, and later discussed in relation to Swedish ethics education, characterised as both a conservative and liberal values education. The analyses and comparison show the importance of the components of moral sensitivity and moral implementation and their relative absence in the Swedish curriculum, but also how moral judgement must include a competence to evaluate moral motivations, where empirically testable reasons are also central. Moreover, the risk of neglecting contextual, situational and knowledge-related aspects of ethical competence is highlighted.

Introduction
The purpose of this article is to contribute to what is understood and described as a marginalised discussion about central ethical competences to be aimed at in ethics education. The aim is to present varieties of ethical competence highlighted in ethics and moral education research articles and to discuss them in the light of competences stressed in the Swedish curriculum, understood as an example of ethics education in compulsory school.

In Sweden, ‘Ethics’, together with three other sub-areas – ‘Religions and other outlooks on life’, ‘Religion and society’ and ‘Identity and life issues’ – is part of the subject Religious Education (RE). Its variety of aims has similarities with British RE, a main problem of
which has been described as its competing imperatives and its thirteen educational focuses (Conroy, Lundie, and Baumfield 2012). Paradoxically, neither the British nor the Swedish name of the subject clarifies its compound character. For example, the fact that ethics in Sweden is a part of the subject cannot be seen from the name (*religionskunskap*), since it only draws attention to religion. In this respect, it differs from, for instance, the Norwegian situation, where both ethics and life views appear in the name KRLE (Christianity, Religion, Life views and Ethics, formerly RLE, see e.g. Skeie and Bråten [2014]).

The compound character of the Swedish RE subject is problematic. On a *school level*, the situation has meant that the knowledge area of ethics has been both marginalised, in favour of religion, and unclear, which has been shown in empirical studies over time (Anderström 2017; Osbeck 2013, 2014, Skolinspektionen 2012; Skolverket 1993, 54–55). In a situation when teachers’ understanding of a knowledge field is vague, the impact from national tests (since 2013 given in Sweden in RE, ethics included) on teaching can be assumed to be considerable, which empirical research has also confirmed (Anderström 2017). Research that expands these perspectives and presents broader conceptions of ethical competence is therefore valuable for general critical awareness, curriculum development and increased professionalism among ethics teachers.

Also on a *research level*, Swedish ethics education suffers from its location within a research structure that is based on school subjects, i.e. from being a part of RE. Here too, ethics, as part of RE, is marginalised (Sporre 2010). In subject matter research, there may be a risk of directing research interest on an overarching level towards the subject and its teaching challenges as such (e.g. Lindmark 2013). That means that there is a risk of subordinated, specific knowledge areas being less researched. This may be an international tendency as well; for instance, when Grimmitt (2000) presents different pedagogies for RE in Britain, it is not 13 focuses that are debated (Conroy, Lundie, and Baumfield 2012) but rather one dominant one, and it goes without saying that this focus is not ethics.

**Ethics Education in the Swedish curriculum – a characterisation**

Since the aim of this study is to discuss identified varieties of ethical competence in the light of the Swedish curriculum, a more thorough presentation and characterisation is needed. What Swedish students are expected to develop in Ethics is stated both in the general part of the curriculum and in the RE syllabus. However, these wordings differ (e.g. Sporre 2017). The introductory part stresses normative and value-specific competences. The importance of forming personal standpoints is underlined, but the values that the school should ‘represent and impart’ are fixed as ‘the inviolability of human life, individual freedom and integrity, the equal value of all people, equality between women and men, and solidarity with the weak and vulnerable’ (Skolverket 2011, 9). In the RE syllabus, it is primarily analytical and verbal competences, both argumentative and conceptual, that are stressed. The syllabus may also be interpreted as indicating a wish for action competences and non-value-specific normative competences, e.g. taking a personal stand. However, these perspectives are not present in the knowledge requirements of RE, where to achieve the highest grade, the students should be able to ‘…reason and argue about moral issues and values by applying well-developed and well-informed reasoning, and use ethical concepts and models in a well-functioning way’ (Skolverket 2011, 184).
In order to characterise the Swedish ethics education approach, Jones’ (2009) conceptualisation of values education in four discourses – conservative, liberal, critical and postmodern – can be used. Even if ethics education is generally a broader concept than values education, Jones’ conceptualisations contribute crucial perspectives concerning ethics education in Sweden (for more about ‘ethics education’ see the first paragraph in ‘Ethical competences in research articles’ below). According to Jones, conservative values education is marked by the ambition to transmit dominant societal values to the students, who may be rather passive in this. It is not the values as such but the education that makes the approach conservative. In contrast, the liberal approach is based on the students’ active participation, and largely on their own decision-making and value preferences. This makes it a rather individualistic approach, Jones argues. The competence to weigh values, and to develop consistent perspectives and a personal morality, is here highly appreciated. In contrast, such an individualistic perspective is questioned in a critical values education, which works with explicit social norms, but not necessarily the kind of norms that are dominant in society. The perspective is critical in the sense that it identifies subordinated groups and marginalised interests, and aims at change. The intention of this critical approach is to contribute to a more peaceful, just and sustainable world. The students are expected to be active, engaged, and critical, identifying alternatives and contributing to actions. While postmodern values education is also critical, these approaches are more radical in their critique, and question notions of truth and fundamental values in general. Therefore, the ambition is to reveal how knowledge, values and power are intertwined and in that way, deconstruct hegemonic perspectives. Students’ tasks are to develop self-reflection and deconstructive competences.

The Swedish ethics education, from the perspective of Jones (2009), has traces of both a conservative and liberal education. The introductory part of the curriculum has conservative traits, whereby the fundamental values to be aimed at, are prescribed. This approach has also been identified in Swedish teachers’ aims with their education (Thornberg and Oğuz 2013). However, in as much as the introductory part further stresses personal standpoints and the importance of developing such perspectives, the current education is closer to a liberal approach. This is also the dominant perspective in the RE syllabus.

Material and method

Material

In order to select articles for the study, the databases Education Resources Information Centre (ERIC) and Education Research Compete were used. Principally, the search terms included either ‘moral’ or ‘ethics’ in combination with four areas: either teachers, students, competence or reasoning. This means that the study’s intention was not to make a distinction between ‘moral’ and ‘ethics’. More specific forms of moral and ethics education could have been added as search terms such as ‘values education’ or ‘caring’ and ‘character’ approaches. In line with, e.g. Howard (2005), we interpreted these forms as subordinated to moral and ethics education, and have therefore assumed them to be included in the broader labels used.

The original idea was to limit the searches so that only articles that were available as full text, peer reviewed and published in academic journals between 2000 and 2015 were selected. However, the samples varied in size, which meant that some adjustments were made in order to have reasonably large samples from each of the four areas: the time period...
could be increased or decreased, English could be specified as a language for the whole article, the additional search term ‘learning’ could be added, and quotation marks around ‘ethics education’ were also used once (see below). The searches were conducted in spring 2015 and resulted in 1,940 articles. The actual search strings and numbers of articles found were:

- Moral development AND teaching AND pupils, full text, peer reviewed, academic journal, 2000–2015: 54 articles.
- Moral education AND teaching AND subject, full text, peer reviewed, academic journal, no time limit: 100 articles.
- Moral competence, full text, peer reviewed, academic journal, no time limit: 47 articles.
- Ethical competence, full text, peer reviewed, academic journal, no time limit: 42 articles.

**Initial analyses and the focus on ‘ethical competence’**

In line with a grounded theory approach (e.g. Thornberg and Charmaz 2014), inductive analyses of the material were conducted in phases (see Table 1). First, all article abstracts were analysed in order to respond to questions about aims, methods and theoretical frameworks, and, if ethical competences were focused on, what kind. This last question in particular related to the research task of interpreting and tentatively formulating categories for ethical competence. Ethical competence was used heuristically as a broad and open concept with the intention of bridging different forms of knowledge, skills and abilities, as well as different labels for such resources. The use of an overarching concept made it possible to discuss perspectives from different theoretical traditions, focusing on competences to be developed in Ethics. In line with a general curriculum discussion on competences, the focus is on learning outcomes, but hopefully without the connotations of instrumentalism and measurement (Biesta 2012).

In a second phase, deeper readings and analyses with the same particular research task were conducted for the entire articles if a conceptual relevance of ethical competence was identified. From the lists of all tentatively formulated ethical competences, broader and more inclusive categories of ethical competence were developed, as a third phase of analyses.
### Table 1. Phases of the analyses and conceptual focuses of Ethical Competences.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Phases 1 and 2 Tentatively formulated main categories of ethical competence. To be...</th>
<th>Phase 3 Broader conceptions of ethical competence</th>
<th>Phase 4 Links to Rest’s components of acting morally</th>
<th>Phase 5 Renewed analyses focusing on Rest’s components in relation to the empirically grounded categories</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>- Listening</td>
<td>Taking in information</td>
<td>Moral sensitivity</td>
<td>- Listening</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Seeing</td>
<td></td>
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<td>- Seeing</td>
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<td>- Empathic</td>
<td></td>
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<td>- Empathic</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Reflexive</td>
<td>Thinking information over</td>
<td>Moral judgement</td>
<td>- Reflexive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Reasoning (aiming at moral judgements)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- Reasoning (aiming at moral judgements)</td>
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<td>- Critical</td>
<td></td>
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<td>- Critical</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Value-directed (demonstrate values)</td>
<td>Having a direction/intention value foundation</td>
<td>Moral motivation</td>
<td>- Value-directed (demonstrate values)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Virtuous</td>
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<td>- Virtuous</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Acting</td>
<td>Carrying out intentions</td>
<td>Moral implementation</td>
<td>- Acting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Informed / knowledgeable</td>
<td>Transgressing the four focusses</td>
<td></td>
<td>- Informed / knowledgeable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Context-sensitive / -dependent</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- Context-sensitive / -dependent</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Communicative</td>
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<td>- Communicative</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Initial findings, conceptualisations and theoretical connections – and further analyses

Four overarching categories of ethical competences emanated from the analyses: taking in information; thinking information over; having a direction/intention/value foundation; and carrying out intentions. In what can be described as a fourth phase, obvious similarities were identified between the four categories and James Rest’s (1986) and his research partners’ (Bebeau 2002; Narvaez and Rest 1995) conceptualisations of acting morally in four psychological processes. First, there is moral sensitivity, which includes seeing situations, interpreting them and identifying possible ways to respond to them. Second, there is moral judgement, i.e. decisions concerning what actions are morally right. Third, it includes moral motivation, giving priority to moral values – which are defined as social values concerning human cooperation in the service of furthering human welfare (Rest 1986, 3) – rather than other kinds of values. Fourth, acting morally includes implementation, which presupposes perseverance and ego strength.

Since our initial findings were so close to Rest’s – who is one of the most cited scholars in the moral education field (Lee and Taylor 2013) – we decided to use these concepts for four overarching types of ethical competences. However, this conceptual connection concerning an understanding of ethical competence should not be read as an affiliation with Rest’s general, psychological, developmental and neo-Kohlbergian approach to morality. In line with current developments in grounded theory research, whereby existing theoretical concepts can be used to enrich the empirically developed categories (Thornberg and Charmaz 2014), we decided to use Rest’s concepts as focuses in the further analyses of the material.

In line with the aim of the study, to present varieties of ethical competences, examples of research articles related to each of the components and the tentatively formulated main categories of ethical competence were chosen and were examined further for a broader understanding of the four focuses. Since the interest is perceptions of the four focuses, the analyses were carried out without further regard to the articles’ methodological or theoretical orientation. The deepened analyses kept the possibility open that the chosen conceptualisation of ethical competence (Rest 1986) might lack or marginalise central ethical competences. A certain interest was directed towards the transgressing competences that, already in the previous phases, were hard to capture in one of the four categories.

Ethical competences in research articles

The field of moral development and moral education is a multifaceted one, divided in different ways and related to different academic disciplines, of which the main ones – besides education, which itself is multidisciplinary – are psychology and philosophy (Lee and Taylor 2013). Since this is an RE curriculum studies article, the presented ethical competences are discussed in relation to the Swedish curriculum and a fruitful conceptualisation to characterise this education (Jones 2009), anchoring it in the broader research discourse. A traditional moral education division, e.g. between cognitive developmental, caring, and character approaches (Howard 2005), would not assist our analysis. These approaches and their theoretical traditions are visible in the articles, however. For instance, they are shown through discussions about the foundational abilities of the ethical competences studied. Three strands can be identified. First, there is the discussion about affective and cognitive
dimensions of ethical competences and how they are related. Second, there is a discussion concerning the function of language, stressed, e.g. in socio-cultural moral development as the tool of tools, mediating our being in the world (e.g. McCloskey 2012; Thompson 2013). This discussion, by the way, captures what in Table 1 is called a communicative competence transgressing the four focuses. Third, ethical competence is linked to personal characteristics or virtues that the individual has or is able to develop (e.g. Blizek 2013; Berkowitz and Bustamante 2013). With the awareness of this broader landscape of moral development and education, the four focuses of ethical competence are presented.

**Moral sensitivity**

Not infrequently, in the articles that pay attention to moral sensitivity, it is understood as the most crucial of the four components (e.g. Sirin, Rogers-Sirin, and Collins 2010; Rissanen and Löfström 2014), which also agrees with Rest’s understanding. Ethical sensitivity is a prerequisite for ethical thinking and behaviour, since it concerns the ability to recognise potential moral dilemmas. This is why there has been a certain interest in how such a competence can be developed. In this respect, education is often found to be important (Acevedo 2013). Educational level, but also specific ethics courses related to, e.g. race discrimination, are central in order to be able to identify such discrimination, i.e. to show moral sensitivity (Sirin, Rogers-Sirin, and Collins 2010).

Moral sensitivity is described as an identifying, listening, seeing, and empathic competence. A listening sensitivity can involve both listening to the other, including encouraging him/her to listen to his/her inner voice, and listening to one’s own inner voice. When listening to the other, it can be important to capture the unique expression of the other and thereby try to protect her/his otherness (cf. English 2011).

Furthermore, moral sensitivity as a seeing ability means more than identifying ethical challenges; it means really seeing another person. Understanding the appeal that is directed towards oneself through the face of the other, in line with Emmanuel Levinas, can be understood as moral sensitivity (Allan 2011).

Being morally sensitive can also be described as an empathic competence that may vary in character and depth, and be affected by the context in which interactions take place. The number of individuals involved, the task involved and the time pressure all influence the ability to show fundamental empathy, which in turn also affects action possibilities and habits (Cooper 2010). A sensitive moral competence may differ depending on the area in which the challenges appear (Myyry and Helkama 2002; Rest 1986).

In Rest’s understanding of moral sensitivity, both identifying an ethical situation and discerning options for ways to act are parts of this component. The latter can also be interpreted as being a part of a moral judgement competence.

**Moral judgement**

Reasoning about and judging what can be considered a morally wise way to act is the most researched component of the four, in line with previous findings (Lee and Taylor 2013). It is sometimes understood as the moral competence. In these cases, the other components that Rest stresses can be implied as part of such a competence. In dialogue with Kohlberg’s theory and research, different tests have been developed in order to measure such
a competence. Many refer to Rest’s Defining Issues Test (DIT) (e.g. Nather 2013) and Lind’s Moral Judgement Test (MJT) (e.g. Desplaces et al. 2007), which both go back to Kohlberg’s testing methods and his six stages of moral development, where the most advanced represents a universal abstract ethics. A proper act is one where the principle behind it could be raised to a general law, which shows the influence of Kant (Kohlberg 1971). Criticism of Kohlberg’s approach is also well-known, for instance for being about ‘fairness reasoning’ rather than moral reasoning (Rest 1979 in Cain and Smith 2009), and for being gender biased and neglecting care-orientations (Gilligan 1982), a discussion that continues (e.g. Myyry and Helkama 2002). In sum, one can say that while it is hardly controversial that moral judgement is a central competence, it is the norm for this judgement – what constitutes a right or good solution – that is debated.

In several studies, moral judgement is measured in relation to educational efforts. Here, the findings vary a bit and are explained in relation to the different kinds of educational background and characters of the participants. Generally, the effect is positive, especially when the education draws on interactive forms such as group discussions where advanced reasoning is represented. Integrating time for reflection and using methods where group members can interact anonymously without social pressure, and in this sense have expanded opportunities for being frank and critical, have also been shown to have extra educational potential (Cain and Smith 2009). Ethics education can also be more effective when integrated into other teaching, e.g. business courses, than when taught separately (Bosco et al. 2010).

A competence that may be understood as closely related to moral judgment is a reflexive competence. As with the judgement competence, a reflexive competence can also be understood as being enhanced by collective practices (Griffin 2013), which may develop inner dialogue (English 2011). Also, Foucault’s ethics of self-care and ethics of discomfort can be seen as arguing in favour of a continuous reflexive competence, which is nurtured in true social practices where such a competence is collectively fostered. To be active in such practices is to care about one’s ethics. Writing can be of importance, due to its possibilities for creating a distance from one’s thoughts and for maximising one’s reflexive and critical potential (Sandretto 2010).

A critical competence is also present implicitly in the article sample, in that it is demonstrated by the authors of the articles in their criticism of ethics education. One of these articles in particular criticises character education for its consensus focus and individualistic perspectives. Such perspectives risk making structural societal problems invisible and failing to strengthen students as a powerful collective and enhance their critical skills (Winton 2008).

**Moral motivation**

Among some of the authors, the capacity to carry out a morally right action is understood as a consequence of moral judgement, whereby moral motivation may be seen as implied in moral judgment. However, Rest separates these categories and reserves the concept of *moral* motivation for a motivation that gives priority to social values and human welfare.

The kind of values that are highlighted in the articles examined here can generally be said to be in line with Rest's understanding of morality. The importance of developing less egocentric perspectives, highlighting the common and societal good as well as respect for
the other, is stressed (e.g. Cheung and Lee 2010). Several studies are reported that have the purpose of evaluating whether education and training can develop such preferences (e.g. Allen et al. 2011; Cheung and Lee 2010). An interesting theme that is implied in several articles concerns how much individuals can be held responsible, given how influenced they are by their contexts and the hegemonic discourses of these contexts (e.g. Arnold 2012).

Moral motivation can be understood as being related to not only moral judgement but also acts. Influenced by virtue ethics, some researchers stress such an integrated perspective and bring it back to the question of being a good person. The right actions, according to Aristotle, must not only be done, but be done “to the right person, to the right extent, at the right time, with the right motive, and in the right way...” (Blizek 2013, 81, our italics).

**Moral implementation**

A central component of acting morally is implementation, the execution of an intention. However, an ability to carry out an act is often hard to study. In this sense, moral research risks being reductionist (Rest 1986), even if there are researchers in this field that have also argued that test responses can be understood as actions since they in themselves are expressions of moral cognition and moral attitudes, i.e. the basic components of moral behaviour (Lind and Wakenhut 1985). Rest (1986) has stressed that perseverance and ego-strength are characteristic of implementation.

In the articles that have been more thoroughly analysed here, action research studies can be mentioned as examples where concrete moral actions are focused on (Araujo 2012), as well as quasi-experimental studies of individuals’ actions with the aim of changing peoples’ behaviours (Allen et al. 2011). The importance of moral education that focuses on real-life dilemmas and actions has been stressed, and also the centrality of understanding these moral or immoral acts in relation to the social context where the students are active (Banerjee et al. 2012; Thornberg 2010). An interesting complementary concept to action is manner, as discussed by Tate (2006), who emphasises that moral acts are not only about what is being done, but about how it is done.

**Competences that risk being invisible with the four-component model**

On the basis of the articles, it is worth mentioning two aspects of ethical competence that may remain invisible when the four focused concepts/components are used. First, there is the situational aspect of an ethical competence, i.e. handling the fact that challenging events are often situational. Two perspectives of a situational competence are highlighted: the importance of focusing on the other person including his/her uniqueness (English 2011), and individuals’ dependence on their contexts for their ethical competence and the need to be aware of this (Arnold 2012; Sandretto 2010). To Rest (1986) also, social context is a crucial aspect: he has stressed that differences in quality in the four competences are related to variances in experiences of the social world.

Second, to be knowledgeable and have wide discursive frames for reflection is an aspect of ethical competence that is repeatedly emphasised as being of importance for a developed and nuanced moral reasoning (English 2011; McCloskey 2012; Sirin, Rogers-Sirin, and Collins 2010). Once more, the context and collective practices are of importance, since we are each other’s resources for widened perspectives and mutual awareness (Arber 2010; McCloskey...
In order to widen one's perspectives, education is important (Sirin, Rogers-Sirin, and Collins 2010). To actively use one's knowledge and take it into account may be understood as a competence in itself. With reference to a classic Swedish conceptualisation of a well-founded moral standpoint (Bexell 1990), an ethical competence can be interpreted as taking into account facts and theories about human needs that are possible to test empirically. This means that ethical competence is also related to being knowledgeable about the issues at stake.

**Concluding discussion**

The aim of this article has been to present varieties of ethical competence highlighted in ethics and moral education research articles, and to discuss them in the light of competences stressed in the Swedish curriculum – understood as an example of ethics education. Concerning the first part of the aim, initial inductive analyses resulted in categories that largely corresponded to Rest’s (1986) four components of morality. In the deepened analyses of research examples related to each component, the intention was to show varying understandings of these components but also to identify potential ethical competences that these components may not capture. In line with the second part of the aim, the findings are to be discussed in relation to ethical competences highlighted in the Swedish curriculum, an ethics education that, based on Jones (2009), has been interpreted as a conservative but also liberal education approach.

So, what conclusions can be drawn when the presented findings are related to each other? First, it should be stressed that the review of research supports Rest’s components as foundational in discussions of ethical competence in the identified journal articles. Whether this means that they are also comprehensive, or that this primarily reflects a powerful canon in ethics and moral research, cannot be determined based on the examination. However, the study has shown that subdivisions of the components can be made. It could be a valuable task for further research to elaborate the tentatively formulated sub-components presented here and identify additional ones. The review has also shown that the four components of morality can be understood in a more nuanced way if they are explicitly discussed in relation to situations, contexts, and knowledge about issues at stake.

Thereby the research review, assisted by Rest’s four-component model, has identified conceptions of ethical competence that transgress the one expressed in the knowledge requirements of RE in the Swedish curriculum. There, a moral sensitivity is not asked for, and while the general introductory part of the curriculum pays attention to what Rest calls moral motivation (fundamental values in the curriculum), the RE syllabus also leaves this out. Neither is moral implementation part of the knowledge requirements. Ethical competence in the Swedish RE syllabus, of which Ethics is a sub-area, is primarily about a moral judgement competence that includes an argumentative ability.

The empirical findings in relation to Rest’s four-component model constitute an important knowledge contribution to curriculum development as well as to ethics teachers’ professional understanding, by highlighting and conceptualising a variety of ethical competences. The findings show that it is possible and even desirable to have an ethics education that aims at a wider conception of ethical competence than the present Swedish one. The marginalised position of Ethics, emphasised at the beginning of this article, would presumably benefit from a more developed syllabus expressing a variety of ethical competences as presented
here. Such a curriculum development would of course be interesting if it took place in a broader international context, as in RE generally with projects such as the Signposts (Jackson 2014) or the Toledo guiding principles (OSCE/ODIHR 2007). This in turn raises questions about how ethics and religion relate to each other, and how this could and should be reflected in curriculum and education, an important discussion for further research.

More concretely the review has pointed towards, first, the centrality of developing moral sensitivity, to practise an ability to identify ethically problematic phenomena, and to practise an ability to see, listen and empathise with one’s fellow human beings, which can advantageously start in classroom practice.

Second, the findings show that a wider understanding of moral judgement/reasoning is needed. Moral judgements and moral values are closely dependent on each other, and also on verifiable knowledge. A “well-developed and well-informed reasoning’, as the Swedish curriculum states, presumes knowledge. It is therefore reasonable that ethics education practise a competence to search for relevant facts and to use them in moral reasoning in order to make it well-informed (Bexell 1990). Since ethics also includes values, it can be considered a central ethical competence to weigh these in relation to each other and in relation to fundamental values. This calls into question the idea of a liberal values education (Jones 2009), one that is individualistic and relativistic, and does not acknowledge collective values. This is in contrast to the large majority of the research articles that argue for social values and socio-centric perspectives that highlight the common societal good as well as respect for the other. It is also in line with values in the Swedish curriculum, stated in the introductory part but neglected in the RE syllabus. Based on how ethical competences are visualised and discussed in the analysed articles, this curriculum division can be questioned. Instead, one may ask how an ethics education involving explicitly defended values can be developed. Such an ethics education cannot be conservative in its value approach (Jones 2009). It needs to be critical so that students can learn to question what is taken for granted, such as value hierarchies, and instead, on communitarian grounds, try out defendable fundamental values for a democratic and inclusive society that respects the unique and equal value of each person. Such an education will reveal that the commission to foster certain values stressed in the curriculum is not only a commission to teach students to practise stated societal values, but also a task to change societal practices.

Third, and not totally surprisingly, the findings show that the ability to implement intentions is considered a central aspect of ethical competence. To include the development of such an awareness in ethics education, to share experiences about what this can mean in practice and how one can develop such competences, seems to be essential. Ethics education cannot be about artificial dilemmas, but ought to be about the everyday life of young people. This means that ethics education must include awareness about our dependence on the practices where we are active, and about how these practices may widen and/or limit our ethical competences.

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