

# Fiction at School for Educational Purposes: What Opportunities Are Students Given to Act as Moral Subjects?

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When Simone de Beauvoir claims (1982), “one is not born but, rather, becomes a woman”, the same could be said about children in relation to childhood and children’s literature. In particular, textbooks for children, including extracts from children’s literature, tell us how children are supposed to become children by adopting educational aims. In fact, extracts from children’s literature in textbooks could be said to evoke actions emanating from ideas in the texts of what children should be like.

In the school context, these actions are stressed by the functional, educational view of literature expressed in the syllabus for Swedish compulsory school, which states that students should get the opportunity “to read and analyse fictional texts and other texts for different purposes” (Skolverket 2011). This work should be intertwined with that to achieve the overall goals stated by the curriculum for Swedish compulsory school, stressing that students through their education should be able to express ethical standpoints, empathize with the situation of other people and distance themselves from the degrading treatment of people. Furthermore, language, learning and identity development are described as being closely associated with each other in the Swedish curriculum (*ibid.*).

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O. Franck, C. Osbeck (eds.), *Ethical Literacies and Education for Sustainable Development*, DOI 10.1007/978-3-319-49010-6\_5

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### THE SCHOOL CONTEXT AS A DISCOURSE OF “ACTS”

To discuss the school context, this context is here being viewed as a discourse of “acts” that have semantic meanings. To be more precise, this context will be narrowed down to the interplay between text content and actions evoked by *fictional texts in textbooks* written for students at compulsory school. However, this interplay is complex and not limited to explicit relationships. Rather, it is constituted by moral bonds within the school context and culturally related ideas regarding childhood and upbringing.

In this context, the theory of “acts”, initially expressed by Edmund Husserl (1950), Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1945) and George Herbert Mead (1934), is relevant since it seeks to explain in what ways social agents constitute social reality through language. However, speech-act theory will here be limited to that elaborated by Kent Bach (inspired by Austin 1975). Bach’s point is that utterances can be viewed as intentional action, in the sense that what one intends can contribute to what one does (Bach 1994). Together with his idea that discourse creates linguistic structures to construct the self, this concept might contribute to the understanding of *how* and *why* utterances in textbooks create possibilities and limitations for students to act as subjects within the school context. Consequently, identity is here regarded as a performative accomplishment, constituted by acts that one “does” (performs). Claiming that one is not born but rather becomes a child thus means appropriating and reinterpreting the doctrine of “constituting acts” because being a child is in no way a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts proceed—rather, it is an identity tenuously constituted in time, an identity instituted through a repetition of acts.

### CHILDREN’S LITERATURE AS A REPETITION OF ACTS

From an educational or moral point of view, what children need has often been studied. In fact, the history of children’s literature could be said to be a repetition of acts, maintained by authors creating children’s literature and writers focusing on children’s literature. It is worth noticing that even if writers of literature do not intend to be advisory, but instead pursue imaginative freedom, the results can be the opposite.

Of course, this could also be said about researchers. For instance, while criticizing the unimaginative, lecturing content of older textbooks, Paul Hazard lectures on what children are and what they need:

It is true that they lure us away from the feast of ideas, taking no pleasure there themselves. They place small value on the abstractions that are so useful to our grown-up pastimes. No doubt it sometimes happens that the stories most laden with meaning seem easy for them to take hold of, as though they had already lived several lives, the confused memory of it survives; or as if they had foreknowledge of their own completion; or as if intuition accomplished its miracle in them and allowed them to reach their goal while sparing them the journey to it. But these are only exceptional rays of light. Let us not exaggerate, let us not grant them every quality, let us admit that they have no skill in handling ideas. What they have is enough for them. (Hazard 1947, p. 166)

Authors, too, have explicitly expressed opinions about what children need. For instance, Zacharias Topelius, as early as 1865, stressed the importance of texts not patronizing children, a standpoint which may be compared with ideas expressed a hundred years later by another author writing for children: Lennart Helsing. In 1963, Helsing wrote about how important it is that texts for young readers (1) interest them; (2) have sufficient aesthetic merits; and (3), if they treat ethical matters, keep up to “the morals or tendency that we are likely to accept” (Helsing 1963, p. 52, my translation).

That a distinction is possible to make, separating children’s literature from that for grown-ups, Örjan Lindberger discusses in his research (1998). Demonstrating examples of adaptation of literature written for adults into children’s literature, he points out what historically has been regarded suitable for children. Lindberger shows that there are several characteristics of literature that have been adapted: (1) the content of the transformed literature concentrates on adventures or stories about children, families or animals; (2) the story itself is concrete and not too slow (when it comes to action); and (3) children can relate to the stories. He also writes that complicated language should be avoided in adapted literature, as well as (hidden) symbolism that could be said to prevent young readers from understanding the meaning of the text.

In her work, Jacqueline Rose is aware of the didactical implications of conceptions of children’s literature (1992). In *The Case of Peter Pan or the Impossibility of Children’s Fiction*, she foregrounds the complex potential

meanings of children's literature by asking what it is that adults (through literature) want or demand of children. She regards children's literature as something that "seems to operate according to a regime of attraction which draws the child straight into the path of identification—with the intimacy of the story-telling itself, or with the characters in whom the child recognises himself or herself on the page" (p. 140). Here this is interesting, since Rose explains this process as an activity of oppression of children by adults. As she puts it, every reader (adult as well as child) has to take up a position of identity in language by recognizing themselves in the first-person pronoun and "cohere themselves to the accepted register of words and signs". Problems arise, she says, when this necessity of recognition shifts into "something more like a command" (p. 141).

Rose's research, as well as the theories on adapted literature, problematize the fact that even if adults have the intention not to (consciously) have an impact on literature for children, adults constantly keep filling children's literature with a content that reflects their own ideas of what is suitable for young people to read. Whether it be moral proclamations—typical of children's literature in the past—or something else, children's literature is likely to express moral standards that are desirable within the society in which the texts are being produced. In that sense, both the young reader and the main character in children's books could be said to be objects rather than subjects of constitutive acts, contributing to the performativity of childhood and the creation of what they (themselves) should be like.

### STUDYING EXTRACTS FROM CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

To be able to analyse messages conveyed by contemporary children's literature, and discuss the performativity of children's literature in the textbook context, the focus here will be on fiction in textbooks for pupils aged 10–15. Three texts from three textbooks are discussed, as well as exercises relating to the texts.

The following books have been analysed: Alvåker and Boglund's *Bokskåpet* (1994 [*The bookcase*]), Falkenland's *All världens berättelser och du* (1998 [*All stories of the world and you*]) and Sjöbeck and Holmström's *Svenska nu* (1999 [*Swedish now*]). In all three, literature is a major part of the content. However, these books have also been chosen because they differ from each other. *Bokskåpet* is similar to a textbook anthology but with exercises linked to some of the texts. On the one hand, these exercises aim to develop the thoughts evoked by the texts (e.g. "Write

about a time when you experienced something very sad.”—all translations related to the textbooks are my own). On the other hand, they aim to help the young reader learn about narrative technique.

On the back cover of *All världens berättelser och du*, the book is referred to as a “study anthology”. Every text is presented with an introduction and followed by exercises. The exercises consist of tasks that encourage students to dramatize the content of the stories or to talk/write about them. (The aim is, as Falkenland puts it, to get pupils to reflect on what they have read and take a stand where they compare their reading experience with practical experience from real life; see Falkenland’s preface, p. 5.)

*Svenska nu* uses an approach characterized by an integration of all kinds of schoolwork included in the subject of Swedish. Extracts from children’s literature are combined with exercises aimed at speaking and writing practice, and even questions about grammar. The book also aims to cover the whole subject, as well as the overlaps between Swedish and subjects such as history, religion and civics. Fiction, here, can be said to be the starting point for broader studies than are traditionally included in the subject of Swedish.

In this chapter, three texts from the aforementioned textbooks are read more closely. They are all written by contemporary Swedish authors writing for children. The texts under study are Lars Hesslind’s “Använd språket, grabben” (“Use your language, young man” from *Bokskåpet*, pp. 148–155), Mecka Lind’s “När mamma rymde” (“When mum ran away” from *All världens berättelser och du*, pp. 106–112) and Shanti Holmström’s “Ur Mitt okända hemland” (“From my unknown home country” from *Svenska nu*, pp. 8–13). One of these stories was written by a man (Hesslind) and the other two women (Lind and Holmström), which could be said to be a typical gender representation of publications on children’s literature in Sweden. (Most textbooks include extracts from children’s literature.) The stories were chosen because they represent three different perspectives on social issues: “Use your language, young man” is interesting from a socioeconomic standpoint, while gender studies are relevant to “When mum ran away”. Questions about ethnic belonging and identity could be said to be relevant after reading “From my unknown home country”. (From now on I refer to the titles translated into English to make it easier for the reader to follow.)

In all three stories the reader meets a main character who in the first person tells of something that has happened in the past, and by doing so they both (re-)present the book content and evoke action denoting performativity. Though two of the stories are extracts from longer stories

(“From my unknown home country” and “When mum ran away”), this will not be taken into account; after having read the whole of the stories, it is clear to me that the extracts are typical of the stories as a whole. (Both are from the beginning of the stories.)

### PERFORMING THE CHILD THROUGH EXTRACTS IN TEXTBOOKS

“Use your language, young man” is set in the 1940s and is about a working-class boy in a Swedish town who hits his long-time antagonist with an icy snowball. The boy who was hit swears revenge. However, the revenge never happens because the main character has learnt how to rattle off the (classical) Greek alphabet. “You can’t beat someone like you”, the antagonist argues, “you’re so crazy I wouldn’t even dirty my hands on you” (*En sän som dej kan man ju inte slå. Du är ju så jävla flängd i huvudet att man inte kan skita ner händerna på dej*, p. 154). At the end the main character tells the reader that he has learnt from this that words are the strongest weapons in the world.

The story is written in the first person, yet it includes comments that are more likely to be spoken by a grown-up than by a child, such as “From the structure of our language you may judge yourself, how far we were from the bookshelves where we grew up” (*Av språkets struktur kan ni själva räkna ut hur långt det var till bokhyllorna där vi växte upp*, p. 149). The text being written in the first person, from a young boy’s perspective, the presence of irony is remarkable (“Life was damn good”, *Livet var skitkul*, p. 152). The choice of words, stylistically, also contributes to the alteration of the social agent’s position, from being in the position of a subject, retelling in the first person, to that of an object. For instance, at the end, it is said about the antagonist that “The expression on his face slowly changed, from the one of a scornful avenger to one of a doubter” (*Uttrycket i hans ansikte förändrades sakta från den hänfulle hämnarens till tvivlarens*, p. 154). Together with the content of the story, the stylistic level strengthens the positioning of the adult as a subject. This happens, for instance, when the boy meets an artist, who tells him that his canvas invites him to dance with “the anxieties of creativity” (*där skapandets ångestar bjöd upp till första dansen*, p. 151).

“When mum ran away” is also written in the first person. The narrator explicitly informs the reader that the main character, a girl called Ollie, is 11 years old. The story is retold from her point of view and is about an

ordinary afternoon ending in chaos. It takes place in a flat where a (single) mother lives with her three children: Ollie, Jesper (who is younger than Ollie) and Tessa (who is about 15). They are all quarrelling with each other in the kitchen while their mother is frying fish fingers. They remark on the food that is being prepared: “Actually, you do get paid for us, mum” (*Du får faktiskt betalt för oss, morsan*), Tessa remarks (p. 108). “First, you get the child allowance, then you get money from dad, too” (*Först får du barnbidrag och sen betalar pappa för dig också*), she goes on (p. 108).

This and other comments finally make the mother feel that she has had enough—at least the reader is supposed to think so when the children find themselves left on their own the following morning when they wake up. Their mother has left a note explaining that she cannot endure anymore and that “she needs to rest and think” (*Måste få vila och tänka efter*, p. 111).

At the beginning it is relevant to argue that the story—literally—is being told not only from the main character’s point of view but also from the other children’s perspectives; the reader receives information about what is going on through the dialogue. The focus of the story gradually changes, though, from that of a social agent (the main character) being a subject to the being an object (when the mother’s perspective takes over). This development is not (mainly) expressed in words but through the mother’s body language. (You can read that the mum first bangs a saucepan on the stove. Then she bangs a frying pan so hard that she makes the fish fingers jump like dolphins. Later she rushes into the bedroom and locks the door.)

Yet, stylistically, nothing (verbally) reveals the transformation from the main character’s position of a subject to the position of an object (related to the mother’s position as a subject). So if the main character’s “object position” in “Use your language, young man” is not very well hidden (in terms of expressions and vocabulary with references to a world far from what could be said to be ordinary childhood experience), “When mum ran away” verbally sticks to the “subject position” while letting the children dominate as social agents.

The third text, “From my unknown home country”, is similar to a diary. The reader gets to know a teenage girl called Shanti, who describes what it is like to be adopted and look different from many other Swedish young people. Her thoughts keep wandering about in the text, from her biological parents and the parents she is living with now, to the experience of having found herself close to a neo-Nazi demonstration when visiting Stockholm.

Since the text exposes Shanti's thoughts in a convincingly realistic and personal way, and the language is not very complicated, the text can be said to stick to the main character's subject position. Yet if the content of the story is being analysed, it has—just like the other—a sense of morals that transfers the main character to an object position. When Shanti talks about the demonstration, for instance, she tells the reader that the demonstrators acted without knowing what they were doing (*De visste ju egentligen inte vad de gjorde*, p. 9). She is also remarkably sensible when it comes to people who have hurt her. For instance, she tells the reader that she understands a tormenting skinhead who has been bullying her, and suggests that they could have talked to each other because they “might have been able to help each other” (*hade kanske kunnat hjälpa varandra*, p. 11). Throughout the story, Shanti keeps her feelings under control and tries to understand the world around her, and she expresses a forgiving attitude even when people are being mean to her.

#### EXTRACTS WITH EXERCISES IN THE TEXTBOOKS

No specific exercise is linked to “Use your language, young man”, while several tasks are set after “From my unknown home country”. The text is part of a chapter entitled “Read and write about identity” (*Läs och skriv om identitet*, pp. 7–21), making it clear, literally, that developmental psychology could be said to have an impact on the Swedish school system.

First the students are asked to retell the content of “From my unknown home country”, then they are asked to describe themselves using nouns and adjectives. After this they are supposed to make a timeline describing their lives so far, and discuss questions such as “What possibilities does one have to control one's own life?” (*Vilka möjligheter har man att styra sitt liv?*), “Does it make any difference what you do?” (*Spelar det någon roll vad du gör?*) and “Should you plan your life and already be working on your future—for example, by studying?” (*Ska man planera livet och redan nu lägga grunden till framtiden genom att till exempel studera?*, p. 17). The students are also asked to write a story about their future, where they fantasize about what it is going to be like. At the end of the chapter in the textbook, they are asked to “investigate different lifestyles and different things people believe in” (*undersöka olika livsstilar och olika saker som människor tror på*, p. 19). Finally they are asked to make a self-evaluation, working with questions such as “Why may it be a good thing to think of what shapes one's identity?” (*Varför kan det vara bra att fundera över vad som format identiteten?*) and “Are you pleased with your own work?” (*Är du nöjd med ditt eget arbete?*, p. 21).



Here these exercises are described to focus on how the interpretation of children's literature is directed in a textbook context; even if subject positions can be said to be present in the literary texts, they tend to disappear when the work with the texts begins. This is especially true in questions such as "Should you plan your life and already be working on your future—for example, by studying?" and "Why may it be a good thing to think of what shapes one's identity?" (exercises set after "From my unknown home country"). Yet it is not as simple as saying that a text such as the one about Shanti includes the positioning of a subject, while the textbook context does not offer opportunities to analyse it from a young person's subject position. It is, for instance, possible to argue that "From my unknown home country" has a form that gives the reader an impression of a subject positioning herself (the "diary"), while the content (or rather the message conveyed) indicates the positioning of an object. Also, studying the questions one could argue that the opportunity to act as social agents *is* possible within the framework of doing the exercises—at least to some extent the pupils can leave their marks on the answers.

Similar thoughts are evoked by "When mum ran away" and the questions related to this text. Below the heading after "When mum ran away", "The story and you" (*Berättelsen och du*, p. 113), the following questions are found: "Whose 'fault' do you think it is when there is a quarrel in Ollie's family?" (*Vems 'fel' tycker du att det är att det bråkas i Ollies familj?*), "Was it 'right' that the mum ran away, do you think?" (*Var det 'rätt' att mamman rymde, tycker du?*), "Why did she run away, do you think?" (*Varför rymde hon, tror du?*), "Is a parent allowed to run away?" (*Får en förälder rymma?*) and "What could she have done instead?" (*Vad kunde hon ha gjort istället?*). The questions offer the opportunity for the students to position themselves as subjects in the answers because they are open and they invite answers from a personal point of view. Yet the educational purposes of the exercises and the textbook are likely to have an impact on the students when answering the questions.

## PERFORMATIVITY THROUGH EXTRACTS

In fact the text content could be said to signal performativity in the sense that children denote modes of presenting the content (from an object position), while adults denote modes of evoking action (from a subject position). In "Use your language, young man", for instance, this can be seen when the young boy says that he realizes that language is the strongest

weapon in the world, and in “From my unknown home country”, the main character acts and draws conclusions as any adult positioning themselves as a subject would (which could be regarded as the ultimate act of positioning the main character as an object). Also, remarks about the situations consist of expressions that deviate stylistically from what might be supposed to be typical of children’s language and references (especially in “Use your language, young man”).

On the other hand, in all three stories, children can be said to denote modes of subjects positioning themselves as well: all of them are written in the first person, with young people as (fictional) storytellers. All of them also depict situations where the main character initially positions themselves as a subject: in a conflict increasing because of a snowball (in “Use your language, young man” ), during a rowdy afternoon at home (in “When mum ran away”) and in an ordinary situation such as eating at school (in “From my unknown home country”).

However, in all of the stories an educational purpose can be discerned, as well as in the exercises linked to them. Perhaps educating the pupils with the aim of telling them that learning language is important (and the right use of it even more important—see “Use your language, young man”), that being nice to your mother is good (and to your brothers and sisters—see “When mum ran away”) and that trying to understand other people is desirable (even if they bully you because of your skin colour—see “From my unknown home country”) offers the most striking examples of children having altered their positions of being subjects to being objects.

Of course, this might be regarded as the result of the fact that texts written for children also need to suit adults—at least to some extent (to be sold and, in this context, accepted by teachers). As pointed out, another explanation is the history of children’s literature as morally educational. Worth stressing here is that the tradition of morally educating children through children’s books risk taking place and growing stronger through the support of the educational context at school (including exercises). In fact, one could argue that the school context opens up for the *double adaptation* of literature in textbooks, partly as a result of the idea of children’s (supposed) needs in general and partly because of the moral standards maintained by the school discourse.

Undoubtedly this requires a discussion about what texts are being used at school and why; if discourse creates linguistic structures to construct the self, the possibilities and limitations created by the choice of texts is crucial (Bach 1994). In addition to this, the students’ tasks related to the

text extracts make it clear that it is important to discuss in what ways texts used in school make it possible for students to act as subjects within the school context. Furthermore, if the goal in the curriculum of students being able to express ethical standpoints is to include their own ethical standpoints, they need opportunities to act as moral subjects while reading and discussing fiction at school.

### FICTION AT SCHOOL AND THE OPPORTUNITY FOR STUDENTS TO ACT AS MORAL SUBJECTS

To enable sales, are textbooks made to suit as many readers as possible with as little confrontation as possible, as the Swedish author Sven Wernström puts it? According to him, texts in textbooks are predictable and (therefore) uninteresting (1991). What students need, he points out, is fiction that opens up the unpredictable in life, showing the irrationality of peoples' behaviour and their (more or less) repressed motivations for their choices in life.

Undoubtedly students need fiction to help them to grasp complexity if they are to discuss interpersonal complex situations at school. Wernström might well be right when he says: "To be able to act as a human being there is only one user manual, and that is fiction" (p. 167).

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