

Chapter 10

Concluding Remarks and Future Directions

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Abstract In this last chapter, some concluding remarks are presented with reference to the various chapters. These remarks are related to the paths for future research that were presented in the introduction, and these paths are, in an introductory way, correlated to the research questions that are in focus in the research project of which the book is a part.

In the foregoing chapters, several issues relating to the national tests in RE have been discussed with reference to the research approaches presented. The common aim has been to highlight the concept of ethical competence, such as this may be interpreted and developed with regard to the items focusing on ethics in the tests.

A critical analysis of how the concept in question is dealt with in the syllabus and in the tests was carried out in the second chapter, and some suggestions for the development of the assessment of ethical competence were presented. In the third chapter, another dimension of measuring ethical competence was discussed, namely, one which may be formulated in terms of “critical thinking”. In the fourth and the fifth chapters, teachers’ and pupils’ approaches for dealing with items regarding ethics in the tests were analysed. In Chap. 6, a critical analysis with reference to the concepts of sustainable development and global responsibility, both mentioned in the Swedish curriculum, was carried out with the aim of identifying how an adequate interpretation of the concept of ethical competence may be developed within RE teaching and in the national tests. In Chap. 7, a statistical analysis highlighting differential item functioning (DIF) was presented with regard to the items concerning ethics. Finally, in Chaps. 8 and 9, international perspectives on the issues and approaches presented in the foregoing six chapters were presented and elaborated on.

As was mentioned in the Preface, research regarding the national tests in RE has recently begun, and much can be expected when it comes to the development of this in the future. Some possible paths of research were mentioned. One of these involved

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focusing on results in the tests in relation to various formats of items; another was to investigate pupils' answers considered as expressions of young peoples' views on ethics and existential questions along with various conceptions about religion. A third path for research mentioned could be thought to be directed towards the question of the degree to which the results of the tests can provide indications about how the teaching in the subject of RE is carried out in Swedish schools. A fourth could be thought to be concentrated around issues related to interpretations of how teachers perform assessment and how teachers identify different qualities in answers given by pupils.

Now, all of these paths are, in one way or another, represented in this volume – and in the research project which was mentioned in the Preface: *What May be Learnt in Ethics? Varieties of Conceptions of Ethical Competence to be Taught in Compulsory School*. The purpose of this project is “to identify and elucidate varieties of conceptions of ethical competence and critically analyse and discuss them in relation to each other and in relation to ethical theory as potential educational content in compulsory school” (http://idpp.gu.se/english/Research/research_projects/what-may-be-learnt-in-ethics).

Questions and themes treated in the chapters of this volume are dealt with within the project. Its research questions are:

1. What conceptions of ethical competence can be identified in pupils' utterances (a) in national tests and (b) concerning experienced needs of ethical competence as expressed in interviews?
2. What conceptions of ethical competence can be identified in teachers' utterances in interviews regarding their commission and the goals of their teaching of national tests?
3. What conceptions of ethical competence can be identified in supranational policies and in a sample of national curricula?
4. What can be said about the identified varieties of conceptions of ethical competence in the light of each other as well as ethical theory and as potential content in contemporary compulsory school? (http://idpp.gu.se/english/Research/research_projects/what-may-be-learnt-in-ethics)

The analyses presented in the foregoing chapters, and the conclusions drawn with reference to them, have raised questions that are important to be investigated. The concept of ethical competence, applied within school contexts, is one that is of great relevance not only to a Swedish arena but to the international field where ethics and ethics education are analysed.

The conclusions drawn in the analyses in the chapters would, consequently, be of great interest for research and teaching regarding the foundations and the methods of assessment highlighted within research that is carried out with the aim of identifying challenges and problems related to assessment in ethics in a general sense.

Let me shortly sketch how further research along the four paths mentioned above is to be carried out within the ongoing research project. Such a picture captures some threads that seem to be of general interest.

The first path was described as involving a focus on results in the tests in relation to various formats of items. In several of the chapters in this book, this path has been touched upon from various angles; for example, in the second chapter, in relation to Olof Franck's analyses of what kinds of ethical competences are implied in the construction of the items or, as in the third and sixth chapters, with reference to Kristoffer Larsson's analyses of how 'critical thinking' or, to use Karin Sporre's formulation, an ability to 'think critically, in freedom and with integrity', is approached. A third angle is represented in Chap. 7 by Johan Tykesson's analysis of differential item functioning (DIF), applied to the ethical items in the tests, with results introducing perspectives and challenges relating to the questions of whether the tests could be said to favour one gender over the other and whether they disfavour pupils who are second-language speakers of Swedish.

Within the research project, these analyses will be taken further along some relevant lines. Issues regarding how ethical competence and critical thinking are approached in items in the national tests will also be highlighted in the research that lies ahead. Here it is worth emphasising that one strand to examine is the way in which ethical competence and the ability for critical thinking are described in national policy documents in various parts of the world. Such descriptions will indicate conceptions of ethical as well as of critical competence, which will probably influence the construction of tests – be it national tests or less comprehensive ones.

It is also worth mentioning that analyses of item construction in the national tests in RE may be of relevance to test construction in other subjects and vice versa. One example relating to the national tests in history is research presented in Samuelsson and Wendell (2016).

The second path for further research focusing on investigations of pupils' answers, considered as expressions of young people's views on ethics and existential questions as well as various conceptions about religion, is, in the book, specifically highlighted in Chap. 5, where Christina Osbeck presents and discusses various conceptions of ethical competence with regard to a sample of pupils' answers about the ethical concept *forgiveness* in one of the tests. The issues she examines, such as how the empirical results could be dealt with and interpreted with regard to the philosophical analysis previously presented and what pedagogical implications can be said to follow, are ones that are presently being developed within the research project. Results from a number of analyses of pupils' answers, representing a range of items and issues, have been presented at national and international conferences, and several research articles are now to be finished and submitted.¹

It is important to develop research along this path in relation to international examinations. The national tests in RE present in certain ways a specific approach to assessment and testing, but this does not, of course, mean that they should be thought to be so unique that they lack relevance to other testing procedures within the area.

On the other hand, the research area has to be defined and structured so that a clear picture of what kinds of investigations are carried out is made transparent.

¹ See footnotes 8–12 in the Introduction.

There is apparently a need to bring together research that examines specific topics such as pupils' answers to items on tests in ethics education in compulsory and upper secondary school²; competence tests carried out, for example, among staff in the areas of health and social care³ or among students in business education⁴; and ethical codes for assessment in schools and universities.⁵

The third path for research mentioned was the question of the degree to which the results of the tests can provide indications about how teaching in the subject of RE is carried out in Swedish schools. This is a research area that is to be further examined, not least by a continuation of interviews with teachers such as those that Annika Lilja analyses in the fourth chapter in this book. More interviews have been carried out, and it is relevant to emphasise the importance of widening the scope and including international examinations of teachers' approaches to ethics education and assessment.

Finally the fourth path, concentrated around issues related to interpretations of how teachers perform assessment, how teachers identify different qualities in answers given by pupils, is one that has clear connections to the third path. There are, however, specific issues to be dealt with here. One is related to the pedagogical focus teachers may have when carrying out assessment in ethics education. Another is the extent to which teachers' conceptions of ethics, ethics education and ethical competence influence the assessment within education about ethics, morals and values. A third issue concerns questions that are treated by Julian Stern in the ninth chapter in the book, such as "What is ethics education?", "How may such education be performed and developed?" and "What is the ethical significance of assessment within ethics education?".

Stern contributes by highlighting these questions with reference to international contexts, and it is naturally important to consider such references in order to widen the perspectives on assessment in ethics education.

Such a widening of scope is also in focus in the eighth chapter of this book, where Nigel Fancourt presents an outsider's perspective on the questions and approaches highlighted in the six chapters written by the Swedish contributors. He highlights these questions and approaches with reference to wider global policy tensions and discusses demands for effective assessment, relating to neo-liberal tides and ideas. In particular, Fancourt considers "the principle of constructive alignment between curriculum, pedagogy and assessment".

Fancourt's discussion has important consequences for the development of the research area of assessment in relation to policy-making and curriculum planning. The chapters of this book are all to be seen as parts of such a development, starting with examinations of national tests in RE in a Swedish context and taking the methods and the results of the analyses further as contributions to an international research arena.

² See, for example, Grant and Matemba (2013).

³ See, for example, Calder (2015).

⁴ See, for example, Wilhelm and Czynewski (2006).

⁵ See, for example, Davison et al. (2016).

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