

Nutrition education and citizenship

- Individual responsibility and democratic politics

Nutrition education and the promotion of healthy eating behaviors and lifestyles are essential to students' health, well-being, and educational success. Healthy, well-nourished students are better able to reach their full academic and physical potential, are absent less often, and have higher test scores. (Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction 2017)

The quote is from Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction. We recognize the message from many other sources such as media and research. Well-balanced diet is an important prerequisite for the wellbeing of the individual.

This study addresses health and nutrition education at school. What it also does is to relate this to civic education. We assume that health, in contemporary western societies, is seen as an individual rather than a societal and/or political responsibility. Health, along with issues such as energy, sustainable development and education, is in today's political rationality characterized by depoliticization and responsabilization (Fitzpatrick and Tinning 2014). During the last decades, what citizens collectively seek through political action has become less important than what the individual, as a customer, demands.

The depoliticization of health is reflected in changes on both societal and individual levels. The individual citizen is presumed to be active and take responsibility in a wide range of issues. Matters of diet and nutrition are also highly individualized. Cederström and Spicer (2016) described how contemporary diets require micro-regulation and self-surveillance such as regulated tables and prescriptions on what and when to eat.

The problem with an individualization of diet and nutrition is that it overlooks and obscures the social, economic and political determinants of and solutions to health problems. Research has shown that health and the distribution of health among nations and within nations are largely determined by things other than the choices made by the individual. In many ways, health is determined by the social and economic structure within and among populations (Wilkinson and Pickett 2011). Statistics show that the social gradient in health is a remarkably widespread phenomenon.

This study has three aims. Firstly, we analyse how nutrition and causes and solutions of malnutrition are portrayed in textbooks. The question we answer is: "*Is diet and nutrition portrayed as a political or non-political issue in secondary school textbooks?*" Secondly, and informed by the result, we discuss and problematize what kind of citizenship and democracy that thereby is constructed in the textbooks. Thirdly, we comment on the implications for future diet and nutrition education and the role the educational system should have when it comes to citizenship and democracy.

In this study, we have chosen a concept of politics (and politicization - depoliticization) presented by Colin Hay in *Why We Hate Politics* (2007). According to Hay, politics share four different features.

Firstly, politics can only occur in situations when human beings can choose; that is, in

situations of *choice*. Secondly, and closely related, politics can only occur when human beings can *make a difference*; that is, when humans have the *capacity for agency*. In other words, politics only exists in situations that human beings can influence. Thirdly, politics is closely related to *deliberation*, which happens when human beings talk about, scrutinize, debate, draw attention to and explore options related to an issue. Fourthly, politics is a *social activity*, which means that politics only occurs in situations when activities and choices directly or indirectly have consequences for other human beings. We argue, in line with Biesta (2011), for a need to keep citizenship (and therefore citizen) education focused on politics and democracy.

Research design and methodology

In this study we have analysed Swedish textbooks for secondary school that explicitly address health issues. We are not trying to offer a comprehensive analysis of all teaching material. Rather, we used a selection of textbooks with representative examples to illustrate how nutrition and diet is portrayed within them.

We started by examining the Swedish national curricula (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2011) in order to find out which school subjects in the Swedish school system that are supposed to deal with health. We concluded that the following subjects are supposed to address health issues: Biology; Home and consumer studies; Physical education and health; and Science. Health is coupled with these subjects through the national curriculum and the core content for the subject.

Our methodological approach consists of a reconstruction and systematization of content that deals with nutrition and diet and an analysis of the content based on our theoretical canvas. Accordingly, we do not analyse why a certain view on nutrition and diet is presented in the textbooks or which implications it will have on, for example, students in school. We discuss what kind of citizenship and democracy that is constructed within the textbooks, since the concepts are strongly interconnected to and dependent on politicization and depoliticization.

Preliminary results

The results so far indicate that the issue of diet and nutrition in the textbooks is depoliticized. They are regarded as an individual, not a public or governmental, concern.

The study is in its early stage, with no detailed results. Elaborated results, discussion and implications for health and nutrition education will be presented at the conference.

References

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