


# Ethical competence expressed in students' written texts

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Teaching ethics in compulsory school regained urgency some years ago in Sweden when National Tests in ethics were introduced. Students were evaluated as having or not having the ethics knowledge required. The aim of this study is to investigate what aspects of ethical competence students express in texts from National Tests, and to investigate what cultural tools 12- and 15-year-old students use in their texts about a given ethical situation. A qualitative content analysis was performed in three steps. In the first step, four aspects of ethical competence were identified: to verbalise, to take a stand, to take responsibility for one's actions and an understanding of life. In the second step, the identified ethical competence was interpreted through four ethical voices building on the theories of Nussbaum, Løgstrup, Benhabib and Singer, showing that the students' texts contain varying aspects of ethics. In the third step, cultural tools used by the students were identified. The conclusions were that (1) some ethical perspectives, such as the societal and global perspectives, are disadvantaged in the analysed texts, and accordingly in the tasks; (2), ethics is a difficult subject to assess in a fair way; and (3) since cultural tools are dependent on the social, cultural and historical context, the school has a responsibility to teach ethics in a way that gives all students the power and authority to live good lives.

**Keywords:** Ethical competence; National Tests; Students' texts; Ethical voices; Cultural tool; Moral development.

## Introduction

The complex question of teaching ethics in compulsory school regained urgency some years ago in Sweden, with the introduction of the National Tests in ethics. Every fourth student in Grade 9 is evaluated each year as having or not having the ethics knowledge required in the curriculum. Since 2013, students in Grade 9 are taking a National Test in Religion Education (RE) in which ethics is tested, and in 2013 and 2014 a quarter of all students in Grade 6 also took the National Tests in ethics. In 2015, the National Tests for students in Grade 6 became optional, but since 2017 they are not given at all.

In Sweden, ethics is a specific knowledge sub-area in the subject of RE. Ethics is also described in the overarching introduction of the curriculum for Swedish compulsory school (Skolverket 2019). These two parts differ when it comes to how ethics is described. In the curriculum introduction, normative and value-specific capacities are emphasised, as is the centrality of forming personal standpoints (Skolverket 2019). In the RE syllabus, analytical and verbal competence is emphasised. Between these two parts of the Swedish curriculum, there is a tension between primarily value transmission and a more analytical ethics that underlines the ability to reason, think critically and engage oneself in ethical inquiry (Gardelli 2016). Knowing that students are evaluated as having or not having the ethics knowledge required in the Swedish curriculum, and that there is a tension in this curriculum, ethical competence is possible to view as being both oil in the machinery of society and gravel, giving opportunity for critical reflection.

## Ethics education

According to Avci (2017), teaching in ethics can be understood as a controversial matter. He also emphasises the importance of identifying the purpose of ethics education before describing particular methods and models of teaching ethics. From his point of view, it is meaningful that ethics education not only develops individuals' ethical skills and knowledge but also produces global perspectives recognising and accepting cultural and social diversity.

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When it comes to investigating the student perspective, in a study from Ireland (O'Flaherty, Liddy & McCormack 2018) the researchers turned to students aged 13–14 years to investigate, amongst others, their views on important values in ethics education. The students in the survey emphasised values like equality, inclusion and holistic development. They also mentioned various life skills of interest to them, with which they engaged outside the prescribed curriculum. Examples included career advice, money management and how to take care of a home. This result is in line with another study, in which 15-year-old students in Sweden emphasised situations involving peer relations, their future and education, issues involving migration and climate change as important ethical questions (Osbeck 2018). The students in the Irish study also suggested that questions about bullying, homelessness and the war in Syria were important to be aware of. When it comes to questions like these, the students regard the school as important as their parents cannot always give full explanations about events (O'Flaherty et al. 2018). In the study 'Learning for life' (Arthur 2010), trust and honesty were regarded as the most important values, while lack of sharing was an issue of concern, as were environmental issues. Another important issue for the students was friendship. A finding that was also of importance, primarily to students aged 14–16 years, was that the language of character and values was experienced as difficult to understand and use; this made it harder to express their views and feelings.

## Different needs of ethical competence over time

To understand the present context of ethics education, it can be valuable to draw comparisons with earlier traditions. This has been done by Walker, Roberts and Kristjánsson (2015). Children living in the 18th century were regarded as having been born sinful, and teachers were to discipline them in order to overcome this sinful nature. In the 19th century, children were seen as weak and accordingly in need of effective socialisation within each respective class to control their character. The 20th century is divided into two parts: before the Second World War, when students were to learn prosocial adjustment through habituation into moral activities; and after the Second World War, when the theories of Kohlberg influenced the view of students' needs. Then, the core entailed that students needed to be guided by the school through a thinking process to understand the morally good in order to become morally good. In the next section of this review is the turn of the 21st century. Then, students were seen as fragile emotional selves and their needs involved receiving help in mending themselves and boosting their self-esteem, as this was regarded as the way to gain motivation, resilience and self-confidence. Today, students are considered to be flourishing. The ultimate goal for this approach, compared to the others reported above, is an institutional change rather than simply an individual one. It is a reaction to the instrumentalist and technicist what-works approach that is still the dominant perspective at policy level (Walker et al. 2015).

## Tests and assessment in ethics

The Swedish National Test in RE, which tests ethics, focuses on verbal and argumentative competences in line with a utilitarian approach to ethics (Sporre 2019). The ethics emphasised in the Swedish National Test can be understood as preparing students for a normative reasoning in order to understand how to act in an ethical way (Sporre 2019). Assessing ethics education is a challenge (Alexander 2016). The leading assessment approach, according to Alexander, is a narrow account of quantifiable outcomes. Alexander (2016) prefers an assessment whereby qualitative descriptions capture, evaluate and interpret the many layers of intentions and purposes that govern the students' answers, whereas quantitative measurement tends towards technical knowledge. In a literature review, Avci (2017) found that the outputs of ethics teaching are not objective and measurable like other subjects, and because of this, universal goals and standards are difficult to develop. The Swedish circumstance, with ethics assessed through the National Tests, can be explained as an answer to the New Public Management era (Fancourt 2017), in which there is a desire for more effective and refined assessments.

## Conceptual framework

### Moral development

A sociocultural way of understanding moral development is suggested by Tappan (2006). The sociocultural theory of moral development implies a focus on both agent and agency, that is, both the person performing the act and the means the person uses to do this. These cultural tools, often in the form of language, are appropriated in three ways: the first, described as mastery, implies that one is able to use a cultural tool with a relatively high degree of facility; the second, described as ownership, implies a capacity to use the cultural tool and make it one's own; and the third characteristic is that a mediated action is always associated with power and privilege (Tappan 2006).

Tappan (2006) built on the theories of moral development by Carol Gilligan and Lawrence Kohlberg. Studying their works, he understood their theories as different moral voices: 'care' and 'justice'. These two voices represent different ways of understanding human relationships and different ways of describing moral problems, as well as different strategies for resolving them. The moral voices exist as cultural tools in the world, that is, they are present in media and books, for example. As mentioned, they are associated with power and authority and are situated in a particular sociocultural context. Tappan (2006) states that individuals tend to prefer one of the voices, but people use both voices as cultural tools to respond to ethical situations in their lives.

Tappan (2006) refers to Wertsch (1991), who states that mediated actions are always historically situated, both when it comes to the agent's own history and the history of the context in which the situation occurs. Tappan (2006) implies that moral development must be understood as the

outcome of a complex developmental process that includes both maturational influences and experiences from social communication and interaction in specific and personal contexts. He regards moral development as ‘the process by which persons gradually appropriate a variety of “moral mediational means”’ (Tappan 2006:15).

In this study, Tappan’s theories will be used in two ways. The first way is to understand the ethical competences expressed by 12- and 15-year-old students by using the theories of the ethicists Nussbaum, Løgstrup, Benhabib and Singer as four different ethical voices. The second way is to identify a progression of moral development between 12- and 15-year-old students by identifying different cultural tools in some of the texts written by the students.

### Ethical voices through four ethicists

Four ethicists have been selected in order to broaden the understanding of conceptions of ethical competence: Martha C. Nussbaum, Knud E. Løgstrup, Seyla Benhabib and Peter Singer. These philosophers represent different approaches to ethics. Influenced by Tappan’s (2006) sociocultural moral development theories, we have interpreted these philosophers’ theories as four different ethical voices (Lilja & Osbeck 2019). Nussbaum is the ethicist behind the *voice of virtue*. This voice focuses on the individual who is seen to acquire character traits through a shared life and strives to develop traits that can be understood as virtues, for example, being a good fellow human being and a democratic citizen. In Nussbaum’s theories, the focus is on the individual, the ethical subject and a virtue–ethics perspective underlines the importance of a fruitful development of these ethical subjects to prepare them for challenging situations in everyday life and responsible action in relation to them (Nussbaum 2011).

From Løgstrup’s point of view, a salient ethical demand is ever present in meetings between people because of their interdependence (Løgstrup 1992). Løgstrup’s perspective represents an ethics of proximity. An important aspect of this responsibility is being aware of the other’s needs. This is a process that presupposes an ability to draw on understandings of one’s own life in order to encounter the other and shoulder the responsibility involved. Here, the voice heard is called the *voice of responsiveness because of interdependence*.

A *voice of rights* is heard in Seyla Benhabib’s writings about contemporary societal challenges, such as migration and gender structures. Her theories emphasise that the rights of individuals should be safeguarded through democratic conversations in which all perspectives are taken into account and individuals meet, not as ‘generalised’ others but each one as a ‘concrete other’ (Benhabib 1992, 2013). Benhabib represents a discourse–ethics perspective, whereby the rights of the concrete other are important. Her theories emphasise communicative perspectives on rights for those who are otherwise denied them.

Peter Singer represents a utilitarian perspective which underlines a careful consideration of what maximal utility implies for all involved – not only humans but also non-humans. The *voice of reasoning for maximal utility* is heard through Singer’s writings. According to him (Singer 2015), effective altruism implies that we should do the most good we can, not only in the local context but also in the global arena. Ethical conduct should be acceptable from a universal point of view (Singer 2016).

In this article, a re-analysis has been carried out regarding students’ answers on four different tasks testing ethics from the 2013 Swedish National Tests in RE. Two of the tasks are from the test for 12-year-olds, and the other two are from the test for 15-year-olds. The aim of this study is twofold. The first is to investigate what aspects of ethical competence 100 students in Grade 6 (12 years old) and 100 students in Grade 9 (15 years old) express in texts from the National Tests, and to broaden the understanding of the expressed aspects of ethical competence through an analysis using the four ethical voices from Benhabib, Løgstrup, Nussbaum and Singer. The second aim is to investigate what cultural tools 12- and 15-year-old students use in their texts from the National Tests about a given ethical situation.

### Method and material

The empirical material in this article involves texts from the National Tests in RE carried out in Sweden in spring 2013. The tests were taken by a quarter (about 25 000) of all students in Grade 6 and the same share and number in Grade 9. After the tests were carried out, the teachers were asked to send in a copy of tests taken by certain students in Grade 6 (those born on the 10th, 20th or 30th of each month) and by certain students in Grade 9 (those born on the 6th, 16th or 26th of each month) to the group producing the National Tests in RE for the Swedish National Agency for Education. From these tests, answers from 100 students in Grade 6 and 100 students in Grade 9 were re-analysed in this study. The texts were chosen from 1152 full copies for grades 6 and 9. In the selection of students’ texts, we strove for as great a variation as possible when it comes to (1) the grades given by the students’ teachers on the whole test in relation to the assessment instructions accompanying the tests, (2) students’ type of living area, (3) parents’ post-upper secondary education and (4) students’ mother tongue. As the study includes sensitive personal information, it was reviewed and approved by the regional ethical review board, Gothenburg.

The re-analyses were carried out using qualitative content analysis, with the aim of identifying varieties of ethical competences in the responses of the students. The analysis was inductive, and focused on the ways the students had solved the task (Osbeck 2017). The texts were read and re-read several times and on a detailed level, paying attention to formulations that express ethical competence. This first step generated different aspects of ethical competence introduced in the first result section. The second step, in which the categories were interpreted through the four ethical voices –

the voice of virtue, the voice of responsiveness because of interdependence, the voice of rights and the voice of reasoning for maximal utility – is accounted for in relation to the description of the found ethical competence. The third step involved an interpretation of cultural tools found in the 12- and 15-year-old students' texts.

## The tasks

The National Tests in RE from 2013 are not classified, and the EthiCo project,<sup>1</sup> of which this study is a part, has permission to have access to the students' answers from a total of five tasks, four of which are re-analysed in this study (the fifth task is re-analysed in Sporre 2018). The tasks are presented next.

### Task 3: Grade 6

#### The friends Keyla and Maria

Keyla and Maria have been friends since preschool. Now they are in Grade 6, and are still best friends. They also have new friends: Isabelle, Max, Ali and Josef. They are together in school and sometimes also in the afternoons.

Keyla has been worried for a while. Maria is her best friend, but she smells of sweat. Keyla is not the only one who has noticed this. The other friends have spoken to Keyla about Maria smelling of sweat. They think it is disgusting and want Keyla to speak with Maria about the problem.

Keyla does not know what to do. She notices that the other friends distance themselves from Maria without saying anything. Keyla is thinking about whether she is going to speak to Maria, who will probably be hurt, or whether she should pretend like nothing is happening and hope Maria will notice the smell herself.

Write and tell what you think Keyla should do. Write why you think this, and what consequences it might have for the persons involved. In your answer, you should use at least two of the following concepts or other similar ones: responsibility, wrong, right, duty and fair.

### Task 10: Grade 6

#### Victimisation

Your task now is to think of a situation that involves victimisation. Describe the situation briefly and motivate why this is a case of victimisation. Give examples of what you can do to make the situation better.

### Task 12: Grade 9

The word 'forgiveness' is an important ethical concept. You may yourself have forgiven someone or experienced being forgiven. Reason about why forgiveness can be important both for the person asking for forgiveness and the person who forgives.

<sup>1</sup>The EthiCo-project: What may be learnt in ethics? Varieties of conceptions of ethical competence to be taught in compulsory school (Dnr 2014–2030, Swedish Research Council).

### Task 25: Grade 9

Discuss and argue about whether the death penalty is right or wrong. You should use the ethical models from the previous task when you reason. Keep in mind that the same model can be used to argue both for and against the death penalty. If you want, you can begin your text with one of the following sentences:

- It can be discussed whether the death penalty is right or wrong. A person representing consequentialist ethics would probably say...
- A person representing deontological ethics would probably say...
- I think a person representing intentionalist ethics would probably say...

### Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance to conduct the study was obtained from the Regional Ethical Review Board, Gothenburg, Sweden (Ethical Clearance number: 060-15) on 23 February 2015.

## Findings

The findings of this study are divided into two parts. The first part will describe the aspects of ethical competence found in the students' texts, and the understanding of these will be deepened and broadened by the four ethical voices. All four voices are not applicable in relation to all identified aspects of ethical competence; this offers an understanding of what ethical perspectives are present and lacking in the students' texts, but mostly in the tasks given in the National Tests. In the second part of the findings, different cultural tools, according to Tappan's (2006) theories regarding moral development, that have been found in the 12- and 15-year-old students' texts will be interpreted.

### Ethical competence found in students' texts and understood through four ethical voices

The qualitative content analysis of the four tasks described above shows four different aspects of ethical competence, which in an overarching way are the same in grades 6 and 9. The identified aspects of ethical competence are *a verbal ability, an ability to take a stand, to take responsibility for one's actions and an understanding of life*. More than one ability can be expressed in the same text. For each description of the abilities below, there are statements that clearly express the emphasised ethical competence selected, even if the statement might also include other abilities. The interpretation of the abilities of ethical competence is described through quotations that are considered representative of the whole material. In this section, characteristics from the four voices are also used in the interpretation.

#### Verbal capacity

A verbal ability implies that students use ethical concepts in a correct and developed way. It also implies that they are able



to vividly describe different situations and suggestions. The following is an example of a quote in which a Grade 6 student explains what the concept 'decent' can mean:

'Tell Maria in a decent way. You don't have to shout it out when all the others are around; instead, you can tell her when no one else can hear'. (6LM514)

Another quote from a student in Grade 9 explains how an intentionalist ethicist could reason about the death penalty:

'The intentionalist ethicist could be converted in two directions. You can regard the situation as if you've actually lost your right to live as a consequence of killing someone. But studies show that violence actually increases in society because of the death penalty. It can be a spiral of killing, which is a very bad consequence'. (9CW532)

Both quotations above are examples of conceptual competence. The next quote from a student in Grade 9 is an example of an ability to express a situation in a vivid way, offering the readers the possibility to understand nuances in the described situation:

'When you get to hear a "forgive me", you feel a transportation of joy through your body since you understand that the other has realised he or she was wrong, and that he or she is no longer angry with you. You also feel like you get a kind of understanding from the other, an understanding about your feelings'. (9CW440)

In the assessment instructions accompanying the National Test, verbal capacity is expressed as asking the students to use correct ethical concepts and show that they can analyse an ethical situation from a specific ethical theory. In the re-analysed texts, it is possible to see a more developed verbal competence than what is asked for in the assessment instructions. This competence also includes an ability to notice a situation and identify possible ways to respond to it.

Using the four ethical voices to understand verbal ability in a more nuanced way, it is obvious that this ability of ethical competence is essential. The voice of virtue focuses on one's own development and emphasises that a good fellow human being needs to be able to reason and clarify his or her positions. The voice of responsiveness because of interdependence, on its part, highlights that a verbal capacity, to both speak and listen, is needed in the encounter with the other. Benhabib's voice, that of rights, suggests that a communicative perspective on rights for those otherwise denied them is necessary for a democratic procedure.

### To take a stand

In the students' texts it is possible to discern statements expressing an ability to take a stand. The students argue and make adjustments, express values and show an ability to discuss different circumstances, conditions and suggestions. To illustrate this ability, a statement from a student in Grade 9 has been chosen:

'As already mentioned, I'm against the death penalty for the simple reason that I want to believe a person can change.

After all the feelings of guilt, maybe a good person steps forward. Of course, there are some people without a conscience, but no one deserves death. We're all human beings who deserve to live on this earth'. (9CW484)

The ability to take a stand involves more than simply developing reasoning. Taking a stand involves descriptions of consequences and a change of perspective, but it also involves the abilities to weigh values in relation to each other and to argue for collective and societal values.

To be able to take a stand one needs to have a discerning ability, which is part of Nussbaum's voice of virtue. The ability to take a stand can also be described with Løgstrup's voice of responsiveness because of interdependence by arguing that the silent demand, being aware of what is best for the other, is needed when deciding what stand to take. With the voice of rights, it is possible to find a balance between a focus on the other and the social context. The voice developed from Singer's theories implies a careful consideration of what maximal utility implies, not only for humans but also for non-humans. A societal sense, not only in relation to oneself or the other but also in a more global arena, can be found in the texts about the death penalty.

### To take responsibility for one's actions

In the texts, the students show an understanding of the need to take responsibility for one's actions and for others' well-being. The students demand that the persons involved in the tasks do this in a quite challenging way. This ability goes a bit beyond the former, to take a stand, in the way that the students urge for action. The quote exemplifying this is from a student in Grade 6 related to the task on victimisation:

'To improve the situation, the boy can go and get a friend or an adult. If anyone else hears what is happening, they can act themselves and call on an adult.[...] The most important thing is that they do something; no one should be victimised'. (6LM227)

In the texts, the students argue for responsible actions and offer motives as to why certain actions are required in the specific situations the tasks involve. This includes a moral motivation showing a prioritisation of moral values.

Acknowledging the consequences of one's actions is a virtue as emphasised by Nussbaum (2011). This ability is found in the texts and is also asked for in the tasks. When acting in accordance with the ethical demand, developed by Løgstrup (1992), one might have to oppose the other, when one believes that the best for him or her is not necessarily what he or she explicitly demands. In relation to this ability, the voices of Benhabib and Singer are absent in the students' responses.

### An understanding of life

From the students' responses to the different tasks, it is possible to see that they have an understanding of life, that is,

they are able to use knowledge not only from their own experiences in life but also from what they know about the local and global society. This ability includes an existential as well as a normative understanding. It allows the students to describe consequences of different incidents in more than one step, and to distinguish between cause and effect. The next quote, showing a nuanced experience of what forgiveness can imply in different ways, comes from a student in Grade 9:

'Forgiveness is something that is mostly taken for granted today, to say 'I'm sorry, forgive me' isn't a sincere request anymore, but rather something we say out of habit to show that what we did wasn't meant to be as wrong as it turned out to be. But often it isn't that easy. If the situation is about people we care about, it's not enough to just say 'I'm sorry' even if the other person accepts it. Accepting an apology is something we're expected to do, and it has almost the same value as when we say 'Sorry' when bumping into a stranger'. (9CW450)

To be able to answer the tasks in the National Tests, an understanding of life is necessary, although this is not given credit when assessed according to the RE syllabus. The understanding of life is a prerequisite for moral sensitivity as well as for moral judgement and moral motivation.

The voice of virtue emphasises that character traits are built through a shared life. To encounter the other and shoulder one's responsibility, an understanding of life is necessary, also according to Løgstrup. The voice of rights is also heard when it comes to an understanding of life: Benhabib emphasises the need to understand people's situation regardless of who they are.

To sum up this part, the ethical competence interpreted from the students' texts can be described as four different abilities: *to verbalise*, *to take a stand*, *to take responsibility for one's actions* and *an understanding of life*. The design of the tasks encourages different ethical directions, but the assessment instructions do not value all the ethical dimensions the tasks contain. The results of the re-analysis, with help from the four ethical voices, indicate that the students' ethical competence goes far beyond the requirements in the RE syllabus. The findings also draw attention to what ethical perspectives are missing in the tests. The voice of rights is represented to a limited degree, and the voice of reasoning for maximal utility can hardly be said to be found. The voice of virtue and the voice of responsiveness because of interdependence, on the other hand, are frequently represented in the students' texts. This is primarily because of the way the tasks are designed.

### Different cultural tools found in texts written by 12- and 15-year-old students

This part of the findings presents an interpretation of the cultural tools (Tappan 2006) found in some of the students' texts in relation to the four identified abilities of ethical competence. The group of students who have written the texts, analysed in this article, are regarded as similar agents

in the way that their individual cultural context is unknown, besides being students in the Swedish compulsory school.

The cultural tools described by Tappan (2006) in themselves largely constitute a *verbal ability*; this concerns knowing the words to use in moral discourses. This capacity is also emphasised in the knowledge requirements for RE, in the specification that students should have the ability to use ethical concepts correctly. In the following two texts, the use of ethical concepts is highlighted.

In the task involving the friends Keyla and Maria, the students are asked to use two of the five given ethical concepts. Responsibility is one that is often used in the texts: 'In this case I think Keyla's friends need to take their responsibility and tell Maria she smells of sweat' (6LM302). The use of the concept does not show a deeper understanding of what taking responsibility might mean; instead, it is expressed as a concrete action. The cultural tools used by several of the students in Grade 6 involve describing an action. The students have learnt that responsibility entails doing the right thing.

In the following example from a Grade 9 student, the concept of forgiveness is described:

'Being able to forgive someone is very strong and humble, since the person you have to forgive has probably done something wrong and hurt you. You also have to swallow your pride; in one way you have to be bigger than yourself, to be so unselfish that you can draw a line through what the other person did'. (9CW21)

In this statement, the meaning of forgiveness is described in a nuanced way using specific words: 'humble', 'swallow your pride' and 'draw a line through'. One can assume that these are cultural tools that the 15-year-old student has acquired from his or her particular social, cultural and historical context. He or she shows an understanding of what the expressions imply, and can use them to make himself or herself understood. The statement is an example of a developed answer, not all texts contain cultural tools as developed as this one.

*To take a stand* is the second ability of ethical competence identified in the texts. The following is an example chosen from the Grade 6 texts:

'The gang victimises him for being a Jew and for following the laws of his religion. This is not right; he should be allowed to follow his religion and his classmates should respect that'. (6LM415)

In this text, the student takes a stand by using what could be interpreted as the cultural tools: 'should be allowed' and 'should respect'. In the introductory part of the Swedish curriculum, it is stated that no one should be discriminated against because of their faith; this is something you learn from the beginning when you start school, and it is thus reasonable that a 12-year-old student can express it. The following quote is from a Grade 9 student: 'it's always

important to ask for forgiveness if you've done something you really didn't want to. In Christianity, Catholicism, you can go to confession with your sins (bad deeds)' (9CW129). In this example, the 15-year-old takes a stand by saying it is always important to ask for forgiveness. The answer is then developed by showing how confession can help a Catholic. The cultural tools 'Christianity', 'Catholicism' and 'confession' are used correctly, and take the answer in a societal direction rather than merely a personal one.

Some cultural tools identified in the texts expressing a demand *to take responsibility for one's actions* are shown in this paragraph. From the Grade 6 material, the following quote has been chosen: 'I think she should tell her she smells of sweat, straight to the point but in a nice way' (6LM187). The cultural tool identified in this statement is the expression 'to tell her straight to the point'. This expression involves an explanation of how the action should be carried out, with an addition to do it in a nice way. This reasoning can be identified in discussions held in school between teacher and student, and perhaps also in this student's home; and because of this social, cultural and historical context, this 12-year-old's way of expressing taking responsibility for one's actions makes sense. The next quote, from the Grade 9 task involving the death penalty, expresses how a murderer should take responsibility for his or her actions:

'...It's hard to think that someone who's done this [murdered civilians] should live, but on the other hand it isn't our task to decide whether someone is going to die or not. I think it's better if they're sentenced to prison for a lifetime...'. (9CW595)

The expressions 'civilians' and 'sentenced to prison' are cultural tools that show that murder in war might imply another interpretation of the responsibility for killing. That one is sentenced to prison also shows knowledge of the law.

All students' quotes can be assessed as showing *an understanding of life*. In the following two quotes, the understanding of life is directed towards specific situations that have been experienced in some way by the student who has written the text. The text from the Grade 6 student is from the task involving victimisation. This text is an exception, as it does not describe a representative situation. Most texts answering the task involving victimisation are about situations in school, but this one is not:

'Once I went to a night club; a lot of people were drinking beer and liquor. Then two guys pushed an older guy. [...] I was sitting in a car and saw when the guy came out from the night club. Five guys ran after him and pushed him into a car'. (6LM41)

The cultural tools 'night club', 'beer and liquor', and 'ran after him and pushed him into a car' are examples of a social, cultural and historical context that is familiar to the 12-year-old writer of this text. This might come from experiences in his/her own life, or for example, from computer games or movies. The situation described by a 15-year-old student concerns a relationship between a girlfriend and a boyfriend, and the meaning forgiveness might have in this relationship:

'If a girlfriend is angry with her selfish boyfriend, who mostly only thinks about himself, an apology from him can mean so incredibly much. It can save their relationship if the girl realises her boyfriend doesn't only think about himself but also others. But she can also realise that the boy will never mature, and this can lead to an end to the relationship'. (9CW368)

This text also contains specific words that can be interpreted as cultural tools, for example, 'selfish boyfriend' and 'will never mature', that express an understanding of a situation that 15-year-old students might very well have experienced in relationships with a partner.

According to Tappan (2006), moral development is more than cognitive development, and by using his sociocultural theory on moral development, the texts by 12- and 15-year-old students show how their social, cultural and historical context offers different opportunities to describe an ethical situation become obvious. It is also possible to see that the texts written by the 15-year-olds generally have more developed forms of moral language and moral discourse than those of the 12-year-olds, as the ethical situations are more nuanced and precisely described. The tasks given in the National Tests direct the students' texts towards the perspectives of oneself and the other, but it is nonetheless possible to note that the texts by the older students hold more connections to societal references.

## Discussion

The importance of deciding what kind of ethics education one wants to offer is emphasised by Avci (2017). Sporre (2019) has analysed the Swedish curriculum and concluded that there is a focus on verbal and argumentative competences in line with a utilitarian or deontological approach to ethics, and that the ethics underlined in the Swedish National Test can be understood as preparing students for normative reasoning in order to understand how to act ethically (Sporre 2019). This analysis is in line with the instrumentalist approach that Walker et al. (2015) describe as the dominant perspective in the policy arena today.

The interpretation of the students' texts shows that four aspects of ethical competence can be identified: *to verbalise*, *to take a stand*, *to take responsibility for one's actions* and *an understanding of life*. The ethical competence shown in the texts can be described as a multidimensional one, and the knowledge requirements in the National Tests as a one-dimensional ethics, that is, a verbal and analytical competence is emphasised. The four ethical voices used in the second step of the analysis show that Nussbaum's virtue ethical voice and Løgstrup's proximity ethical perspectives are frequent in the texts, but the voices of rights and reasoning for maximal utility are not frequent to the same extent. Avci (2017) emphasises that ethics education should include global perspectives recognising and accepting cultural and social diversity. Furthermore, in studies

investigating students' perspectives on ethics education, a societal perspective, for instance, involving climate change and current war situations that force people to flee, is in great demand (Arthur 2010; O'Flaherty et al. 2018; Osbeck 2018). In the study by O'Flaherty et al. (2018), the students also underline the importance of discussing such topics in school, since not all parents are up to date on the issues.

In the third step of the analysis, Tappan's (2006) theory of moral development was used to identify cultural tools in the texts. Assessing the existence of a cultural tool implies the effort to see how a cultural tool implies that the students use words in an independent way. The results show that the texts contain different cultural tools that give the texts meaning. They also show that the texts by the 15-year-olds contain more developed cultural tools, in that they are more nuanced and show a deeper understanding about a situation, as well as in the way the 15-year-olds associate not only with individual perspectives but also with societal perspectives.

This result was expected, as moral development depends on maturational influences and experiences. But it is also dependent on social communication and interaction in specific and personal contexts, which in this study is identified as ethical competence, that is, life understanding. Tappan (2006) argues that knowing how to express oneself and understanding the world in a nuanced way carries power and authority. In Arthur's study (2010), students expressed that the language needed in ethical situations is difficult to understand and therefore difficult to use.

That ethics is hard to assess is stated by Alexander (2016), Avci (2017) and Sporre (2019), and this is also shown in this study. The re-analysed texts show a broader ethical competence than what is asked for in the RE syllabus, a competence the students are not given credit for when assessed. Fancourt (2017) emphasises that the Swedish system, with National Tests in ethics, is a response to the New Public Management Era, in which an efficient outcome is the goal. The findings also show that the tasks in the National Tests lack a societal and global perspective, which, for example, is emphasised by students as important (O'Flaherty et al. 2018; Osbeck 2018). With this knowledge as a background, it is relevant to return to Avci's point (2017) about being aware of what kind of ethics education one wants to have. When the social, cultural and historical context seems to have a great influence on what cultural tools students are able to develop, this is something ethics education needs to handle, as students live in different contexts and the degree to which the cultural tools are developed matters when it comes to the power over one's own life.

## Conclusions

Using the voices of the four ethicists Nussbaum, Løgstrup, Benhabib and Singer, as well as the theories of Tappan, it is possible to draw the following conclusions from this study:

some ethical perspectives, such as the societal and the global, are disadvantaged in the tasks, and accordingly in the analysed texts. Another conclusion is that the re-analysed texts show a multidimensional ethical competence, but that the RE syllabus only gives credit for a verbal and analytical ability. These findings show that ethics is a difficult subject to assess in a fair way. Another conclusion of this study is that cultural tools are dependent on an ability to verbalise and to have an understanding of life; this is something that develops through maturational influences. But it is also dependent on the social, cultural and historical context in which students live; and since these differ, school has a responsibility to teach ethics in a way that gives all students the power and authority to live good lives.

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## Data availability statement

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

## Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated agency of the author.

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