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## How to Understand Disorderly Boys

### An Exchange of Didactic Experiences Among Textile-Sloyd Teachers in an Internet-based Community of Practice

*This paper reports on a case study in which a textile-sloyd teacher sent a message to an internet-based community of practice seeking advice from other textile-sloyd teachers regarding how to cope with unruly boys. Two major themes emerged from a interview and the discussion on the Internet: 1) behaviour analysis and 2) coping attempts The analysis also revealed two themes related to the exchange of experiences: 1) descriptions of the problem as pertaining to the pupils, the process, classroom management, freedom of choice, or connection to everyday life and 2) suggested solutions, such as area of activity, competences, leadership and techniques. The article concludes with a discussion demonstrating that the collegial exchange about disorderly boys appears to have strengthened and challenged this internet-based community of practice.*

**Keywords:** classroom management, community of practice, sloyd didactics, exchange of experiences, textile-sloyd, unmotivated pupils

#### **Introduction**

During a period of ten days, between the 23<sup>rd</sup> of January and the 1<sup>st</sup> of February 2011, a discussion took place in an email-based group called ‘the textile-sloyd teachers list’. The issue under discussion was how to carry out a textile-sloyd lesson with badly behaving or disorderly boys in three different sixth grade classes. The discussion focused on central didactic elements that can be found in all forms of teaching—the pupil, teacher and instruction—as well as connections between these three elements (Lundgren, 1992). The exchange of experiences started with a message in which one textile-sloyd teacher asked if colleagues had had similar experiences and might share radical ideas about how to cope with these challenging students. Thirteen other textile-sloyd teachers responded to the message concerning lessons in sloyd, which is a school subject in Swedish compulsory education within the domain of arts and craft, where pupils work with textile or wood and metal materials.

To some extent, the message and the request for other people’s experiences reveals the shortcomings of the sloyd teacher in question. Exposing one’s shortcomings in this manner may function as a way for others to become self-aware of their teaching. Having followed the email group’s communications for several years, I can say that there was another interesting aspect of this message: textile-sloyd teachers tend to focus on issues of teachership, according to Granström’s (2012) categorisation of roles. Therefore, this message could be seen as expanding the number of topics that textile-sloyd teachers believe they need to discuss with colleagues in the same trade. Granström divides a teacher’s work into two parts, *leadership* and *teachership*, which he describes as being two sides of the same coin. He points out that this division is by no means a total and exclusive description of what teachers do, but it may function as ‘a sensitive indication of what the teacher’s roles are about’ (Granström, 2012, p. 33). Granström describes leadership in the classroom as ‘*knowledge* about classroom interaction and group processes, and *ability* to lead the work in the classroom and cope with group processes’ (2012, p. 33). More specifically, leadership involves the teacher choosing suitable methods for the work that is to be performed. Granström (2012) goes on to describe teacher-

ship in the classroom as ‘*knowledge* about a discipline or subject, and *ability* to mediate knowledge and skills’ (p. 33). In other words, the teacher chooses the social values he or she wishes to mediate or transmit.

The fact that the issue of unruly boys appears in this context is interesting in many ways. For instance, it is notable that textile-sloyd teachers suddenly focused on a phenomenon such as leadership, as it had not appeared previously during the years I had followed this email group. It is also noteworthy because the group rarely discusses didactic matters in this way. The history of this former email discussion group substantiates these comments, as can be seen in the Google group now called *textillalararlistan* in Swedish (directly translated into English, it means *textile teachers’ list*). It has, thus, been possible to verify that, so far, there have never been any discussions concerning *leadership*, *leaders* or *leading of activities*; meanwhile, there has only once appeared a question about *unmotivated pupils*. In other words, this topic is new, in the sense that it has not been discussed previously. To email a question, that is, to put into words and share with others an experienced problematic phenomenon, could be understood as an attempt to focus on a didactic aspect. At the same time, it may reflect an attempt to develop one’s professional language, to achieve and sustain a more professional role as a teacher (Colnerud & Granström, 2003).

There is yet another reason why the appearance of this question is interesting. The majority of Swedish sloyd teachers, who teach either (a) textile or (b) wood and metal work, took part in the National Evaluation of the Comprehensive School in 2003 (NU 03), carried out by the National Agency for Education (Skolverket, 2003). Most of these teachers reported a strong sense of wellbeing in the sloyd classroom. In the report, the teachers expressed their feelings of comfort as follows:

They experience their role as a teacher as enjoyable, inspiring and engaging. The negative part is a feeling of stress, in that the sloyd teachers have to ‘defend’ their subject against other subjects, and they feel that teachers of other subjects regard ‘sloyd’ as less valuable (Skolverket, 2003, p. 64).

From this quote, it seems reasonable to deduce that sloyd teachers have a picture of sloyd as a subject permeated by pleasure, goodwill and good company. Perhaps this viewpoint explains why these teachers feel forced to defend their subject. This defensive attitude may be interpreted as a variation of Colnerud’s (2002) ‘collegial paradox’. Colnerud describes how some teachers are criticized by their colleagues, or worse, excluded from the collegial community on the grounds that they are and have been too obliging and sensitive in relation to their pupils. This need to defend their subject may be understood in terms of their representing – in the eyes of their colleagues – the kind of teacher who can offer enjoyable activities that seem to respond to the pupils’ needs and wishes. Such an interpretation aligns well with what was revealed in the national evaluation referred to above.

The 2003 National Agency report confirmed that teachers of sloyd pay attention to their pupils’s needs, revealing that the pupils have a positive attitude towards sloyd and describe it as the most enjoyable subject in compulsory school:

The subject interests them and has top position in regards to pupil participation. Many pupils express that they are allowed to take responsibility and initiative. The evaluation also demonstrates that the pupils enjoy their work and that they can work at their own pace without feeling any pressure (Skolverket, 2003, p. 65).

This quote clearly shows that pupils experience a great deal of participation during sloyd-lessons, a finding that was not surprising to sloyd teachers.

In the same National Agency report, there are also pieces of evidence that may explain why sloyd teachers feel a need to defend their subject. For instance, ‘Three out of four pupils do not feel that they will have any use for their sloyd skills in future studies or working life’ (Skolverket, 2003, p. 65). Here, pleasure and participation, in themselves something positive and valuable, are at odds with the school’s task of mediating knowledge, skills and values (Granström, 2007) that the pupils will use as members of a democratic society. In the sloyd subject, pupils are trained in democracy. For example, they learn to discuss which mode to use, how to plan their work, how to carry out the work and how to evaluate it in relation to the goals and syllabus. At the same time, sloyd involves skills that pupils cannot see the use of; in other words, they do not grasp how these skills might be useful to them in the future.

### **Research Questions**

The fact that ‘disorderly boys’ was the topic of discussion in the email group *textillalarlistan* is particularly relevant given that this group is an important forum for many textile-sloyd teachers. Sloyd is a school subject divided into two: 1) textile or wood and 2) metal. Sloyd teachers often work alone in their schools; there are two teachers at most, one teaching textile sloyd and one teaching wood and metalwork sloyd. Only large schools with many pupils can afford more than one teacher in either subject.

With the above introduction forming the backdrop, the present article seeks to address two research questions: 1) For what reason did a textile-sloyd teacher address questions about disorderly boys to the email group *textillalarlistan*? 2) What sorts of solutions did the email group provide about how to handle disorderly boys?

### **Research Overview on Teachers and Disorderly Boys**

Various researchers have investigated boys’ and girls’ differing behaviour during school lessons. As early as 1929, a researcher found that ‘the behaviour of girls conforms more closely to the teachers’ standards of acceptable conduct than the behaviour of boys’ (Wickman, 1929, pp. 60-61). Wickman (1929) conducted experimental studies of behavioural problems among students in two compulsory schools in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, finding that boys were twice as troublesome as girls. Boys negatively influenced the learning environment by destroying school materials and by behaving disruptively and inappropriately. Less than 50 years later, Good, Sikes and Brophy (1973) reported the same situation. In their survey of earlier research, they stated that many studies had demonstrated that boys were more aggressive and more difficult to manage than girls. Based on their own observations of teachers in mathematics and social studies, they concluded that female teachers tended to warn misbehaving pupils more often, whereas male teachers were more likely to criticize them. However, they also emphasized that ‘although male and female teachers do teach differently, they do not treat male and female pupils differently’ (Good, Sikes & Brophy, 1973, p. 83).

Brophy (1985) arrived at a similar conclusion when he conducted an overview of earlier research about male and female teachers; however, he also noted some differences between the teachers. For instance, female teachers were generally more inclined to commend correct answers, while also giving the question to another pupil rather than following up on a pupil’s incorrect answer. Overall, female teachers were more cordial and gave more feedback to pupils about their progress. Brophy finally stated that, in spite of the limited number of studies to compare, it seemed likely that the teacher is an important factor, in that he or she makes an impact and may even reinforce gender differences that already exist. Eccles and Blumenfeld (1985) brought forth similar ideas based on their overview of studies concerning socialisation. These studies revealed that boys who were expected to be low achievers (a) were more criticized, (b) interacted more with their teachers, (c) were given fewer opportunities to speak in public discussions and (d) were given less acknowledgement than other

pupils. These findings reflected the teachers' lack of strategies for coping with this group of boys. It also demonstrated how the teachers worked preventively in coping with the girls but 'interventively' in coping with the boys (Eccles & Blumenfeld, 1985). In an observational study of 32 class teachers in primary school and 38 class teachers in lower secondary school, Merrett and Wheldall (1992) also discovered that there was a difference in how teachers used praise and reprimands for pupils. In general, lower secondary teachers on one hand gave positive feedback to the boys for their academic achievements but not for their social behaviour; on the other hand, they gave the boys more negative attention for their (lack of) academic achievement as well as their social behaviour. Female teachers responded more to the boys, which Merrett and Wheldall explained in the following way: (a) the boys were more disturbing in the female teachers' lessons and worked harder for the male teachers; and (b) the teachers had different standards in regard to disturbing behaviour, which could mean that 'when boys are off-task they are more overtly disruptive than girls who are off-task' (Merrett & Wheldall, 1992, p. 75).

Kaplan, Gheen and Midgley (2002) carried out subject-oriented studies, e.g., concerning how teachers of mathematics cope with disruptive boys and girls. They found a connection between classroom environment, goal structures and pupils' behaviour. The teachers had low expectations for low-achieving boys and expected them to be more disruptive; as a result, the teachers spent more time and energy coping with these pupils than with other pupils. In a meta-study, Börjesson (2005) discovered that girls and boys were treated differently and that the teachers' attention primarily was directed towards pupils with learning difficulties. This, he claims, should be understood as 'boys who do not behave the way they are expected to behave in a classroom' (Börjesson, 2005, p. 36). Consequently, boys received more negative attention in terms of criticism and reprimands. Wernersson's (2006) study asserts that the teacher's gender may be such an important factor that boys' failures in school may reflect the fact that they have been taught by female teachers for the most part. Based on a field study of 49 teachers and their interactions with pupils in three seventh grade classes, Samuelsson (2008) observed that boys were attended to as 'disruptive' more often than girls. Further, in this study, the pupils' and the teachers' genders did not interact in any decisive way in terms of what the teachers found disturbing in the classroom; however, there was a tendency for teachers to correct pupils of their own gender more often.

In sum, this research overview reveals that the way teachers, male and female, respond to disruptive girls and boys has been studied empirically for a long time. Nevertheless, it is evident that all kinds of teachers still have the same kinds of problems when it comes to coping with (a) boys in general and (b) disruptive boys in particular. The overview also reveals that researchers, primarily through different types of observations, have studied classes in theoretical subjects, such as language, mathematics and social studies. Very few studies seem to have covered teaching in so-called aesthetic-practical subjects. It is, therefore, reasonable to claim that we, so far, have limited knowledge about how teachers in these subjects experience and cope with disruptive pupils, especially boys that, according to earlier findings, could be regarded as more problematic than girls.

### **Community of Practice**

A community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998) is a group of people who have something to gain from interacting with one another. Wenger, McDermott and Snyder (2002, p. 4) describe it in the following way:

Communities of practice are groups of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis.

The exchange of ideas and experiences described in the present article involves a group of textile-sloyd teachers with a common interest in teaching this subject. Questions and responses are examples of interactions that aim to deepen the know-how of members within the community of practice. The above definition of the 'community of practice' is open to interpretation regarding variations in size and group orientation. This variety means that a community of practice can appear anywhere, and we can be part of several communities of practice as central or peripheral members to varying degrees. Our motive for participating in the community can be embedded in a process of collective learning within the framework of a certain limited domain.

According to Wenger (1998), communities of practice differ from *networks* in that they have a specific content; they are not just about a certain number of relationships between a group of people. Wenger (1998) points out three important dimensions in a community of practice: (a) *domain*, (b) *community* and (c) *practice*. These dimensions show the difference between a community of practice and a club of friends or a network of connections between people. Those who register for and then participate in the textile-sloyd teachers' list constitute a community of practice because they share a general interest in sloyd and a particular interest in teaching textile-sloyd. The first dimension, *domain*, indicates that it concerns individuals with a shared interest, a passion or a competence in something they have in common, something that separates them from other individuals. The second dimension, *community*, indicates a common engagement in learning and development through activities, discussions, mutual support and sharing of information by systematic and continuous interaction with one another. The third dimension, *practice*, indicates that the members share a repertoire of resources in terms of artefacts, concepts, experiences, language and tools. Practice reflects the members' understanding of what is essential. Thus, the community of practice does not exclude impressions from outside, but new influences are interpreted and conceptualised by the members together within the community.

Wenger (1998) emphasizes that a community of practice has many functions. One of the functions is (a) sharing and interpreting information built on a common understanding of what is relevant to communicate and how the information is shared among members. Second, the communities (b) store knowledge that reflects aspects of a shared interest within the community of practice. Consequently, communities of practice share tacit knowledge that is not contained in formal systems. Communities of practice also (c) administer competences with the aim of keeping ahead of the content that initially was the reason for gathering. This aim requires sharing ideas and elaborating on problems as well as staying updated on developments and changes within and outside the domain. Finally, (d) communities of practice offer a place of identification where like-minded members meet. This way, communities of practice maintain their potential for learning based on the core of knowledge that is being developed and the interactions that make the boundaries clear. In other words, Lave and Wenger's *community of practice* is also a learning theory. Wenger (1998) claims that the theory combines *community* (learning as belonging) with *identity* (learning as coming into being) and *practice* (learning as doing).

## Method

Case studies focus on a limited number of incidents for a certain phenomenon by studying and describing experiences, conditions, events and processes. Case studies orient attention towards a single unit of observation, aiming to obtain insights that may lead to further implications (Denscombe, 2010); with this case, I seek to find out more about the conversation occurring in the Google group *textillalarlistan*. Because the question about how to understand unruly boys was asked without my intervention, the phenomenon could be described as naturally existing (Yin, 1994). Through this in-depth study, I sought to understand more about the

phenomenon, a complex yet subtle real-life situation (Denscombe, 2010) for a textile-sloyd teacher and her colleagues. It is, therefore, possible to argue that this case study was discovery-driven (Denscombe, 2010), although I attempted to find descriptions of what happened by investigating key issues and making different kinds of comparisons.

With the technical development and establishment of different types of web-based communities and games, researchers have gained new possibilities for accessing first-hand information (Linderoth, 2007) through their own participation. I have for many years been a member of the previously mentioned textile-sloyd teachers' list. I am registered on the list as a field researcher for whom participant observation is an important research method, and I have previously used this email list for gathering data and sharing information about the research of teachers registered on the list (Samuelsson, Samuelsson & Autio, 2014). Consequently, I have different identities, participating in this community of practice in more than one way (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Hunter, 2010).

I used structured qualitative interviews (Bryman, 2012) to ascertain the motives of the textile-sloyd teacher who introduced the question on the *textillalarlistan*. I started by asking the textile-sloyd teacher the following questions: (a) Why did she decide to email a question to the list? (b) How much leadership training did she receive during teacher training? (c) How much in-service training in leadership did she receive during her working years? (d) Had she discussed her question with other textile teachers in her school district or municipality? (e) Did she receive the responses she had expected, or were there any surprising ideas?

I considered the restraints and possibilities of conducting the interview via email. I knew that I would lose the opportunity to follow up on questions face-to-face straight away; nonetheless, I thought it would be possible to do the interview online because the teacher's answers generated new questions that could be answered later. Another possibility while conducting interviews using email was that teacher could answer the questions whenever she wanted. A similar aspect was that we, by the use of e-mail, did not have to decide a date and time for the interview. E-mail interview also gave a sense of on-going interaction, that made it possible for to send as many e-mails as I found necessary. I, therefore, decided to conduct the interviews and the exchange of experiences over email. In practice, this meant that I emailed questions and/or comments and exchanged experiences on five occasions with the textile-sloyd teacher who introduced the original question. The answers from the teacher were deepened each time until I found that we, through our email conversation, had exhausted the theme (Arfwedson & Ödman, 1988). I analysed all input from the email discussion with the teacher in a qualitative mode as a case study (Arfwedson & Ödman, 1988).

A constant comparative analysis was used in order to discover similarities and differences in the statements (Fejes & Thornberg, 2009). Using thematic content analysis (Braun & Clark, 2011), I moved between 'getting acquainted with the material' (step 1), 'generating codes' (step 2), 'looking for themes' (step 3), 'examining themes' (step 4), 'defining themes' (step 5) and 'producing a comprehensive text' (step 6). My ambition was for the results to do justice to the original question raised by the sloyd teacher about other teachers' experiences and their potentially radical ideas about how to cope with disorderly sixth grade boys. I also sought to consider the discussion in the community of practice, finding examples of the themes that had appeared in the analysis.

I printed all 17 statements in order to review the contributions from the 14 teachers (including the textile-sloyd teacher asking for advice and radical ideas) who took part in the exchange. In so doing, I obtained access to dated statements that showed who had made what statement. I could also see if the statements built on the reasoning and experience of others, or if they were independent. I concentrated on the topical aspects of the exchange, as they focused on the central elements that had to do with the pupil, the teacher and the instructional contents. I interpreted this focus as being the reason for the originally-posed question. Thus, I

tried to understand why a textile-sloyd teacher addressed a question about disorderly boys to an email group as well as the solutions proposed by teachers regarding handling disorderly boys. I was not interested in the length of the statements, nor in how many statements each teacher contributed to the discussion.

Regarding research ethics, informed agreement was received from all participating teachers. Names that appear in the article are fictitious. Special agreements were made with the teacher who first posted the question on the email list as well as from a teacher I contacted later on the grounds that she described similar problems as the first teacher. I requested these agreements during interviews or email exchanges.

## Results

The results are here described in two parts: (a) *tracks of trails*, i.e., the analysis of the interview and exchange between me and the textile-sloyd teacher (called Berit), where she reflected upon the phenomenon; and, (b) *trace the thread*, i.e., the analysis of the exchange of experiences and ideas between the 14 textile-sloyd teachers on the email list, where they shared their experiences and gave tips on how to handle the situation of disorderly sixth-grade boys.

### *Tracks of Trails*

Based on the qualitative thematic analysis of the interviews, Berit's experiences and motives could be interpreted in terms of (a) *behaviour analysis* and (b) *action attempts*. Berit's *behaviour analysis* focused on descriptions of how she understood the boys and their behaviour, while her *action attempts* focused on descriptions of the actions she had tried in order to bring about necessary changes.

#### *Behaviour analysis*

Two different themes emerged in the behaviour analysis, based on either the *pupils' conceptions* or the *teacher's qualifications*.

The textile-sloyd teacher, Berit, had considered the problematic phenomenon and noted that the source of the problem was not the textile-sloyd subject, the participants in the community of practice, herself or her teachership and leadership. Rather, the problem was rooted in 'the pupils, the group constellation, lack of motivation (often contagious), attitudes or values'.

Berit was eager to point out that it was the *pupils' conceptions* and their behaviour that caused the messy lessons. She modified her statement by saying, 'The pupils are not naughty, but they mostly want to play and run around and make a terrible noise; they work a little now and then but have problems in focusing'.

In Berit's view, a possible explanation for the pupils' behaviour could be how they were brought up. She also said that the situation has changed over time and that the foundation of respect should be laid at home before the children begin school. The fact that pupils in school today are less inclined to think independently and to a higher degree expect to be 'coddled' or cared for by the teacher could be traced back to what they were used to at home. As she put it, 'There is a limit to creativity! How can I make the pupils think for themselves and do the job instead of being served on a silver plate all the time?'

Following this line of thinking, Berit saw a connection between responsibility and upbringing. The classroom situation today meant that she had to spend more time and energy on maintaining a 'comfortable and peaceful working climate for all of us'. She problematized this situation and asked for more discussion about upbringing and respect, not least because teachers, the way she saw it, had to 'weigh their words carefully so that the pupils do not get offended', whereas teachers are offended all of the time.

Another important aspect that Berit brought forth was the *teacher's qualifications*. In some ways, she thought that she was poorly equipped for the changed situation with unruly sixth-graders during textile-sloyd lessons. She emphasised that she did not have the right qualifications for coping with pupils like the ones she had encountered. Although she had received practical tips from other teachers during her years as a teacher substitute, she received very little classroom management training in her teacher education. These years and the colleagues she met at that time had been 'more valuable than that part of her teacher training'. She also highlighted that she had never received any in-service training during her teaching years. She was looking forward to and hoping that future in-service trainings would address leadership issues. According to Berit, there was a great need for leadership training in order to handle today's pupils, who, on one hand, were poorly motivated and, on the other hand, seemed to expect the teachers to be ingenious and funny and to entertain rather than teach them.

As there was no other textile-sloyd teacher at her school, Berit cited professional isolation as the main reason for requesting experiences and radical ideas from other textile-sloyd teachers on the email list. It was, however, not the only reason. She also wanted advice on new approaches to help her think 'outside the box', or beyond her own daily teaching habits.

#### *Action attempts*

Three variants of action attempts emerged in the analysis: diverting manoeuvres, promises of reward and positive reinforcement.

Berit believed that she had limited access to tools for managing disturbances of the kind she had described. During lessons, she tried to talk with the pupils, but it had little effect. For the moment, she noticed a change, but not over time. Conversing with colleagues on the email list had served as a useful form of brainstorming, but 'none of the responses surprised me; there was nothing out of the ordinary, i.e., what we usually do in textile-sloyd'. Berit described how she had tried to cope with the pupils' disorderly conduct using proactive strategies as well as reactive measures; that is, she tried to think beyond the textile-sloyd lesson. This diverting manoeuvre meant, among other things, that she met with the pupils outside the classroom to speak with them separately about her subject and its objectives. In this context, she asked the pupils 'to tell her what they thought about the situation'. In this preventive strategy, she was careful to be positive and 'show them that I believed in them, their own goals and their future in secondary school'.

Further, Berit described how she used reactive measures, such as trying to disturb the pupils' disruptive small talk. Despite its limited effect, one such measure she had tried was to put on the projector when there was total uproar in class. There was nothing on the projector, but the light distracted and calmed down the pupils for a moment; the pupils quieted down and started to work again. However, the effect was limited because the pupils did not understand why the projector was being put on and off as a diverting manoeuvre; they were never told why it was done.

Berit also talked about group-level solutions like *promises of reward*. She had suggested that the pupils would watch a movie every fourth lesson as long as they behaved themselves in between by working and keeping up a good spirit. Although this suggestion appealed to the pupils, the teacher underlined the limitations of the strategy. There was a problem selecting the right movies because the pupils and she differed in preferences. She reserved for herself the right to examine the pupils' choices. There was an expected change over time, and, according to her, the change in behaviour did not occur as fast as she had hoped: 'We have not reached there yet – if we had, the change should have been very obvio-



us'. Berit's reasoning reflects partial clarity regarding the rate of change for which she had hoped; it reflects that change takes time.

It was apparent that Berit understood the importance of using *reinforcement* rather than punishment, such as reprimands or whining. Berit worked with reinforcement, *individually and in between lessons as a way, instead of punishment, to change pupils' behaviours* so that they would fall in line with her expectations of how to behave during sloyd-lessons.

### ***Trace the Thread***

The input from Berit's expanded group of thirteen colleagues brought up various matters, but not all teachers responded to all aspects. Some emphasised what others had already said by agreeing, and two of the teachers deepened the content of the original issue about disruptive boys by bringing up examples of similar problems that they had themselves experienced in sixth-grade textile-sloyd classes. One teacher mentioned that he had had similar problems with somewhat younger pupils. A few teachers indicated, though, that they did not recognize these problems. Phrases like 'I never had this problem' (Lena) expressed surprise in regard to the original question.

From the qualitative thematic analysis, it was possible to understand and interpret the content of the exchange as either (a) *definitions of the problem* or (b) *suggested solutions*. *Definitions of the problem* circled around the question of what the problem really was about, whereas *suggested solutions* focused on how the situation of disturbing boys could or should be solved.

### ***Definitions of the problem***

It was possible to identify five different definitions of the problem. These variants referred to shortcomings or vagueness in relation to *pupils, process, classroom management, freedom of choice or connection to everyday life*.

The discussion about the *pupils* concerned characteristics that the teachers thought existed among the pupils as a group. These attributes consisted of generalisations of behaviours that teachers thought were common mostly among boys, but to some extent, also among girls in sixth grade. One of the teachers thought this behaviour was manifested by 'the boys playing around all the time and the girls are responding by giggling, which gives more fuel to their attitude' (Lovisa). In essence, Lovisa stated that the boys' behaviour resulted from the interaction between them and the girls in the class. While this statement focused on the group as a whole, this view was not to be found among all the teachers. Instead, some of them singled out the boys as a separate group with special problems that surfaced when they were in grade six. According to teacher Katarina, the problem was that 'the boys had poor self-confidence while at the same time being tough and not wanting to show their weaknesses'. Katarina's idea was that some characteristics are common among boys as a group at a specific age. Whether Lovisa and Katarina saw the behaviour of rowdy boys as an effect of group interaction between them and the girls or as something related to their age, both the teacher and the structural situation were – in this case – given a clean bill as explanations to the pupils' disruptive behaviour. It is also possible to interpret these inputs as being based on ideas from developmental psychology about maturity, motivation and self-esteem.

Some of the respondents mentioned the *process*. This expression is, most likely, short for 'the sloyd process' (from idea to assessment), a well-known concept to many textile-sloyd teachers referring to how the relationship between process and product is expressed in the textile-sloyd classroom. In this line of thinking, the problem was presented as having to do with the pupils' limited possibilities to deal with the process: 'It's about letting the pupils work with their own process' (Lena). In this case, Lena expressed her positive attitude towa-

nds individualisation. In this response, the originally-emailed question that indicated a behavioural matter on the group level was transformed into a question of individual processing. This transformation in itself could be understood as a criticism of a situation lacking sufficient individual focus, thus problematizing group-level thinking as it was formulated in the original question about other colleagues' experiences.

When the responding teachers mentioned *classroom management* as the cause of the problem, they wrote about how the organisation was managed. Two aspects were mentioned: the boys' unruly behaviour was either the result of confusing or ardent classroom management. Pointing to the aspect of confusing management, one teacher commented that 'maybe we should raise our demands of the pupils and show more distinctly who is the leader of the activities' (Johanna). Here, the responding teacher also referred to a TV series documentary, 'School-class 9 A', which was being shown on Swedish TV at that time. Of course, this question-like comment could be interpreted in various ways. For instance, Johanna might not have been totally convinced that this was the right solution in the case of unruly sixth-grade boys, or perhaps she was uncertain that being more distinct as a leader in the classroom would solve the problem, as was indicated in the TV series. A third interpretation could be that watching the TV series had caused Johanna to think that this strategy could be used in a textile-sloyd class with a group of unruly boys. Whatever the interpretation, Johanna's response problematizes the issues of classroom management, structure and demands.

The second aspect, over-zealous management, was formulated from the point of view that the teacher in question had made her own interpretation of the curriculum. One teacher wondered, 'What passage in the curriculum says that the teacher decides what the pupils are supposed to do?' (Lena). Lena seemed to react against a special kind of leadership structure, which indicates that the teacher is the one who makes classroom decisions. The response could also be seen as a question of Berit's conception of participation. The reference to the curriculum could be a reflection on how Berit, who emailed the original question, exercised her authority.

Several responses contained a discussion about *freedom of choice* connected to possibilities and limitations. This discussion referred to the choices that the pupils were supposed to make in the textile-sloyd class. One teacher thought that the problem could be a consequence of the inadequacy of the teacher: 'As a teacher, you may feel inadequate if the pupils can choose freely when they don't have enough background knowledge' (Bea). Bea suggested that freedom of choice may further complicate the situation, which could even result in the pupils making no choice at all. Freedom of choice was thought to have to do with what kind of choices the pupils actually could make, i.e., whether they should be totally free to choose techniques and materials or whether their choices should be limited in some way. Another dilemma concerning freedom of choice was that the pupils might lose motivation and become disruptive if not allowed to choose what they wanted.

Some teachers reasoned that the problem could be both that the contents and the organisation of sloyd in school were unrealistic and construed for teaching alone, and therefore, not anchored in the pupils' worlds. That is, they pinpointed *connection to everyday life*, which would be improved if the pupils were given opportunities to use the Internet in order to gain inspiration. Perhaps this connection would be improved if they could also, for instance, 'do embroidery while listening to music or, even better, a good talking-book; then there will be less chitchat, hopefully' (Karin). On one hand, this response could be understood as problematizing the perspective, as Karin is pondering about whose perspective – the pupils' or the teacher's – should prevail when planning textile-sloyd activities. On the other hand, the response could also be seen as a naive idea that music would conceal the fact that the pupils have to be in school, take textile-sloyd lessons, and, on top of that, work with something that is decided upon by somebody else. Karin also moralised about music by suggesting a better

alternative, such as a talking book, and a good one. This response thereby indicates that the most disturbing phenomenon – pupils' chitchat – is disturbing both to the pupils and to the textile-sloyd teachers.

### **Suggested Solutions**

In this analysis, four different suggested solutions emerged: *area of activity*, *competences*, *leadership* and *techniques*.

Many teachers responded as though they looked upon the issue of unruly boys from the point of view of the *area of activity* that the teacher had chosen for the specific lesson. This viewpoint disregarded the fact that Berit, who emailed the original question, did not mention anything about the kind of activities that were going on during the lesson when the boys behaved badly. Some of the teachers indicated that the choice of activity could provide certain methodical frames:

Controlled tasks with a certain amount of freedom of choice is my bet – for instance, batik that could be used for something like a picture, a pillow, a bag .... The result is instant, and nobody can fail (Belinda).

This statement not only contains expressions of the usefulness of a clearly-defined area of activity, it also expresses the need for a direct, obvious, well-defined result in the form of a tangible product. Another important point is the idea that nobody could fail the task. Traditionally, the sloyd subjects, with a focus on either textile or wood and metal, should make it possible for the pupils to succeed. Success could relate to the quality of the result but more often to time – the product should be finished at a certain time, e.g., before the holiday or before the class changes from textile-sloyd to wood and/or metalwork, or vice versa. Belinda also underlined the importance of her suggestion to the specific target group, unruly boys. When working with unruly sixth-graders, stated another teacher, it is easier working with 'one very well structured task per year with several instructional sessions' (Karin).

There were other responses with advice pointing in the opposite direction, stressing the pupils' possibilities to choose freely; however, at a later stage 'freedom of choice' should be limited to the actual sloyd products without further details being mentioned.

One response emphasised that the pupils should always work with things of their own choosing based on their capabilities. For instance, Lena said, 'When they are allowed to make their own choices, you get positive, engaged pupils'. Lena had a clearly positive view as regards to pupil influence and participation. She seemed to have trust in pupils' innate creative ability, which would reveal itself as soon as the pupils were allowed to choose their activities.

Some of the suggested solutions were based on the idea that sloyd activities were supposed to practise *competences* that the pupils could make use of in the future. These competences included exercising their sensitivity for problem-solving or creating certain habits regarding the ability to handle tools. According to one teacher, two such important key competences were 'creativity and will' (Zita). This response is in itself a statement about what Zita thought was most important in sloyd education. It is also reasonable to discern that it was oriented towards pupils' future lives and what would be most essential for them. Here, competences can also be understood as the ability to handle tools and materials, such as those used in sloyd education, competences that are likely to come in handy in the future. Therefore, Zita's input contains an element of envisioning the future.

In terms of the teacher's method of teaching, proper *leadership* was the solution to the problem with unruly sixth-graders according to several teachers. Proper leadership could mean giving clear instructions so as to make the pupils focus and concentrate on their work. For instance, Johanna said that the teacher should 'instruct them step by step and make sure that all pupils are following'. In this case, emphasis is on the teacher's role as a leader of the

activities on both the individual and group levels. The steps or elements illuminate the progression and make it easier for the teacher to help as many pupils as possible understand what they are supposed to do. In doing so, the teacher creates a reasonable working situation for herself by giving control questions linked to the instruction for those who ask for help. This way, the pupils will also learn to manage their own activities and to self-regulate.

Among other things, leadership includes repetition of previously-taught aspects, for example, how and for what purpose sewing machines are to be used. Karin said that ‘sixth-graders seem to have forgotten everything they have learned about sewing machines, so one has to repeat that, too’. The teachers pointed out that techniques are preferably taught with the whole class together. Leadership is also a matter of choosing the right working procedures.

Several suggested solutions involved the *techniques* that the teachers themselves have used successfully with pupils of the same age, e.g., certain types of stitches that are good to start with, or some special material that is easy to use. Katarina said that she ‘has tried cross-stitches and diamond-stitches on course linen, and it worked very well’. In other words, the right technique and material pave the way for success. Another similar response brought forth the importance of new techniques as a means to increasing pupil interest.

Based on the idea that the pupils are able to make use of their earlier established know-how in their sloyd activities, the teachers suggested a well-prepared plan with a gradual progression from the simplest to the most advanced techniques. However, all respondents were not in agreement here. Lena, for instance, had a different opinion: ‘Those techniques that they need to use to be able to make a certain object, they will learn when they think they will enjoy it’. Lena’s statement can be understood as opposed to the idea of teaching a specific technique in certain grades, in this case the sixth grade. Her point of departure is that children have an inherent will to learn, provided that it is something they think they will enjoy. Zita, on the other hand, pointed out that ‘the most important thing in sloyd education is not to learn a specific method’, thereby taking a stance against letting methods, in terms of techniques, be what governs teaching.

In sum, the above results show that the textile-sloyd teacher addressed the issue as a way to get other teachers’ informed perspectives or professional views on how a situation with disorderly boys in grade six could be understood and managed. She reasoned about *behaviour analysis*, which meant that she thought about pupils’ conceptions or the teacher’s qualifications as two ways to understand the boys’ behaviour. She also thought of different sorts of *action attempts*, such as diverting manoeuvres, promises of reward and positive reinforcement, which were different actions attempted to bring about necessary changes. As part of the exchange with other textile-sloyd teachers on *textillalarlistan*, Berit learnt about *definitions of the problem*. These were other textile-sloyd teachers’ ideas of the problem, as expressed in terms of the pupils, the process, classroom management, freedom of choice or connection to everyday life. Berit also received *suggested solutions* from the other sloyd-teachers in terms of *area of activity*, *competences*, *leadership* and *techniques*.

## Discussion

This article has sought to contribute new insights into how sloyd teachers, in this case with specialities in textiles, have a need and an interest in discussing and sharing ideas about their teaching. In particular, this work has investigated an aspect of sloyd teaching that is rarely debated, namely teachers’ leadership, internationally known as classroom management (Colnerud, 2002; Granström, 2007; 2012). The article also shows how sloyd teachers understand and discuss essential didactic aspects, such as the pupil, the teacher and the subject matter (Lundgren, 1992). The teacher who first emailed the question noted sloyd teachers’ interest in these aspects on the grounds that 13 other sloyd teachers had actually responded to the question. In order to find out whether or not these teachers really needed to discuss and were

interested in the issue, it seems reasonable to focus on two aspects: (a) 14 out of the about 1900 sloyd teachers who are on the email list (*textillalarlistan*) took part in the discussion, and (b) the discussion went on for ten days. This rate of participation may seem small or even insignificant. The theory of community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991), however, does not support such an assumption. Quite the contrary – the theory of community of practice states that it is not the number of participants that is essential, but rather how the information is received and what it generates. Thus, the number of participants in the discussion could indicate a genuine interest in sharing knowledge and experiences about this particular didactic problem, particularly in terms of how to interpret and cope with it. This interest is further underlined by the fact that the exchange went on for ten days, which is unusual on this email list. My interpretation is that the members of this community of practice expressed a willingness to develop their conceptions and their professional roles in terms of didactic knowledge and leadership (Colnerud & Granström, 2003); they also demonstrated a willingness to participate in a community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Hunter, 2010) as textile-sloyd teachers.

Furthermore, in Sweden, pupils mostly have one semester with textile-sloyd followed by one semester with wood and metals sloyd; these topics are separated from each other (Samuelsson, 2013). According to earlier research (Good, Sikes & Brophy, 1973; Brophy, 1985; Eccles & Blumenfeld, 1985), disruptive boys can be found in all subjects, both sloyd-subjects included. According to Halvorsen (2014), one can assume that ‘feminine craft means unruly boys’. In her studies, she found that the popularity of a school subject shifted in the case of sloyd depending on the aspect of sloyd under consideration. In essence, some boys are more unruly in textile-sloyd lessons. Even so, the results discussed in this article are likely valid for teachers of wood and metal sloyd as well, as earlier findings by Good, Sikes and Brophy (1973) emphasised that even if male and female teachers teach differently, they do not treat male and female pupils differently. Furthermore, Swedish teacher education is similar in all sloyd-subjects when it comes to classroom management training, and the forms of employment are similar: there is usually only one or very few sloyd teachers in each school unit. Meanwhile, in-service training on leadership issues is limited or non-existent. It is therefore reasonable to assume that wood and metalwork teachers are also in need of a forum for exchanging ideas and experiences about maintaining and developing competences those expressed in the community of practice theory (Wenger, 1998; Wenger, McDermott & Snyder, 2002).

This article provides new knowledge on how teachers of an aesthetic-practical subject (textile-sloyd) experience, manage and reflect on a didactic phenomenon like boys’ disruptive behaviour at school. A review of earlier research reveals that the unconventional or non-conformist behaviour of boys has been studied mostly in relation to subjects like mathematics or social studies (Good, Sikes, & Brophy, 1973; Kaplan, Gheen, & Midgley, 2002). The present study substantiates earlier results in that it shows that sloyd teachers also find boys disruptive, not pupils in general or girls specifically. The findings are also in line with earlier research by Merrett and Wheldall (1992), as teachers in lower secondary school generally gave negative feedback to the boys for their social behaviour. The results of the study seem to indicate that, from a teacher’s perspective, it is something other than the subject or the subject matter that makes boys unruly. From the pupils’ perspective, however, the situation may appear differently. The specific nature of the aesthetic-practical subjects – allowing more space for moving around and chitchatting, requiring less sitting still and listening, giving space for the pupils’ organising, planning and carrying out their learning activities – may invite the pupils’ disturbing behaviour from the teacher’s point of view. This assertion can be compared to the

results of the national assessment of 2003 (NU03), which made clear that neither pupils nor parents understood or could see the usefulness of the sloyd subjects (Skolverket, 2003). The fact that the usefulness is not obvious could perhaps also be a reason for disruptive behaviour from the pupils' perspective.

### Implications

The present study contributes to our knowledge about how the theory of *community of practice* (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998; Wenger, McDermott & Snyder, 2002) can be used to interpret and understand responses in interviews and email communications seeking answers to the following research questions: "For what reason did a textile-sloyd teacher address a question about disorderly boys to the email group *textillalarlistan*?" and "What sorts of solutions about how to handle disorderly boys did the email group provide?" It seems reasonable to believe that the email discussions on the topic of disorderly boys both *strengthened* and *challenged* this particular community of practice. The community was *strengthened* in the sense that the members emphasised already existing and commonly shared, but maybe not hitherto formulated, conceptions within the community of textile-sloyd teachers. It was also strengthened the community in the sense that the conversation contributed to developing the professional language about the teacher's role (Colnerud & Granström, 2003). The questions and discussions in this community of practice, or, in this case, the extended teaching staff, strengthened the teacher's role and reminded members of the possibility of sharing ideas about didactic phenomena. The community was *challenged* in the sense that members verbalised conceptions that were *not* shared by everyone in the community of practice. The will and ability to internalise new ideas, to develop a professional language through conceptualisation and to progress as a professional teacher may not be shared by everyone to the same extent. Some of the answers seem to indicate that some sloyd teachers reject the idea of focusing on leadership, not just teachership (Granström, 2007).

Those aspects of the exchange that *strengthened* the community were a shared interest in and recognition of the problem. The teacher who introduced the topic mentioned this strengthening aspect in an interview. Other teachers also mentioned it as they testified to having encountered the same dilemma from time to time. Another aspect that *strengthened* the community was the seemingly common understandings of possible reasons behind the experienced problem. Most of the sloyd teachers who responded to the question and provided suggestions pointed out the unruly boys as the problem. Their understanding of the described situation was thereby confirmed by other sloyd teachers. One aspect that was presented as a possible explanation to the boys' disruptive behaviour was the psychological (im)maturity of boys in the sixth grade, an assertion that was shared among some of the textile-sloyd teachers.

Yet another *strengthening* aspect was the discussion of the process, the subject matter and the techniques. This point is not surprising in itself, as many textile-sloyd teachers have used – and still are using – the email list to discuss various techniques and to get ideas about suitable activities for pupils of different ages. Among the *challenging* aspects in the community of practice was the *connection to everyday life* topics. On the topic of whether and how sloyd education in school should or could relate to the pupils' everyday lives, the teachers had different views. In this context, there were responses concerning competences; the teachers did not agree about the relevance of this aspect, which made it a challenge to the community of practice. Further, according to the teacher who emailed the original question, no radical ideas were presented, which may be a sign of conservatism, another challenge to this community. An additional *challenging* aspect could be that the responses seemed to be normative suggested solutions and descriptive definitions of the problem. This finding could, on one hand, be understood as *challenging* because the community, based on the content in the exchange of experiences, could be perceived as having a firm and complete conception of how to

deal with didactic phenomena, regardless of situation, relations and interactions. On the other hand, the exchange of experiences seems to emphasise the fact that there are no universally valid solutions to problems that occur in textile-sloyd education, a type of activity that is regulated from outside by a national curriculum, locally organised and constantly changing. Nevertheless, it became obvious both in the interviews with Berit and in the email exchange, that sloyd teachers seem to agree on the need for more training and a continuous discussion about leadership and other didactic aspects of teaching. It seems necessary to further develop the teachers' understanding of how to read and manage situations like the one under discussion here, that is, 15 disruptive, unmotivated boys in sixth grade, a phenomenon that historically has always existed and probably will always exist in school and in textile-sloyd lessons.

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