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‘We’re really lucky’: co-creating ‘us’ and ‘the Other’ in school booktalk

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A B S T R A C T. The present paper addresses how ‘Otherness’ is co-constructed in booktalk in a Swedish school. The data consist of video-recorded teacher led booktalk sessions, involving small groups of pupils in grades 4–7. Seven of the eight books discussed were – at least partly – set in settings foreign to the present pupils. We found that a basic teacher device for constructing the ‘Other’, was to implicitly or explicitly compare a group of others to the participant children themselves, ‘us Swedish children’, accomplishing ‘Otherness’ by foregrounding *differences*, setting up a series of implicit or explicit contrasts between ‘them’ and ‘us’ (cf. Dickerson, 2001; Sampson, 1993). Such contrasts concerned: literacy and language skills (Extracts 1–2), ways of ‘sticking together’ (Extracts 3–4), as well as contrasts in terms of the distribution of material educational resources and work demands on children (Extracts 5–8). Moreover, the last extracts also illustrate how pupils co-construct the teachers’ implicit or explicit underlying moral agendas.

K E Y W O R D S *booktalk, children’s literature, identity talk, Otherness, , reader reception*

Egalitarianism, subversion and the teaching of literature

Equality and an egalitarian ethos have a relatively strong tradition in Swedish public life, and anti-racist issues are part of the official Swedish school ideology and syllabus. How do teachers – in the light of egalitarian goals – treat pupils’ notions of ‘the Other’ in discussions on children’s literature? The topic of the present article is how ‘the Other’ is treated in discussions with children on books in a school context. In what ways do teachers and pupils orient to ethnicity? Are ethnic stereotypes counteracted, if they occur? In what ways is the ‘Other’ portrayed in booktalk conversations?

The issue of Otherness and how it permeates cultural expressions such as literature has been thoroughly examined by Edward Said (1978). He describes how humans draw borders in their mind, with the result that other people

become 'they' by being described as different from 'us'. Said points out that both modern and primitive cultures define a part of their identity as negative; i.e., a pre-Christ Athenian would perceive himself as much as Non-Barbarian, as he would see himself as Athenian.

Drawing on Edward Said's work on orientalism, Nodelman (1992) convincingly argues that children's literature as well as much of child psychology are, in many ways, imperialist enterprises. In the same way that Occidentals relate to Orientals, adults relate to children, seeing them as the *Other*, for example, inferior, female, or just (oddly) sensitive. It is therefore interesting to study different types of 'Otherness' in children's literature.

There have been a few studies of 'Otherness' in relation to children and literature. For instance, Singh and Greenlaw (1998) have promoted contrapuntal pedagogy to make Anglo-ethnic pupils analyse their own Eurocentric perspectives in more enlightened ways.

Concerning representation of ethnicity in children's literature, a large scale American study showed that only 16 percent of the protagonists in 4 255 genre fiction reviews published 1992–2001 were of colour (Agosto, Hughes-Hassell, & Gilmore-Clough, 2003). This was compared to the statistics for Americans under age 18, where over 31 percent are non-whites.

Another study related three African-American girls' reader response to white mainstream norm (Trousdale & Everett, 1994). The only cross-cultural implication that the authors drew from their study, was that "children may make connections which a teacher from another culture [---] may not be able to predict" (Trousdale & Everett, 1994: 12).

Jack Zipes (1983) has documented subversive elements of the classical fairy tale, discussing the liberating potential of the fantastic in contemporary fairy tales. Zipes' work concerns the texts as such, not the readers' responses. In a reader reception ethnography of 4–10 year old children, Bronwyn Davies (1989; 1993) read out loud and discussed modern fairy tales with subversive elements. She found that most children were already attuned to the dominant discourses of gender. Non-sexist texts were at times therefore read as traditional, gender stereotypical texts.

Yet, there is no recent in-depth investigation of Otherness in reader response studies of children's fiction. However, Staffan Thorson (1987) has presented an ambitious large scale motif study of immigrants in Swedish fiction for children, covering about 150 books, published in the post-war period: 1945–1980. In the books analysed, immigrants were often cast as marginal members of the Swedish society, to be pitied and cared for. Immigrants were recurrently portrayed in well meaning, but stereotypical ways, as groups of 'them', opposed to 'we', in a society that is portrayed in a positive and uncomplicated way. On a somewhat polemical note, it can be said that any problem depends on the recent immigrant's deficient skills in the majority language, and they will normally disappear with time, and if people are nice to each other. Thorson also claimed that most books are more or less didactic, and lack in-depth characters and unexpected perspectives (Thorson, 1987: 220).

Immigrants in young children's books (particularly fiction for preschoolers) are portrayed as more stereotyped than immigrants in youth books, though, and whereas children's books depict immigrants' lives in terms of "a state", youth books present "processes" (Thorson, 1987: 246). Moreover, the condition of the protagonist's life is often that of someone to be pitied, rather than someone with whom to identify. As discussed by Thorson, when quoting the Council of Interracial Books for Children "After reading the average children's book, what child would like to be black, chicano, Puerto Rican, Asian, Indian?" (Thorson, 1987: 67).

Jan Susina has studied Helen Bannerman's *The Story of Little Black Sambo* (1898), as well as criticism of this book and some recent revised versions of the tale. The focus of Susina's study is on Julius Lester's *Sam and the Tigers: A New Telling of Little Black Sambo* (1996) and Fred Marcellino's new illustrations to *The Story of Little Babaji* (1996). Susina (1999: 243) quotes Lester who remembered Sambo as a black hero, yet as a hero who had his heroic status diminished by his very name and by the way he was depicted.

The papers above concern construction of the Other in literature, that is, the point of departure for the discussions studied. The focus on literature is what makes the present paper different from other studies. However, talk – about literature – is still in focus. Therefore, we would like to draw attention to some studies of constructions of the Other in other contexts as well.

In a study of interviews with television news audiences, Paul Dickerson (2000) examined contrasts drawn between self and others. His study partly confirms earlier work on the functions of contrasts. Additionally, Dickerson shows that contrasts change significance with the conversational context, and that contrasts can be used to deprecate self in relation to others.

In focus-group interviews with ethnically Dutch people, Maykel Verkuyten (2001) examined the discursive construction and representation of "abnormality". Verkuyten found three main strategies: "making contrasts, formulating extreme cases, and referring to basic human values" (2001: 263).

Another discursive study treats interviews with British ex-war prisoners in Japan during World War two, examining rice and rice diet as conversational topics deployed in identity talk, categorizing self and others as members or nonmembers of the Japanese community (Murakami, 2001). Kyoko Murakami (2001 [29]) thereby shows how cultural otherness is constructed through talk about rice.

Existing literature thus concerns different ways of constructing otherness – in literary texts or in talk, but, as far as we know, no study concerns otherness in talk about literature.

As pointed out, the official documents of the Swedish educational system promote the equal value of all people, as a central fundamental value (Utbildningsdepartementet, 1998: 5). It is stated that work in schools should depict and promote equality between women and men, as well as the equal value of ethnic groups marked by "cultural diversity" (e.g. immigrants and refugees). One

way of achieving this is through fiction, which according to the syllabus, opens new worlds (Skolverket, 1996: 77). This is even more emphasised in the most recent syllabus, where it is stated that fiction provides possibilities for empathy and understanding for what is different (Skolverket, 2000). Fiction – including literature, film and theatre – is thus seen to counteract racism. Yet, it has not been documented how teachers and pupils actually work together in co-creating novel non-stereotypical images of ‘us’ and ‘others’ out of fictive characters.

Data

ETHNOGRAPHIC SETTING

The data was collected as part of a discursive study of reader responses in a naturalistic school context, based on so called book circles (Swed. läsecirklar), that involved a teacher and three to eight pupils in grades 4–7, aged 10–14 years. Each group of pupils met with their teacher on three occasions, as part of regular school activities, and read and discussed a book that they had chosen from a set of books, presented by a teacher-librarian. All discussions were led by one of the teachers, who were all inspired by Chamber’s reasoning on “booktalk” and his basic idea that you have not properly read a book until you have discussed it with somebody else (Chambers, 1993/1999). Chamber’s aim is to create literary readers.

Seven of the eight books discussed were – at least partly – set in settings, foreign to the pupils in Sweden. Several of the present examples are drawn from conversations on *Eldens hemlighet* (Mankell, 1995/1999; *Secrets in the fire*, 2000), which is set in the war-torn countryside of Mozambique, a book which recurrently invoked notions of ‘Otherness’ in the present classroom conversations. Two more books are discussed in the present extracts. *Pojken och den vita sköldpaddan* (Cowley, 1986); *The silent one* is set in an island in the Pacific, which would be foreign also to most of the author’s compatriot New Zealand readers. Finally, *Smuggelkatten* ([The smuggled cat], Ekholm, 1990) is mainly set in contemporary Sweden, but the story events start during a vacation trip to Greece.

RECORDINGS, TRANSCRIPTION, AND ANALYSIS

During one academic year, the first author (KE) video-recorded 24 booktalk sessions (three sessions/group). The recordings involved 8 different groups. In all, forty pupils (20 girls and 20 boys) and five teachers (four females and one male) participated. However, it is the *booktalk practices* in which these persons participated that constitute the primary analytic units of the present study.

In order to investigate the reading responses, the entire book club sessions were recorded.¹ We have followed the recommendations of Potter and Wetherell (1995), making *in extenso* transcriptions of the entire data set (in all about 450 A4 pages). After searching through the material, we identified 20 sequences where the participants made ‘Otherness’ relevant. All such occurrences were

transcribed in greater detail (cf Transcription notations). The extracts are headed with information about grade, group, session, book discussed, tape and time, and participants (names have been pseudonymized). Finally, a native English speaker translated the chosen extracts.

METHODOLOGICAL COMMENTS

The present data are *naturalistic* in the sense that the conversations would have occurred even if the researcher had not been involved.² Our centre of attention is conversations or talk-in-interaction in an educational setting, that is, discursive data. Within a theoretical framework of discursive psychology, booktalk (like other conversations) is seen as a type of social action (cf. Potter, 1996, 2003). The present work therefore combines work on children's literature with some of the analytical approaches of discursive psychology. In their work on literature and social psychology, Jonathan Potter, Peter Stringer and Margaret Wetherell (1984) argue that an interactional perspective would "unfreeze" literary study; thereby stressing the social and political context of literature. Yet, Potter *et al.* (1984) did not present empirical data on, for example, interpretative practices and social interaction departing from literature.³ Our work can partly be seen as an extension of the work presented in *Social texts and context: literature and social psychology* (Potter *et al.*, 1984) in that it examines conversational practices structured around literature.

Construing contrasts between 'them' and 'us'

We found that a basic teacher device for constructing the 'Other', was to implicitly or explicitly compare a group of others to the participant children themselves, 'us Swedish children'. Thereby the teachers could be seen to accomplish 'Otherness', foregrounding differences by setting up a series of implicit or explicit contrasts (cf. Dickerson, 2000; Verkuyten, 2001) between 'them' and 'us'.

The paper is organised around the content of such contrasts: literacy and language skills (Extracts 1–2), ways of 'sticking together' (Extracts 3–4), as well as contrasts in terms of the distribution of material educational resources and work demands on children (Extracts 5–8).

Moreover, the last extracts also illustrate how teachers either elicit (Extracts 5–7) or spell out (Extract 8) underlying moral agendas. Work on children's literature has recurrently pointed to moral or at least didactic motifs in children's fiction (Shavit, 1986; Thorson, 1987). In the present data, we will illustrate in what ways teachers are also alive to such didactic aspects of children's fiction. In our analyses of teacher's didactic agendas, we will also focus on in what ways pupils resist such teaching or if they help teachers spell out moral points in stories.

TALKING ABOUT THE OTHER AS A POOR SPEAKER OR AS AN ILLITERATE

Based on his exploration of books in Swedish, Thorson (1987) showed how immigrants are recurrently portrayed in terms of language deficiencies. At

worst, adults are, at times, portrayed as speaking a funny pidgin Swedish. In the present books, there were no such cases, and neither the teachers nor the children spoke about language skills in explicitly disparaging ways. Yet, when discussed, language and literacy was seen as something problematic.

Extract 1 concerns language skills: both the pupils' and the inhabitants' of charter destinations, in this case Greece.

Extract 1 'Then they don't speak very good English'

Book club 4B:1 *Smuggelkatten* [The smuggled cat], Tape 3:0.19.59

Participants: SUE (teacher), Dan, Julia, Sara, Mia, Ida

- 1 SUE: The- they had spectacles (2) that's what they
2 had (1) and they have them in Greece in the
3 summer when lots of tourists are there, then
4 they put on really huge spectacles with Greek
5 actors(2) How many of you understand Greek or
6 can speak Greek?
- 7 Mia: Well, I could but I don't remember
- 8 SUE: [No, okay]
- 9 Dan: [Yeah, me too]
- 10 Mia: It was so hard
- 11 SUE: Do you [think]
- 12 Mia: [They]- it was English they spoke
- 13 SUE: Yes (.) but the act[ors didn't] speak English
- 14 Dan: [I (know that)]
- 15 Mia: No:
- 16 SUE: But Anna, who this book is about-
- 17 Dan: They say-
- 18 SUE: Is about-
- 19 Dan: *fank you very muts*
- 20 SUE: That's right.
- 21 Mia: *Muck*
- 22 Dan: *Muts*: that's what they say, at least when I was
23 There
- 24 SUE: The Greeks said that?
- 25 Dan: Yes, *muts*
- 26 → SUE: They don't speak very good English then
- 27 Mia: No: ((*shakes her head*))

After exploring the meaning of Greek drama, the teacher asks if any of the pupils speaks Greek (lines 5–6). Both Mia (line 7) and Dan (line 9) say that they at least knew how to speak it. In line 12, Mia corrects her previous claim: she knew how to communicate *in English* with people in Greece. The teacher then explains that the actors in Greek dramas do not speak English. A little later, Dan impersonates Greek speakers: 'fank you very muts' (line 19). At the time of the study, the present pupils had learnt English for just one academic year, and we do not quite know whether Dan merely pronounces English poorly or whether he intends to imitate the Greeks' poor English. The teacher, who tried to raise an issue concerning

the main character of the book, just makes a minimal acknowledgment. Mia, however, corrects Dan's pronunciation, only to mispronounce it in another way, 'muck' (line 21). Dan then repeats his way of thanking someone very 'muts'. He also claims personal experience to validate his way of pronouncing (lines 22–23). The teacher implicitly challenges him, but Dan reaffirms that the Greeks said 'muts' (line 25). After Mia's confirmation of the teacher's statement about the Greeks' English knowledge (line 26), both the argument between Mia and Dan, and the discussion about languages ends. However, the teacher's comment involves a generalization about the Greeks' poor language knowledge. A tag that distances the prejudice from the teacher follows this statement: only if what the pupils say is true, the prejudice is applicable. The teacher's remark (line 26) thus has a multifold function: firstly, it ends the discussion between Dan and Mia; secondly, it lances a stereotype or prejudice about the Other, the Not-Us as an ignorant people who do not even know how to properly pronounce common English words; thirdly, it contains a disclaimer and an implicit misalignment with this stereotype by the end tag 'then' (line 26).

In the next example, it is questioned if the Other is literate. The characters in the book discussed live in an isolated island, and the villagers see the main character as an outcast since he is mute deaf.

Extract 2 'Do you think they can read and write?'

Book club 7B:2 *The Silent One*, Tape 6:0.44.51

Participants: ALAN (teacher), Pia, Lisa, Elias, Ulf, Nils, Klas

- 1 ALAN: The people living[↑] on this island[↑], in this
 2 environment, they're not very- do you think
 3 they can <read and write> and they usual-
 4 Pia: Azaki- ki can
 5 ALAN: Yes, exactly. But he's pretty much the only
 6 one, isn't he?
 7 Flera: Uh huh
 8 ALAN: (3) But the people living on the island,
 9 they've only seen what's there.
 10 Klas: Yeah
 11 ALAN: They have their own ideas they can
 12 never read about if other people have- they don't
 13 often meet other people.
 14 Pia: Uh huh
 15 ALAN: Or what?
 16 Klas: Yeah
 17 ALAN: So it might be a bit hard for them to think in
 18 other ways.

In line 2, the teacher Alan begins an assessment about the islanders in the book in question 'they're not very-', focusing on a perceived difference, which can be seen as a deficiency. He interrupts himself, and instead poses a question about whether the islanders' are literate. In other words, Alan reformulates a prejudice

into a question. Pia argues against the teacher's generalization and answers that Asaki, one of the main characters, indeed can read and write (line 4). Alan's response (lines 5–6) to this can be seen as an extreme case formulation (see Edwards, 2000), that Asaki is almost the only one who knows this. This functions as a way of playing down the troublesome exception. Some pupils respond in a minimal fashion 'uh huh' (line 7). After a brief pause, the teacher continues to talk about the islanders' restricted experience of the world (lines 8–9 and 11–13). After making sure that at least one of the pupils agrees (line 15), the teacher concludes by stressing that their limited experiences (and illiteracy) explain why the islanders cannot think in other ways than they do. Thus, in the teacher's view, the combination of being isolated and being illiterate makes the islanders restricted in their ways of thinking. Thereby, he privileges the value of literate knowledge as a way of remedying geographic isolation.

In our first two extracts (Extracts 1–2) a derogatory Other is constructed. The Other can here be seen as a version of Sampson's (1993: 4–5) *serviceable* others: "that is, others constructed so as to be of service to the dominant groups' own needs, values, interests and points of view". 'Their' function is to let 'us' express values and points of view, in this case concerning literacy and language skills.

'STICKING TOGETHER' – TALKING ABOUT THE OTHER AS MORE CARING

In their discussion of racism, Wetherell and Potter (1992: 120-122) show how "positive" accounts of a minority group can be based on racist premises. In such cases, Wetherell and Potter mean that group belonging is expressed through physical origins, hereby individuals are characterised by group characteristics. At times, well-meaning stereotypes actually highlight apparently positive characteristics of the Other. Yet, when analyzed contextually, the overall effect is one of stereotypical otherness.

In the following example, the tendency to take care of one's fellowmen is presented in the form of such a positive stereotype.

Extract 3 'You know in these countries people really take care of each other'

Book club 6A:2 *Secrets in the Fire*, Tape 11:0.16.12

Participants: MARY (teacher), Lena, Gerd, Rut, Siv, Dora, Bo, Paul, Sten

- 1 MARY: And who is Mauzena then?
 2 Sten: ° That was some old woman.°
 3 MARY: ((*points at Gerd*))
 4 Gerd: One of those like who they knew who died.
 5 MARY: Yes: (.) f- for a while I wondered if she was
 6 → their grandmother. (.) Bu- but, I I do- (.)
 7 don't know really.
 8 Rut: I think it was just some old lady who
 9 (what do you call it)
 10 → MARY: Uh huh. You know in these countries people
 11 really take care of <each other>. And to do it
 12 you don't need to be so closely related.

The pupils categorize Muazena as ‘some old woman’ (line 2), i.e. as a person who is not a relative of the main characters. The teacher’s spontaneous thoughts about Muazena as the main characters’ ‘grandmother’ (line 6), raises the issue of kinship. The form of her utterance in lines 5–7 differs from how the teacher speaks elsewhere in that she hesitates four times (see, for instance, her disclaimers in lines 6–7), something that she does not do anywhere else to the same extent. A third pupil, Rut, also claims that Muazena is merely some ‘old lady’ (line 8). The teacher then formulates an explanation: kinship is not necessary for people in ‘these countries’ to take care of each other (lines 10–12). What is thus said implicitly is that from a Swedish perspective, it would be logical to presume that one would be biologically related if one took care of another person the way that the main characters in the book did with Muazena (line 12). The teacher orients towards this “puzzle” when she presents an explanation to why the main characters take care of Muazena anyway: ‘in these countries people really take care of each other’ (lines 10–12).

Apparently people naturally just ‘really’ take care of each other. This can be seen as something of a stereotype. The teacher implicitly praises different practices of ‘really taking care of each other’, that is of sticking together, thereby evoking notions of Otherness. Yet, it is a type of default cohesiveness. People stick together because of their poverty and otherness, not because they necessarily want to be together. In her research on the construction of ‘race’, ethnicity and the social identities of young people, Ann Phoenix (2003) has found that it is primarily others that are seen to stick together: ‘they’ stick together and that is thought of as the reason for not mixing with them. That ‘we’ stick together and refuse to let ‘them’ in is rarely given as an explanation to why people do not mix with Others.

In the following example, another positive characteristic is discussed, namely, valuing the family.

Extract 4 ‘Does the family mean as much in Sweden as it does in Mozambique?’

Book club 6A:2 *Secrets in the Fire*, Tape 11:1.03.30

Participants: MARY (teacher), Lena, Gerd, Rut, Siv, Dora, Bo, Paul, Sten

- 1 MARY: Does the family mean as much in [Sweden
2 as it does in
3 Dora: [((raises her
4 hand))
5 MARY: Mozambique? What does everybody think? What do
6 you think Dora?
7 Dora: ((Puts her hand down.)) No:: ((Shakes her
8 head.))
9 MARY: ((To Dora.)) Wha’ mea- where does the family
10 mean the most?
11 Dora: ((shrugs her shoulders))
12 MARY: In Sweden or Mozambique?
13 Bo?: °Mozambique°

14 Sten?: Mozambique
 15 MARY: Why do you think it means more in Mozambique
 16 than in Sweden?
 17 Sten: Poorer there
 18 MARY: Ye:s
 19 Dora: They stick together more
 20 MARY: Why do they stick together more?
 21 Dora: ((shrugs her shoulders))
 22 Bo: °(They have to help each other and all)°
 23 MARY: ((nods)) Th- their life is a little harder than
 24 ours in- in a different way↑ because
 25 maybe our life is hard too↑ (.) Are you
 26 thinking about something else Siv about why
 27 the family sticks together more in
 28 Mozambique? (6)

The teacher asks Dora whether the family means ‘as much’ in Sweden as in Mozambique (lines 1–2). Dora does not respond, but two boys, Bo and Sten, both claim that the family means more in Mozambique. Sten then presents them being ‘poorer’ as an explanation of why the family is more important in Mozambique (line 17). Implicitly, the family is needed as support in a poor society. Sten’s interpretation is ratified by the teacher’s contributions (lines 18 and 20). The family means more in Mozambique than in Sweden, because ‘they have to help each other and all’ (Bo, line 22). Implicitly, family care and protection is thus linked to poverty. In lines 23–28, the teacher raises the issue of similarities between ‘us’ and ‘them’: life can be difficult both in Sweden and in Mozambique, the difficulties, however, are ‘in a different way’. There are some indications that this is hard to talk about. Firstly, the teacher uses softeners (‘little’, line 23; and raising pitch, lines 24 and 25) to mitigate the trouble discourse (see Brown & Levinson, 1987; Wetherell, 1998). Secondly, the pupils do not comment upon her remark.

As can be seen, the first four extracts all illustrate how the teacher foregrounds ways in which ‘they’ are *different*. Extract 2 illustrates how ‘they’ do not know how to read and write, and how it can thus be ‘difficult for them to think in other ways’ (lines 11–17). Enlightenment aspects of reading are thus foregrounded, and the pupils are made to see how Asaki is the only one like ‘us’, the only one who knows how to read. Thereby, the teacher also invokes notions of what Street called the ‘great divide’, that is, ideas of major and insurmountable differences between literate and illiterate people, in terms of democratic values and societal advancement (1984; 1987).

Extracts 3 and 4 illustrate how ‘they’ are different in that people ‘really take care of each other’ (Extract 3, line 11) even when there are no close family ties, and also how families ‘mean more in Mozambique’ (Extract 4, lines 13–14). Yet, they ‘stick together’ because of war and poverty. The Others’ are also constructed as homogeneous in these two extracts.

In the conversations, the teachers first ask a series of questions, prompting pupils to see or point out contrasts between ‘them’ and ‘us’. These contrasts

can, be discussed in terms of exoticism (cf. Said, 1978) in that ‘they’ are primarily discussed in terms of differences.

A conspicuous absence is the definition of ‘us’. In all but two of the presented extracts (4 and 8) it is not spelled out whom ‘we’ and whom ‘they’ are (cf. Billig, 1995). In extract 4 and 8 Sweden is compared to Mozambique and Africa, otherwise who ‘us’ are is implicit.

Spelling out a moral agenda in collaborative booktalk

The next four extracts illustrate how the teacher orients towards material resources in the pupils’ everyday lives, contrasting them implicitly and explicitly to the material resources and everyday lives of the protagonists, e.g. the two sisters who are internal war refugees in Mozambique.

Moreover, these extracts show a progression in how the teacher teaches a moral lesson to the pupils – from just invoking difference or implicitly raising the issue of material divides and gratitude (Extracts 5–7) to explicitly spelling out her moral agenda to the pupils (Extract 8).

ELICITING MORAL POINTS

The teachers recurrently used the method of making the pupils spell out what he or she wanted them to see, instead of just telling them. In extracts 5–7, but we find a series of such cases.

Extract 5 ‘But there was something remarkable about this school’

Book club 6A:2 *Secrets in the Fire*, Tape 11:0.11.42

Participants: MARY (teacher), Lena, Gerd, Rut, Siv, Dora, Bo, Paul, Sten

- 1 MARY: Let’s stop a little here at José Maria,
2 he was the priest and worked at the school and
3 then I have to know, what kind of a school has
4 come into the story?
5 Bo: That all children can go to (x).
6 MARY: Uh huh
7 Gerd: ((coughs))
8 Dora: It was free.
9 MARY: It was. But there was something remarkable
10 → about this school. How many pupils
11 were there, did you think about that?
12 Sten: Ninety-two.
13 MARY: And how many was there actually room for?
14 Did you think about that Pierre?
15 Pierre: °No, they had to sit four (or something)°
16 ((poor sound reproduction))
17 MARY: And if they sat four to a desk, how many had
18 they actually thought would fit in this
19 school? (4) Now it’s mathematics all of a
20 (sudden) ((poor sound reproduction))

21 Pierre: (xx)
 22 MARY: Slightly more than twenty children, but here
 23 they had to sit four to a table.
 24 Bo: Twenty-three.
 25 MARY: ((changes the subject))

In lines 2–5, the teacher Mary explicitly asks the pupils about the type of school that the protagonists attend. Initially, two pupils volunteer information about positive aspects of the school: all children may attend (Bo, line 5), and the school is free of charge (Dora, line 8). Then, the teacher points out that there is something ‘remarkable’ about the school (lines 9–11), probing the pupils’ views of what is ‘remarkable’. Remarkable has both positive and negative connotations in Swedish, it can signify extraordinary as well as odd. As can be seen, no one responds right away, and the teacher partially answers her own question by posing a new question ‘how many was there actually room for?’ (line 13). The word ‘actually’ has a contrastive function here: it signals that something is deficient, inappropriate and different.

She then continues to explore what is ‘remarkable’ or as will be seen in our next example, what is ‘different’ (line 6).

Extract 6 ‘Did any of you think about how different...’

Book club 6A:2 *Secrets in the Fire*, Tape 11:0.21.14

Participants: MARY (teacher), Lena, Gerd, Rut, Siv, Dora, Bo, Paul, Sten

1 MARY: When you read this [(Rut, what)] did you think
 2 Gerd: [((coughs))]
 3 MARY: about it? Did you compare it to your situation?
 4 Rut: ((shakes her head slowly))
 5 MARY: Did any of you think about how
 6 differ[ent-]
 7 Rut: [Yes,] that
 8 MARY: You did↑
 9 Rut: >Uh huh< ((nods))
 10 MARY: What did you think then?
 11 Rut: That I’m lucky hehe ((smiles))
 12 MARY: You think so↓
 13 Rut: °>m<°
 14 MARY: (6)

The teacher invites comparisons between the others and the participants themselves: ‘Did you compare it to your situation?’ (line 3) and ‘did any of you think about how different-’ (lines 5–6). After a series of such probes to one of the participants, Rut, (lines 1, 3, and 10), and to the group at large (lines 5–6), the girl ultimately responds, comparing her own situation to that of the fictive characters, concluding ‘that I’m lucky hehe’ (line 11). As can be seen, the teacher successively guides Rut to this answer.

In line, 14, the teacher’s pause serves as a confirmation to what Rut said, because, unlike on other occasions, she does not continue to ask Rut for clarifications even

though Rut has presented but a ‘minimal’ acknowledgment (line 13). In lines 12 and 14, the teacher can be seen to ratify Rut’s response. Rut has indeed spelled out the teacher’s moral point.

In the continued classroom discussion (rendered in Extract 7 below), the teacher again invites a series of explicit comparisons between the Mozambique protagonists and the pupils themselves.

Extract 7 ‘Do we just take things for granted that we get to go to school and that we don’t need to work and help out at home?’

Book club 6A:2 *Secrets in the Fire*, Tape 11:0.21.45

Participants: MARY (teacher), Lena, Gerd, Rut, Siv, Dora, Bo, Paul, Sten

15 ((Bo and Dora are whispering to each other))
16 MARY: When you read about them Bo did you wonder?
17 These girls had to go out and work first a- a-
18 a- and then they could go (1) and (3) go to
19 school.
20 Bo: <M>
21 MARY: You thought that sounded fine?
22 Bo: <Ye:s.>
23 MARY: But you thought that was fine?
24 Bo: Yes.
25 → MARY: If you were put in that situation (.) that you
26 Bo: Uh huh.
27 MARY: had to work first and go to school later
28 Bo: Uh huh.
29 MARY: would that be a good arrangement for you?
30 Bo: But school was in the afternoons.
31 MARY: Yes.
32 Bo: °<Ye’ah> (.)it would be okay.°
33 MARY: So you wouldn’t have anything against working
34 first starting at six a.m. and then going to
35 school at two in the afternoon? (.) I see.
36 Bo: But they still got up that early even if they
37 didn’t go to school.
38 MARY: What does Gerd have to say? You’re smiling a
39 bit when Bo talks like that. Hehe
40 → Gerd: Well right I mean we’ve got it real good if
41 you like think about it.
42 MARY: °U:h huh° (2) What do you think Lena? Do you
43 ever think about this? (1) Do we just take
44 things for granted (.) that we get to go to
45 school and that we don’t need to work and help
46 out at home? (2) How many of you help around
47 the house?

As can be seen, the teacher Mary turns to Bo and, in the form of a suggestive question, she invites his reflections on Mozambique refugee children who need to work before going to school ‘You thought that sounded fine?’ (line 21). Both the

initial ‘but’ and the rephrasing of the question in line 23, ‘But you thought that was fine?’ indicate that the teacher is troubled by Bo’s answer. He responds that there is no real problem in that the school takes place in the afternoon (line 30). The teacher’s laughter in line 39 may indicate that she finds Bo’s answer insufficient. She is apparently not quite happy with his response, and she invites a response from Gerd, who says that ‘well right I mean we’ve got it real good if you like think about it’ (lines 40–41). Like Rut (Extract 6 above), Gerd seems to get the teacher’s point, to spell out what she wants to hear, as it were. In any case, the teacher does not ask any more questions about how the pupils would do and feel if they were to put themselves in the protagonists’ positions.

Yet, the teacher continues to explore the pupils’ own experiences of helping out at home, and without any great success, she invites Lena to discuss whether she just takes things for granted (lines 42–47).

When she did not receive any account from Lena, she then called on the entire group to tell how many of them would help out at home (not included in this example). All but two boys raised their hands. Yet, when called on individually, the pupils seemed to respond somewhat reluctantly, e.g. with giggles and confessing that they do not help out ‘for very long’. And in all cases, there was a series of specific questions about the pupil’s personal life, implicitly contrasting the way that he or she worked to the protagonists of the text, who had to work many hours a day. In this conversation, being the Other thus means working many hours. Conversely, ‘we’ are ungrateful ‘just taking things for granted’.

SPELLING OUT A MORAL AGENDA

Later in the same booktalk session, the teacher explicitly reveals that she has had a specific goal with the conversation. This goal is to make the pupils do what Rut and Gerd just did, that is, to reflect about their own privileged lives. Finally, the teacher thus explicitly spells out her moral agenda (Extract 8).

Extract 8 ‘What was I trying to get at here?’

Group 6A:2 *Secrets in the Fire*, Tape 11:0.25.12 s. 19

Participants: MARY (teacher), Lena, Gerd, Rut, Siv, Dora, Bo, Paul, Sten

- 1 MARY: And then- then you know how hard it is sometimes
 2 to find time to help out, because you do spend
 3 so many hours in school (.) so if we turn the
 4 problem around, maybe they worked as many hours
 5 as you do in school (.) and then they had the
 6 other time to go to school, the time you have to
 7 help out (.) so you see maybe there isn’t so
 8 → much time (2) but what did they think (.) then
 9 about going to school?
 10 Bo?: Good
 11 Dora: Fun
 12 MARY: °Yes° ((said with inhalatory sound))
 13 really(important) (.) and then the question is,

14 what do you think it's like to go to school?
15 Several: Boring hehe
16 MARY: Is it boring to go ((*laughing*)) Isn't there
17 anything [good about school?
18 Dora: [Lots of homework
19 Sten: Maths
20 Dora: No:!
21 Lena: ((*to Sten*)) PE
22 Dora: Handicrafts
23 Frida: Sports
24 Lena: Handicrafts
25 Dora: Yeah and sports
26 ?: Handicrafts
27 Rut: No: sports (.)°Sports and woodwork°
28 MARY: They don't have things like that ((*sports and*
29 woodwork)), what do they get to do when they go
30 to school down there in Africa?
31 Dora: Read and write
32 MARY: Uh huh and the question is whether they always
33 have something to write on, maybe they just have
34 to sit and listen
35 Dora: Yeah, that's what she I mean he said
36 Rut?: It was a girl that said it
37 Sten: Filomena
38 Rut: ((*rolls her eyes and laughs a bit*)) God, do you
39 know all the names?
40 → MARY: What was I trying to get at here? I'm just
41 trying to help you get a feeling for exactly
42 what someone said "We are very lucky" (.) we
43 take a lot for granted things we want (.) and of
44 course we've got them over several ce- well,
45 decades here in Sweden (.) but sometimes maybe
46 we should think about (.) how things are
47 ((*changes the subject*))

In lines 8–9 and 12–14, the teacher poses a series of questions where she implicitly invites contrasting perspectives between the fictive characters who think that it is 'good' and 'fun' to go to school (lines 10 and 11) and the present pupils themselves who claim that it is 'boring' (line 15). In contrast to the ungrateful Swedish children, the fictive characters are cast as gratefully appreciative of their (poor) educational resources. The fictive characters are also diligent enough to work first and then go to school. Thereby, the teacher is implicitly setting up a contrast between the children in the two countries, between those who have and those who have not (the Others).

In line 40, the teacher reveals that she has a specific aim when comparing the pupils' school situation with the fictive characters' school situation: 'What was I trying to get at here?'. Using discursive variation between what is said and what might have been said, as an analytical lever (Potter, 1997: 150ff; 1998: 136f; Potter & Wetherell, 1994),

one can see that the teacher does not want 'us' to learn from the others and make children work a full day before they go to school. Her agenda is to make the pupils reflect upon their own privileged life a bit. In the teacher's concluding turn (lines 40–46), she thus explicitly spells out her moral agenda. In so doing, she explicitly connects to what Gerd has said 'we've got it real good' (Extract 7, line 40), a comment that was elicited after a series of somewhat suggestive questions on the teacher's part.

In line 30, it is also notable that the teacher draws a generic case about the whole continent of Africa from an isolated fictional case – that of the two Mozambique sisters.

Concluding discussion

In the present paper, we are employing a discursive psychological approach in that we take a close look at the sequential organisation of talk. For example, how the teachers structure questions. The present study adds to earlier work within discursive psychology on the function of contrasts in constructing self and other (see Dickerson, 2001 for a presentation of earlier work on contrasts) in that we show how contrasts work in separating 'us' from 'them'.

Stuart Hall (1992) has examined the functions of 'The West' as a concept, an idea in discourse, not a geographical construct. Hall argues that 'the West' helps us categorize, it is a concentrated image of a number of characteristics. The concept 'the West' is also a standard of comparison – it thus explains difference – finally, 'the West' functions as an ideology (Hall, 1992: 277). In the present study, it is not the dichotomy 'the West' against 'the Rest', it is 'us' against 'them'; at times spelled out as 'Sweden' against 'Not-Sweden'; this 'Not-Sweden' is expressed as 'Greece', 'Mozambique', 'down in Africa' or 'Pacific Islands'. When the pupils claim that 'we've got it real good' (like Gerd, Extract 7) or 'I'm lucky' (like Rut, Extract 6), they can be seen to spell out the teacher's underlying moral agenda. In this and other ways that have been demonstrated in our discussion, positive and well-meaning stereotypes are co-constructed. Yet, even if 'we' do not stick together like 'them', we are seen as the lucky ones. Thereby, our very fortunate position implicitly separates us from the Other.

Sampson (1993: 160) has discussed the issue of differences and hierarchy: "Is it possible, then, to have differences which, though socially constructed, are not hierarchically arranged?". In the preceding extracts, the differences between 'us' and 'them' are not only established, the differences are also ranked in hierarchy: it is 'our' situation that is desirable. 'Their' way of life is not something worthy of appreciation. If we use potential variation as an analytic tool (cf. Potter & Wetherell, 1994: 56), it can be seen that 'their life' is a hard lot, not something to strive for.

In his discussion of serviceable others, Sampson (1993: 6) illustrates his analysis with the construction of woman as serviceable to man: "woman as the absent presence; the male gaze and standpoint as the implicit standard and

universal point of view; the unheard voice of woman's own specificity. These aspects also illustrate the manner by which other others have been similarly constructed by dominant Western groups". In the present study, the discursive construction of the non-Swedish others as serviceable others can be seen through the following sets of contrasts: literacy and language skills (Extracts 1–2), ways of 'sticking together' (Extracts 3–4), as well as contrasts in terms of the distribution of material educational resources and work demands on children (Extracts 5–8).

Sampson (1993: 3) has also pointed out the consequence of 'othering' people: it is easier to mistreat one's other than one's equal. On a provocative note, the serviceability of the others in the studied educational context is linked to moral issues: 'their' poor skills, need of sticking together, and limited resources serve as the background against which 'our' fortune is seen in relief. Furthermore, if 'we' recognize this difference of fortunes and pity the Other, 'we' can thereby simultaneously project the self identity of someone who is caring and empathizing.

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APPENDIX

Transcription notations

:	: prolonged syllable
[]	: demarcates overlapping utterances
(.)	: just noticeable pause, i.e. shorter than (0.5)
(2)	: numbers in single parentheses represent pauses in seconds
AMP	: relatively high amplitude
x	: inaudible word
(xx)	: unsure transcription:
<u>care</u>	: sounds marked by emphatic stress are underlined
◦ ◦	: speech in low volume, <i>sotto voce</i>
(())	: comments of the transcriber
> <	: faster speech than surrounding talk
< >	: slower speech than surrounding talk
?	: rising terminal intonation
.	: falling terminal intonation
↑	: rising intonation
↓	: falling intonation
=	: no discernable pause between two speakers' utterances
<i>must</i>	: code switching to other language or language variety
hehe	: laughter

Notes

1. Due to technical mistakes the recordings lack sound in three cases (5A1:3, 5B2:3 and 6A1:3). In all, 21 book sessions were transcribed.
2. Eeds and Wells (1989) also call their study naturalistic, yet they initiated the analysed literature study groups themselves and selected the teachers in training to lead the discussions. Short (1992) refers to her own study as naturalistic, yet she conducted her studies as an active co-learner, teacher and researcher.
3. Since the focus in the present study is talk about *literature*, the importance of Potter and Wetherell's contribution to research on interpretative practices and social interaction in all other domains will not be accounted for fully in the present paper.