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Pictures that tell stories – visual arts education in secondary school

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This paper presents an on-going research project that study the implementation of a particular “core content” in the Swedish syllabus for visual art (Bild) in secondary school: the students are suppose to produce narrative pictures, or pictures that tell stories, about their own experiences and opinions. This seemingly simple content and knowledge aim is actually a complex one, combining several aims in the subject. The students need knowledge of different techniques and materials, as well as compositional knowledge. They also need a basic understanding of visual communication and the characteristics of different kind of pictures and genres. The emphasis on students’ own experiences and opinions, which is expressed in the syllabus, contributes to yet another level of complexity. Previous studies have on one hand highlighted the potential to address issues on gender, identity, ethnicity etcetera in the subject, but on the other hand research have also identified a link between an individual-centered discourse in the subject and gender-specific expressions; meaning that when students are asked to relate to, or express, their own identity in their art work, the pictures tend to become more gender stereotypical. An assumption is that working with narrative pictures in an educational setting accentuates values in relation to knowledge, democracy, subjectification and socialization. The aim of my thesis is therefore to examine how visual arts education in secondary school creates conditions for narrative picture production, and which norms and values that thereby are constructed and reproduced.