Different kinds of meetings are natural for every pupil and teacher in schools in Sweden as well as other countries around the world. These may be meetings at a distance or close encounters. Different kinds of stories have a leading role in meetings between people. Lesnick (2006) describes and discusses pupils’ meetings with fictitious people and events through reading literature in teaching. She thinks that these encounters with literature may enable pupils to train their ability for empathy and for ethical considerations. Fictitious meetings and stories are the focus of Lesnick’s study, but it follows that the intentions of these meetings might instead be transferred to real meetings between living people in a classroom.

According to Lesnick (ibid), stories can play an important role in pupils’ development of different abilities. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) also emphasise the importance of stories in teaching. They mean that experiences grow out of other people’s experiences, and that these are both personal and social. People must be understood both as individuals and as parts of a social context. A pupil’s individual learning takes place in a context, for example in a school (ibid). Stroobants (2005) and Clandinin et al. consider that a story is often based on life experiences and that by narrating, writing and/or listening to different experiences of life, people can learn a great deal about themselves and about other people. Stroobants (2005) also claims that reflection plays an important role in making development possible in this narration, writing and/or listening. Ghaye and Ghaye (1998) suggest that reflection can be made before, during and/or after a situation or process, for example. Through written reflection, a person can step back, think about and rethink things (Appelbee, 1984). This creative process of questioning oneself and, for example, events and activities in a school may lead to individual learning for a person and to changes in schools (Starratt, 1994; Ghaye & Ghaye, 1998). Hammond (2002) believes that the effects of learning depend on the educational setting and the learning experiences that take place. In an educational setting that encourages co-operation and sharing, it is more likely to lead to a positive psychosocial culture and well-being among pupils and teachers. This chapter is about meetings with other people, stories, reflection and learning experiences from a Swedish compulsory nine-year school. The chapter is partly a revised version of the article “Ethical learning through meetings with Others” published in the International Journal of Learning, vol. 14, no. 5, 2007.

Learning meetings – an example from the world of schools

A teacher's mission in the Swedish school system is multifaceted – one task, for example, is to help pupils to learn subject knowledge and another is to encourage and support pupils in developing an ethical attitude to people around them. The curriculum for Swedish compulsory schools (Ipo, 94) emphasises that ethics should permeate all education (Ministry of Education, 1994), which may sometimes be easier said than done. What could teachers do to unite these two tasks in one whole? The course that is described and discussed in this chapter is called “Ung miter...” (“Young people meet...”) and may be seen as a concrete example of how an ethical attitude can permeate teaching in compulsory schools. A teacher initiated, planned and implemented this course, where the pupils and the teacher had an opportunity to meet people with different life experiences: a homosexual, a refugee and a disabled person. The objective of the course was that the pupils should train their empathic ability and that through these meetings they should develop as human beings and learn from life, for life. As a postgraduate student I took part in the course by being in the classroom and by reading the pupils’ and the teacher’s written reflections in connection with the course. The pupils’ and the teacher’s experiences were documented through their own reflective journals, my field notes and electronic communication between the teacher and myself. Each visit by the guests was divided into three parts. The first part consisted of a question and reflection period before the guest entered the classroom. The second part was the actual visit for the day. The different guests told their life stories for about an hour, after which the pupils and the teacher could ask them questions. In the third part the teacher gave the pupils time for reflection after the visit. Each visit was video recorded so that the pupils and the teacher would be able to go back to the film in order to reflect on what had taken place during the course.

Reflective journals

Every pupil was given a notebook and instructions on how to write reflective journals. As headings on each double-page spread in the book, they wrote “Action” on the left-hand side and “Reflection” on the right-hand side (see Figure 1). Under
“Action” they wrote down the activities that took place in connection with the visit to the classroom, and under “Re-
flexion” they wrote down thoughts, feelings and questions that had arisen before, during and after each visit. After each lesson the teacher collected the reflective journals and gave continuous written responses to what the pupils had written in their books. She then returned the books at the beginning the next lesson, giving the pupils time to make comments on and respond to her reflections and questions in the re-
flexive journals. In this way there was a constantly ongoing dialogue between the pupils and the teacher. The teacher also kept these “double logs” during the course. An example follows of what a pupil wrote in the reflective journal during and after the first lesson, which served as an introduction to the course. On that occasion the content and the organisation of the course were presented, and the pupils also had an oppor-
tunity to start practising writing a reflective journal.

The pupils’ and the teacher’s experiences of the meetings

Analysis of the empirical data resulted in a main theme – learning from the Other. My understanding of the pupils’ and the teacher’s experiences is presented and discussed in terms of this theme with its two aspects – learning different kinds of knowledge, values and skills through the whole body, and appreciating one another and what we do together.

Learning from the other

The pupils and the teacher learned from the Other[1] in the meetings in the classroom (see Figure 2). This course provided opportunities for learning from each other in different relations-
ships, for example between pupil and pupil, between pu-
upil and teacher, between pupil and visitor and between teach-
er and visitor. Through Karen’s dialogue both in the classroom and in the pupils’ reflective journals, she encouraged them to challenge their own learning. Noddings (2006) believes that this, making pupils reflect on what, how and why they are learning, is something that a teacher should do in order for the pupils’ learning and critical thinking to develop. Karen asked the children questions that they were to reflect on and give answers to. Examples of such questions are:

- “What was the most important thing you learned?”
- “Are you prejudiced? Can you talk openly about your prejudices with your friends?”
- “When do you think you learn the most and the least?”
- “Do you feel that what you learned last Wednesday will be useful to you later on?”
- “As a teacher I often find it difficult to bring this (sensitive subject) into teaching in a natural way. Do you have any suggestions about what I, as a teacher, could do?”

This pupil was reflecting here on something that she seemed not to have thought very much about before – that alcohol might be the cause of many of the accidents that occur in society. Another pupil wrote:

- “I have learnt that disabled people perhaps live a little differently, but except for a few things they are just like everybody else”

This quotation shows that, through meeting the disabled man, the pupil had gained important knowledge that is likely to influence her ideas and actions the next time she meets a disabled person. The pupils also showed that they were thinking further about their new knowledge:

- “I also discovered that I too am very prejudiced, more than I had thought.”
- “The new people we are going to meet will experience our new way of treating people, which I think is more humble and less prejudiced!”

In this case the pupil demonstrated awareness of what she had learnt from the disabled man. Because of his situation – still being partially paralysed – it might be natural to feel pity for him, but the pupil had thought a bit further, as she stated that this would not help him any further. There are ways of helping people with problems other than feeling pity for them.

In the teacher’s comments in the pupils’ reflective journals, she expressed a feeling of having learned a great deal from both the visitors and the pupils when writing (in the pupils’ reflective journals):

- “It is easy to feel pity for people, and it might be nice for them for a while, but you don’t help anyone by pitying them, so it is better to try to help them to get better”

1 I use the capital O because it means others in a specific sense. The Other is viewed as a subject and an embodied individual. For further reading on this, see Levinas (1969).
Karen stated that the knowledge gained from this course through meetings with both the visitors and the pupils would influence her treatment of people in the future. This quotation shows that experience develops out of reflecting on encounters with both consensual and other people, which Clad-
min and Connolly (2008) emphasise.

Learning different kinds of knowledge, values and skills through the whole body

When the children and the teacher learned from each other, they also stated that in these meetings they learned different kinds of knowledge, values and skills. They learned this by means of their whole bodies, not merely through their reasoning. The pupils expressed a view to the effect that the course had taught them a great deal of new knowledge about different lifestyles and the conditions of different people in the world.

“We have learnt what it may be like to come to another country, but I still think that nobody can understand it... We will learn more from somebody who has been in an accident or something like that than if you [the teacher] stand in front of us and tell us it” (Jenny, reflective journal).

These meetings had probably an impact on the pupils’ own lives, since they made associations with their own lives and experiences based on the guests’ stories. One of the guests, the disabled person, told them that he had been in an accident because he had been too drunk and walked into the middle of the road when a car ran over him. This influenced the pupils, one of whom wrote:

“I learn to reflect on things after each meeting. Like this time, that you should be careful about alcohol and that you should be happy/careful with what you have got” (Sara, reflective journal).

One of the other children associated what the disabled man had told them with her own life and how she wanted to treat other people:

“I think a lot about not treating disabled people, for example, differ-
dently from other people. When I meet Kristina in the ninth grade I will talk to her. She is nice although she is disabled” (Anna, reflective journal).

Noddings (2006) stresses that associations with a person’s own life and interest in something are two important factors in a learning process. She believes that when we are genuinely interested, we will listen and read attentively. The children demonstrated evidence of this genuine interest in the visitors’ life stories through their active and reflective listening.

The pupils stated above that they had learnt new knowl-
edge through meetings with others, but they also thought that they had acquired deeper knowledge. One pupil wrote:

“It would be fun to find answers to all the questions, because there are some things you can’t guess... I mean for example coming out and daring to tell your parents, friends and people around you that you are homosexual. Hearing people say what it might be like is pretty good, you learn a lot, and so on. I already knew some things, but this was sort of deeper, and you can enter into other people’s feelings and lives” (Caroline, reflective journal).

This pupil stated that she already had some knowledge of the subjects dealt with by the visitors in the classroom, but also that this knowledge might be more superficial. Through “face-to-face encounters” with people with varying life experiences, the knowledge was embodied and therefore influ-
enced her in more profound ways. It may be assumed that the deeper learning in this case might have to do with this pupil learning in an emotional way. The teacher also discovered the importance of acquiring knowledge through feelings, which she described in the following way:

“I acquired knowledge that I can feel in my stomach and heart af-
ter our meetings... This knowledge was easy to acquire, interesting to share, and I will probably remember this better than if I had read it in a book” (Karen, in pupils’ reflective journals).

Learning not only through reason but also through feel-
ings may lead to a deeper understanding of something and hence also to opportunities for real learning. Merleau-Ponty (1996) emphasises this when pointing out the importance of the body in a learning process. We learn and experience through our whole bodies, because body and soul are closely interwoven with each other. Feelings in the stomach and the heart are both manifestations of learning in the teacher’s example. The children also showed that they were learning through emotions and feeling empathy for the visitors:

“The most important thing I learned was probably to see things a little from his perspective... I really feel pity for him; it’s sad, sad. I wouldn’t like to experience anything like that... I was really moved by his story” (Jenny, reflective journal).

Noddings (2006, 24) argues that the source of information is important in a learning process and that if the children experience a “strong affective response” to the person giving the information, they will tend to remember the knowledge better.

Through the meetings in the classroom, Karen learned a great deal about herself as a teacher by reading my field notes from the course. She wrote in an e-mail to me:

“When I read your reflection, I could see myself as a teacher with other eyes. I borrowed your glasses!... I regard your participation in this pupil project as a great benefit! I have already learned quite a lot and have a great deal to think about!” (Karen, e-mail to Ulfrika).

Appreciating one another and what we do together

Another important aspect of learning from one another is that this course provided moments when the pupils and the teacher could appreciate one another and their respective ac-

tivities. In Karen’s comments in the pupils’ reflective journals, she appreciated, confirmed and encouraged them with her words. She wrote for example:

“This business about reflective journals is not so special, really; you try to write a few lines about what you are thinking, feeling/wonder-
ding about. Don’t you have to worry about it? You will get used to it”.

“Thank you for letting me share your reflections.”

“It would be interesting to hear what you think.”

“I have noticed that you like people, so this [course] suits you well. Have you considered your future choice of occupation?”

“I agree with you – that you learn more when people with experi-
ces of their own tell their stories themselves” (Karen, in pupils reflective journals).

I assume that the pupils appreciated reading all these sen-
tences and that hopefully this resulted in their developing even further. Confirmation is an important part of ethical and moral education in schools, as Noddings (2006) points out. She claims that really significant confirmation can only be achieved in a relationship, in this case in a relationship be-
tween the teacher and the pupils. The teacher must know the pupils well enough to be able to give confirmation in a cred-
ible way that will strengthen them. Karen also encouraged the pupils to change when writing for example, “How can we be less prejudiced! Have you got any suggestions?” The teacher here gave the pupils an opportunity to think for themselves and make their own suggestions. This shows that Karen also encouraged the pupils to exert influence and take responsi-
bility on their own. Karen stated that she valued the pupils as individuals and that she was really trying to see them and treat them as equals. This may also be said to be an expression of care for and trust in them. These ideas are closely linked to a concept in organisations, appreciative inquiry, which focuses on what we want to achieve in the world, rather than what we want more of (Cooperrider and Whitney, 2005).

“I (Appreciative inquiry) deliberately seek to discover people’s excep-
tionality – their unique gifts, strengths, and passions… And it is based on principles of equality of voice – everyone is asked to speak about their vision of the true, the good, and the possible” (Cooperrider, 2001, 12).

These ideas of development could also be applied in a con-
scious way in schools, since they fit well with the curricula for pre-primary schools and compulsory schools.

The idea of making a documentary film of these meetings may also make it possible for the teacher and the pupils to ap-
preciate what happened in the classroom, as the learning ex-
periences will be saved audiovisually for the future. The film is a lasting record, so the pupils and the teacher will be able to watch it many times afterwards and reflect on the meetings. In addition to paying attention to and appreciating events presented in a visual way, as films or digital photos, can also provide opportunities for reflecting on a practice and on learning from one another (Lennon, 2007). Learning from one another can take place for example between a teacher and pupils, as in this case, but it can also include other people. The pupils and the teacher can for example decide to show the film to other people in the school, so that they can also share the body of experience in these meetings and learn something new. One pupil also had this idea of the pu-
plets sharing their experiences with others in the school. She reflected on the importance of meeting different people that they might not normally meet. She wrote:

“I think people should talk more about things like this [homo-
exuality, immigration and disability] in the rest of the school” (Jenny, reflective journal).

In this quotation she stressed the importance of more pu-
pils in the school having an opportunity to talk about these issues, which she found important. This clearly shows that she had really learned a lot from the different visitors, and that she also wanted the knowledge she had gained to benefit other pupils.

Karen stated that they would tend to remember the information, they will tend to remember the knowledge better.
The twofold task becomes one

As mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, a teacher’s task is, among other things, to promote children’s learning, but at the same time the importance of ethics in schools and pre-primary schools is emphasised. The question is then how these two tasks can be fused into one, so that neither of them is overshadowed by the other. The first task may be said to be more about factual and comprehension knowledge, while the second is perhaps more about values, skills and behaviours towards other people. There are no sharp distinctions between these two tasks, which might cause problems if the two are too strictly separated. The consequence might be that teachers place too much emphasis either on subject knowledge or on fostering and training pupils in an ethical attitude to the people around them. According to the curricula for pre-primary school and compulsory school (Lpög 96; Lpö6 98), the two tasks should instead form a whole, as they state for example that ethics should permeate pre-primary schools and schools (Ministry of Education, 1994-1998). This does not imply, however, that the learning of, for example, a particular subject should be decreased — on the contrary, there should be no competition between the “subject task” and the “ethics task”. My interpretation is that the two tasks were fused in the “Young people meet...” course into a unit that might be called ethical learning. This might imply that the participants in the course developed different abilities and hopefully acquired new knowledge and deepened the knowledge they already possessed. They probably also learned more about values and behaviours towards other people through these meetings. When a learning process, in a conscious manner, also deals with issues to do with our ethical attitude to others, this is ethical learning, as I see it. In this concept, ethics is about something inherent in every human relationship (Lévinas, 1969) and it is closely linked to Noddings’ (2002) emphasis on ethics being a relational phenomenon and a matter of natural care for somebody else. This might imply that ethics should be seen as an underlying basis of all activities in pre-primary schools and schools — which might, for example, consist of teachers acting in an ethical manner when showing care for the children, by attempting to adapt their teaching to the pupils’ wishes, needs and abilities. The concept of ethical learning indicates that both ethics and learning are in focus and that together they may, in the best-case scenario, form a unit.

When ethics and learning form the unit of ethical learning, I can see that learning from the Other is a basis for this, and I found many things that exemplify learning from others in the classroom meetings described in this chapter. The objective of the course was that the pupils should develop their empathic ability and develop as human beings, hence learning from life, for life. A general feature of the pupils’ and the teachers’ reflections in the reflective journals is that they learned a great deal from the visitors and that they will benefit from this in life, both now and in the future. In the learning encounter with the Other, it is important for the relationships to be based on confidence, trust and attention to one another (Bergmark & Alerby, 2008). Pupils emphasise the importance of healthy relationships at school. In order for real learning to take place, it is crucial for the pupils to have confidence in and be seen by their teacher and their classmates (ibid). The importance of good relationships in an educational setting is also emphasised by Kosterinus and Ohrling (2006), when they point out that the children in their study experienced increased well-being in relationships of togetherness, love and support. The children developed ‘positive health experiences’ (ibid, 231). Lévinas (1969) further describes learning from the Other as openness to the Other, which means both openness to the Other’s abilities and being a learning human being. When two subjects, you and I, have a relationship to each other, there will be one opportunity for this openness and for learning from each other.

...it is therefore to receive from the Other beyond the capacity of the I... this also means: to be taught. The relation with the Other, or Conversation is... an ethical relation...this... Teaching is not reducible to maieutics; it comes from the exterior and brings me more than I contain.”

(Lévinas, 1969, 51.)

This quotation underlines that when we learn from each other, we are in an ethical relationship and that as individuals we will gain more if we have an open attitude and learn from each other than if we merely learn in isolation from other people (see Figure 3). Learning is interaction. We learn individually as well, of course — but learning through meetings with the Other in the classroom are perhaps more successful and may hopefully lead to a deeper understanding of what we learn, to lifelong learning in which we develop as human beings and at the same time enhance our well-being.