Religious Education Politics, the State, and Society

Edited by

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Background: religious education and diversity

Sweden can be characterized as one of the most secularized countries in the world (Esmer / Pettersson 2007; Pettersson / Esmer 2005). A greater religious and cultural diversity has appeared in recent years, partly due to global migration. Some researchers speak of this development as an increased visibility of religion (Bäckström et al. 2011). They claim that in several Western societies this increased visibility creates concern and unease, since religion was considered to belong to the private sphere for a significant period of time. Such a taken-for-granted assumption has been questioned in recent times (Taylor 2007; Casanova 1994). The relation between state and religion in a particular society can be studied in a number of contexts. The fact that education provides a particularly rich field for uncovering this relation is evident in the Swedish case.

Research in both Religious Education (RE) and in policymaking, at a European as well as a national level claims that RE is needed to enhance intercultural understanding (Jackson 2007). In Sweden, two recent reports on young peoples' attitudes can be said to add support to such a line of argument. These reports actually demonstrated that religious ignorance among upper secondary pupils correlated with prejudicial attitudes. More specifically the reports suggested that lack of knowledge about religion may lead to anti-Semitic and Islamophobic attitudes (Löwander / Lange 2011; National Agency for Education 2011b).

The increasing religious and cultural pluralism in Europe is conceived as a potential social problem and a challenge to social cohesion for international policymakers. Researchers on RE (Jackson 2007; Weisse 2011) and institutions like the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE 2007) argue that RE may contribute one of the solutions, in that increased knowledge about religions and worldviews can promote intercultural understanding. Such a political starting point can be problematized in several ways. First, the perception of religious and cultural pluralism as something problematic seems to assume that religious and cultural homogeneity existed previously. Such a writing of history can indeed be questioned. Even though there were established or state churches, along with limitations regarding

freedom of religion or even religious persecution, in several Western European countries as late as in the 19th century, it is problematic to construe religious and cultural pluralism as a novelty and as a social problem. Exchanging it with the label religious and cultural *diversity* is one way of recognizing the complexities hidden here.[1] Second, the attribution of this role to RE in the said policy recommendations seems to stem from the assumption that more knowledge leads to greater understanding. While this may very well be the case, such a linear relation between knowledge and increased understanding is in no way self-evident. Could it not be that a higher degree of knowledge about a certain religion can make the pupil more critical of specific traits in this religion rather than sympathetic? Third, it needs to be noted that while the role of RE in the said policy recommendations is of specific interest to this volume, such normative stances are not restricted to the subject of RE. Pluralism, or diversity can be observed as one of the core components in general civic education in the school systems in many Western European countries (Jackson et al. 2008). In other words, there is a prevalent notion that more knowledge, in this case about religion, should lead to further understanding. In the same way, more knowledge about history, art, etcetera would lead to further understanding. Such a notion is closely connected with the concept of *Bildung* discussed elsewhere in this volume. However, it is necessary to critically examine this way of conceiving education. If religious and cultural pluralism is seen as a problem that needs to be tackled and if it is considered to be the task of the schools to deal with this problem, then this raises questions about who is being challenged by the religious and cultural diversity? Who are the 'we', and who are 'we' going to learn to 'understand' by having RE? Does this lead to religion being constructed as the 'other', in Edward Said's terminology (Said 1978)? Finally the notion of RE as an instrument for the promotion of intercultural understanding in policy documents presupposes that in order to understand itself as secular, the modern Swedish society constructs the 'other' as religious, and this 'other' must be subjected to understanding (cf. Lövheim / Axner 2011).

The importance of investigating schools if one wants to understand how a society deals with religion is illustrated by the fact that education shapes many people's images of what religion is or can be, in contrast to socialization in family or religious institutions. A recent study demonstrated that specifically among young Swedes, mass media and school are the key sources of information about religious issues (Sjöborg 2012a). This is particularly true among the vast majority of young Swedes who have no personal regular involvement with organized religion.

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[1]   For a fuller discussion of this, see von Brömssen (2003); von Brömssen / Olgaç (2010).

In this chapter I will look more closely at the Swedish case by examining first the intentions of the national curricula of RE in relation to the contemporary societal situation, which are binding for both state and private schools. The attention will then shift to the attitudes towards religious diversity among the pupils. These attitudes are first of all considered through a questionnaire on pupils' attitudes towards RE and religious and cultural diversity and secondly, by means of focus group interviews with pupils on their views of religion in school and society. The aim is to find out whether there is a relationship between the attitudes towards RE on one side, and religious and cultural diversity and variables such as cultural tradition, foreign background or religiosity on the other. In the concluding discussion, the focus lies on the relation between the official aims and intentions pursued with RE and the pupils' attitudes towards RE and religious and cultural diversity.

Religion in Swedish schools

In order to paint the picture of religion in Swedish schools, it is necessary to draw attention to the provisions of the Swedish Education Act as well as the general clauses in the introductory chapters of the national curriculum. Here, the emphasis lies on objectivity, meaning the neutrality and the non-confessional status of education in Sweden, and that all education 'shall be based on science and proven experience' (Education Act 2010). These statutes also stress that parents shall be able to send their children to school 'confident that they are not influenced in any particular ideological direction'. Even though confessional schools are allowed according to the Act, they are fairly uncommon; only 0.6 percent of pupils attend confessional schools (National Agency for Education 2011a). According the Education Act, *teaching* cannot be confessional and if there are confessional activities at a confessional school, they must be voluntary. But religion is also noticeable in the state and private non-confessional schools and here I would like to give two examples. The first example concerns public discussions in recent years as to whether the general school assembly which closes the school year may be held in a church. This is often the case, especially in primary schools. The Swedish Schools Inspectorate has ruled it to be allowable, as long as the school assembly held in a religious room is carefully directed by the school, aimed at fostering school comradeship, tradition and inclusion, and that the act is voluntary (Swedish Schools Inspectorate 2010). The second example concerns the so-called 'core values' of the educational system. The Education Act states that schooling needs to be shaped according to fundamental democratic values and "human rights such as inviolability of human life, freedom and integrity of the individual,

gender equality and solidarity between people." Moreover, it instructs that all who work in schools shall enhance human rights and actively counteract all kinds of degrading treatment. It is not religion, but rather certain human rights arguments that are central in the discussions on core values. These two examples illustrate that religion is often thought of as something which is completely separated from what is constructed as a secular school. However, it is also clear from these examples that the understanding in these documents of the Swedish school system as strictly neutral with regard to religion can be questioned. First, a position of strict separation between religion and secular school is in no way equal to ideological neutrality, and what counts as religion or not, is a highly delicate matter as the example of the debate on ceremonies ending the school year showed. Second, the same example also points to some cases where the said neutrality becomes tainted by the fact that there are some aspects of religion that are ruled out, while others are retained as 'culture' and thus incorporated into what is seen as a secular school. One of these aspects concerns the distinction of private/public. In debates and rulings it is understood that the individual integrity of the pupil is not infringed upon by being in a church building with other classmates or singing a Christmas carol, but that it is impinged by reading the Lord's Prayer or singing a Christian hymn. As it happens, some traditional Christmas carols are in fact Christian hymns. The issues raised in these discussions have concerned not only end of year ceremonies, but also Christmas nativity shows and traditional crafts around Christian holidays.

Another aspect of religion in the Swedish school system is of course subjects and courses devoted to religion. Since public education was established in Sweden during the 19th century, 'Christianity' (kristendomskunskap) has been a central subject and closely related to the Lutheran state church. Functional differentiation along with urbanization, industrialization and pluralisation led to increasing demands for change. In 1919 the subject 'Christianity' was retained, but altered in favour of a nondenominational subject aimed at conferring Christian ethics and knowledge of biblical stories, motivated by civic education arguments (Marklund 2006; Löfstedt 2011c). Gradually, 'Christianity' came to include brief information about other world religions, at least for the higher levels of education. Not until the Freedom of Religion Act in 1951 was it possible to leave the Church of Sweden, and up until 1958 bishops were inspectors of the upper secondary schools (gymnasium) (Gustafsson 2000). The ideological and philosophical debates were harsh in the 1950s, and once again the subject 'Christianity' was questioned. Morning prayers were abolished and all official links between the church and the school system were removed. However, many practices lived on in local settings. With the reforms in the 1960s, both the

primary school and the lower and upper secondary school had gained a new subject, Religious Education (religionskunskap), which in primary school became a part of the domain of social studies with civics, history and geography. Instead of instruction in a specific religious tradition, the new subject gave orientation about a range of religions, mainly focussing on the so called world religions, but also ethical and existential issues. Using a classic typology, this was a shift from learning *into*, to learning *about* religion (Löfstedt 2011c; Grimmitt 1973).

In the Swedish discussion on RE during the 1960s, the concept of existential issues became central. It can be seen as an argument in favour of retaining RE as a school subject in a secularized society undergoing rapid social change. Hartman's notion along with his empirical studies of children's existential questions, also tied in closely with the central pedagogical discourse of the time (Hartman 1986). Since the 1960s 'existential issues' has been an integral part of the syllabus both in primary and secondary schools. The notion of existential issues has also been central to Swedish studies of students' attitudes towards RE (Skolöverstyrelsen 1974; Skolöverstyrelsen 1980; Sjödin 1995; Sjöborg 2012b). In a report from 1980 the National Board of Education concluded that even though students found it intriguing to discuss existential issues, they were unable to make the connections between these issues and the world religions studied in RE, a result which was seen as a shortcoming in relation to the stipulated aims in the curriculum (Skolöverstyrelsen 1980). Some years later Sjödin noted that existential issues related to interpersonal relations were seen as far more topical by pupils than existential issues related to established elements of Christianity (Sjödin 1995). A recent study demonstrated a clear difference between religious and nonreligious pupils as to their interest in existential issues (Sjöborg 2012b).

A national evaluation report highlighted the fact that RE is a subject where far from all teachers have received formal training (National Agency for Education 2004). This is partly due to the circumstance that the subject, in primary school, was a part of the domain of social studies for some time. National evaluations have also pointed out that pupils are not given the opportunity to get involved in discussions about religion as much as they would like to, or as much as the curriculum stipulates (Jönsson and Liljefors Persson 2006). Researchers have indicated that textbooks in the subject are often tainted with a Western bias (Härenstam 2000; Otterbeck 2005), and that teachers fail to make use of the culturally diverse situation in the classroom and in society in general (von Brömssen 2003; von Brömssen / Olgaç 2010; Jönsson / Liljefors Persson 2006). Furthermore, researchers problematize that the teaching concerning ethical issues does not fulfil its aims (Löfstedt 2011a; Löfstedt 2011b; Jönsson / Liljefors Persson 2006).

High intentions

According to the national curriculum, the subject of RE pursues central aims, both in primary and secondary school. Here I will focus on the curriculum for the upper secondary school, because it is at this school level that I studied pupils' attitudes as will be discussed later on in this chapter. The current curriculum for the upper secondary school stipulates that the aim of the subject of RE is that the "pupils widen, deepen and develop their knowledge about religions, worldviews and ethical models and different interpretations of these" (National Agency for Education 2011b). Noticeable here is the emphasis on religions (which in other sections is referred to as world religions and often includes Old Norse religion and Sámi religion), and worldviews (such as new secularism, existentialism, ecosophy etc.), along with ethical models. However, of specific interest here is the following passage which concerns one sentence that was added by the government late in the political process: "Knowledge about and understanding of Christianity and its traditions is particularly important as this tradition has provided the value foundations for the Swedish society." Such a sentence reflects a politico-cultural discourse related to cultural heritage, which has been present in two rounds of revisions of national curricula made by non-social democratic [Conservative-Liberal] governments (in 1994 and 2011, respectively)[2]. Keeping these aims in mind, they are combined with statements like this:

> The teaching shall start out from a view of society characterised by openness regarding lifestyles, attitudes to life and differences among people and give the pupils the opportunity to develop a readiness to understand and live in a society characterised by diversity. The pupils are to be given the opportunity to discuss how the relation between religion and science can be interpreted and seen, for instance regarding issues such as creation and evolution. The teaching shall lead to the pupils developing knowledge about how peoples' moral attitudes can be motivated by religions and worldviews. They should be given opportunities to reflect over and analyse peoples' values and beliefs and thereby develop respect and understanding for different ways of thinking and forming a life. The teaching should also give the pupils the opportunity to analyse and evaluate how religion can be related to, for instance, ethnicity, gender, sexuality and socioeconomic background. (National Agency for Education 2011d)

As was previously discussed, there is a normative aspect in the curriculum for RE: This is clear regarding both the previous as well as the new syllabus for the subject (National Agency for Education 2011c). According to the latter, RE "provides advanced knowledge, as well as greater understanding

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[2]   It should also be noted that the religio-cultural-political addendum of Christianity in the sections 'aims' and 'central contents' is *not* reflected in the section about the marking criteria, where the expression 'world religions and worldviews' is used.

of people with different religions and views of life". In the block quote above, the specific contribution of the subject of RE is outlined in a detailed manner. Indeed, the subject's aim can be seen as a part of civic education or *Bildung*, where the goal of greater understanding is seen as central. The quoted passage illustrates the centrality of analysis of, and reflection around, the relations between values and beliefs on the one hand, and the people and institutions such as groups and societies on the other. The understanding is thought to arise from the analysis and reflection of values and beliefs. This reflects an instrumental view of RE related to diversity in society, which was discussed above. In other words, this overview shows that there are high expectations from society concerning RE. It is therefore of interest to turn to the pupils and listen to their views.

RE and society – the pupils' perspective

A comparative European study among pupils of RE in seven countries (Weisse 2010; 2011) observed significant differences between pupils who have no ties to organized religion and pupils with such connections. For the former group, school emerged as the main forum for learning about religion and the religious ideas of other students. For the latter group, the pupils are given the opportunity to come into contact with other religions through school. Furthermore, the REDCo study revealed that while there are plenty of prejudices towards other religions among the respondents, many of them also stated that they are ready to engage in dialogue with others out of curiosity and interest. However, there are indications that such a dialogue is difficult to attain. Case studies from Germany (Jozsa et al. 2009) and Norway (Skeie / von der Lippe 2009) showed that the religiosity of the pupils contributed to different attitudes towards RE. Also Swedish studies have recently paid attention to this. In a qualitative study (von Brömssen 2003) carried out in one school in a culturally diverse urban setting, it was found that among students with foreign background, religion was seen as a resource for a person's identity, even though pupils (aged 14-15) often tended to negotiate between different conceptions of what a 'proper' Muslim, Buddhist, etc. would be. The students born in Sweden of Swedish parents were, according to von Brömssen, more inclined to take a position against religion: 'as I am Swedish, I am not religious'. Her interviews demonstrated that religion in school is constructed as something clearly connected with 'the Other.' In a recent article (Sjöborg 2012b) I showed that this is also valid among upper secondary pupils (age 18-19), and in a nationally representative sample (n=1850). If there are salient divergent patterns between religious and non-religious pupils, this suggests

that the secularized society in Sweden creates a certain climate for RE which is necessary to take into consideration.

My questionnaire among upper secondary pupils in Sweden included several items of interest to this chapter. The study was conducted in 2009-2010 among a representative sample of municipalities and 1850 pupils participated in the survey. The study also contained a set of focus group interviews, which are used to illustrate the quantitative data to cast a light on the pupils' relation to religion in RE. Reporting some findings from the survey, I will focus on two aspects: attitudes towards RE and attitudes towards religious and cultural diversity within society. Unless otherwise noted, all differences mentioned are statistically significant to at least a level of .05. The abbreviation 'ns' means that the independent variable does not have any significant effect on the examined question or statement.

Table 1 shows the results for five statements regarding attitudes towards RE. The first column ('all') shows the frequencies for all responding pupils. Between 41.4 and 44.7% agreed that RE increases understanding between people, helps pupils to make up their own minds as to what they believe and gives knowledge for a better understanding of society. 57.3% of all pupils said they think that RE should cover all religions equally, while 16.7% stated RE should mostly be concerned with Christianity. Columns 2-7 show comparisons for the same questions between different subgroups. While there are interesting, though minor differences between the subgroups of foreign or Swedish background, or Muslim and Christian tradition respectively, the most important differences in table 1 are found in column 6 and 7. With the exception of Muslim pupils disagreeing with the statement that RE should be mainly concerned with Christianity, it was religiosity that brought out the most salient differences in relation to the statements examined in table 1. 64.6% of the religious pupils believed that RE increases understanding between people, while only 39.3% of the nonreligious pupils agreed with this statement. 56.4% of the religious pupils said RE helps them make up their own mind what to believe, while only 37.3% of the nonreligious agreed here. 60.6% of the religious pupils said RE helps them better understand society, compared to 37.2% of the nonreligious pupils. This indicates that the religious pupils appreciated many of the key features of RE, which is interesting in relation to the high intentions of the subject discussed above. The main result from table 1 is that religiosity, rather than ethnic background or cultural tradition, brings about different attitudes towards RE. This also pertains to the statement on greater understanding between people, which I showed was one of the main goals of RE. This result is consistent with the findings mentioned above (Sjöborg 2012b; Jozsa et al. 2009; Skeie / von der Lippe 2009).

Table 1. Attitudes towards Religious Education in relation to ethnic background, cultural background and religiosity[3]. Per cent that agree (4-5 on a 5-step scale).

	All	Foreign background	Swedish background	Muslim tradition	Christian tradition	Non-religious	Religious
	n=1850	n=328	n=1417	n=158	n=837	n=1473	n=377
RE increases understanding between people	44.7	53.0	43.1	53.1	51.3	39.3	64.6
RE helps me to make up my own mind	41.4	52.3	38.9	46.6	49.5	37.3	56.4
RE gives me knowledge to better understand society	42.1	49.8	40.4	49.7	48.1	37.2	60.6
RE should mostly be concerned with Christianity	16.7	21.0	15.8	11.0	24.0	14.6	24.4
RE should cover all religions just as much	57.3	70.0	54.9	68.4	58.1$^{\mathrm{ns}}$	52.9	73.7

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3   *Ethnic background:* By foreign background is meant that the person or both his/her parents are born outside Sweden. With Swedish background is meant that a person either is born in Sweden or that at least one of their parents is born in Sweden. *Cultural background:* The questionnaire included an item on the question to which degree the respondent felt belonging to certain traditions. 45.2% of all pupils stated they belong (moderately, quite a lot or completely, steps 3-5 on a 5-step scale) to a Christian tradition, while 8.5% stated they belong to a Muslim tradition. *Religiosity:* The questionnaire included an item on religious self-definition, where 10.9% answered that they consider themselves as 'religious', and 16.7% agreed with the definition 'believer'. Since it was possible to combine alternative identities there is some overlap in the sense that 174 respondents agreed quite a lot (4) or completely (5) with both of these self-identifications, and another 79 respondents agreed moderately (3) with one of these labels and quite a lot or completely with the other. Due to this outcome a new category was created from the self-definitions of 'religious' and/or 'believers' (steps 4 and 5) and named as the new category of 'religious' consisting of 377 individuals, or 20.4% of the pupils. Thus, henceforth 'religious' refers to this said new category. The latter category is compared to all other pupils, labelled 'nonreligious'.

In table 2, I present the results concerning the pupils' attitudes towards religious and cultural diversity in society.

Table 2. Attitudes towards religious and cultural diversity in society, and ethnic background, cultural background and religiosity. Percent that agree (4-5 on a 5-step scale).

	All	Foreign background	Swedish background	Muslim tradition	Christian tradition	Non-religious	Religious
	n=1850	n=328	n=1417	n=158	n=837	n=1473	n=377
Everyone ought to be able to freely talk about their religion in school or at work	68.3	72.9^{ns}	67.6	63	71.8	66.3	75.9
Ringing of church bells should be banned if disturbing to neighbourhood	22.2	18.3	23.1	14.1	16.7	24.2	15
Muslim calls to prayer should be banned if disturbing to neighbourhood	42.2	32.6	44.2	15	43.7	43.9	36.1
Immigration to Sweden should be limited	52.3	37.2	54.9	28.4	55.4^{ns}	55.2	41.3
Clothes and symbols related to religion (veil, turban, cross etc) should be allowed in Swedish workplaces	34.4	47.7	31.6	55.9	35.7^{ns}	30.5	48.8
Immigrants should adapt to Swedish values	61	48.6	63.7	39	61.6^{ns}	63.8	50.8

Table 2 shows the results for the attitudes towards six statements regarding religious and cultural diversity in society. The first column ('all') shows the results for all pupils. 68.3% of all pupils agreed with the statement on general freedom to speak about one's religion at school or work. 34.4% stated that clothes and symbols related to religion (exemplified as veil, turban, cross etc.) should be allowed in Swedish workplaces. These two items reflect freedom of religion perspective, and it was noticeable that for the statement concerning *speaking* about religion a little more than two thirds agreed, while for the statement regarding *visual representations* of religion only a third agreed. This is worth noting since it represents a distinct difference in terms of tolerance of religion. This result indicates that an attitude of tolerance may shift depending on whether the matter concerns someone's freedom to speak or someone's freedom to wear visual representations. This

may be interpreted as meaning that the visual presence of religions is perceived as being more provocative than verbal presence. Regarding the items on the banning of Christian church bells or Muslim calls to prayer, 22.2% agreed with the statement on Christian ringing of church bells, while 42.2% agreed with the statement on Muslim calls to prayer. Such a result may reflect a greater level of unfamiliarity with the presence of Islam in Swedish society amongst the pupils. Two statements concerned immigration and assimilation policy. 52.3% agreed that immigration to Sweden should be restricted, while 61.0% agreed that immigrants should adapt to Swedish values. From the wording of the first of these statements it cannot be discerned whether the respondents wish to keep the present restrictions, or rather urge to increase the existing restrictions on immigration. The subgroup comparisons gave some results of interest. Pupils of Muslim tradition are less in favour of banning Muslim calls to prayer and actually oppose a prohibition on ringing church bells to the same extent as other pupils. As regards the statement on the prohibition of Muslim calls to prayer, nonreligious pupils and pupils of Christian tradition were more in favour than other subgroups. In general the nonreligious pupils can be seen as about as open towards religious and cultural diversity as other subgroups, except regarding the wearing of clothes and symbols and adaptation policy, where they were less tolerant.

From the results in tables 1 and 2 we can see that even though a little more than four out of ten pupils agree with the central aims of RE (RE increases understanding between people, RE helps me make up my own mind of what I believe, RE gives me knowledge to better understand society) the stark difference between the religious and the nonreligious pupils brings to our attention that RE does not seem to instil intercultural or interreligious understanding. It is however necessary to remember that this is not a controlled effect study and the result could, for instance, differ if repeated after an completed course of RE.

Listening more closely to the voices of the pupils: focus group interviews

Among the pupils who took part in the inquiry by questionnaire, a limited number were also interviewed in eight focus groups in total. The results from these group interviews indicate that, when talking about religion and religion in school, the pupils stress central late modern values such as autonomy, individual freedom and reflexivity when they describe themselves and their view on religion (Witkowsky 2010; Sjöborg, forthcoming). Depending on whether or not the pupils are religious this comes in different shapes: *Pupils claiming not to be religious* often refer to a scientific discourse for constructing autonomy. From the focus groups the following representative

ways of stating this can be highlighted: "Religion is something that people used to believe in before, in the old days, when they did not know better. Now we understand more." "They can't help it, they were raised that way." "It can be good to know at least something about religion when you go to, like, Thailand." These quotes illustrate that among these pupils religion is constructed as something which is distant in time or place, which is not associated with modernity, progress and science. In this way, these pupils construct themselves as autonomous and reflexive. The *pupils claiming to be religious* talk of their beliefs as a contrast to the commercial and superficial ideas, which they feel impose restrictions and limitations in the majority society. These pupils construct religion as something that enables them to be autonomous. They stress their reflexivity and underline their freedom with regards to both 1) the demands to be and behave in a certain way in the majority society and 2) that they have not accepted any religious dogmas in an uncritical manner. Summing up the impressions from both categories, the pupils construct as different, the 'other' which they feel opposes modern central values. These 'others' are seen as not as independent and free as themselves. This is true *both* among the religious as well as the nonreligious pupils in the interviews. From these interviews it can be seen that both these categories of pupils – religious and nonreligious – construct the 'other' by stressing their own agency and reflexivity.

The interviewed pupils live in a time when autonomy and freedom are seen as central values. They also live in a society, which from international comparison (Esmer / Pettersson 2007), can be said to be permeated by these values to the extent that their way of talking about RE and religion is coloured by this cultural context. Esmer and Pettersson even characterized individual integrity and autonomy as sacred values in the Swedish context, and proved that traditional religious values were rather invisible on a micro level. It is also necessary to remind that even if the interview groups contained different religious traditions and denominations both in majority and minority, such as active and less active Lutherans, Assyrian Orthodox, Catholics, Pentecostals, Muslims, atheists, agnostics, and Jehova's Witnesses – the need to relate to the cultural norm of individual integrity and autonomy when talking about religion held strong.

Conclusion

The purpose of this article was to relate the high aims and goals of RE with the attitudes towards RE among pupils. The Swedish case served as an example to show the role of RE in civic education in a time of cultural diversity. The main point made was that it is necessary to take into account the cultural context in which the pupils live. I wanted to show that the learning

about approach (orientation concerning world religions, facts) has its clear limitations if these high aims are to be achieved. I demonstrated some gaps in attitudes between nonreligious and religious pupils concerning RE and religious and cultural diversity. Religious pupils are more likely to appreciate RE's key features and hence appear more tolerant. A reasonable interpretation is that the formulation of RE aims and the items of measuring tolerance are closer to a religious worldview than to a non-religious one. Expressed differently, the findings suggest that religious pupils understand better what RE is meant to be and it is therefore easier for them to agree with the items on tolerance.

These findings can be interpreted in the light of the analysis of the political ambition with the RE subject. There are problems with attaining the high aims on intercultural understanding. For RE to better realize its high intentions, RE would have more to gain from making use of the said gap between nonreligious and religious pupils, treating it as a resource in a respectful and serious way. As was pointed out above, another salient aim of RE is engaging in critical analysis. Developing Religious Education in this direction might be relevant to bridging the gap. My findings suggest that the dialogue between the religious and the non-religious is much more difficult to achieve than the dialogue between different religions. If it is desirable to achieve the high aims of intercultural understanding, it is probably advisable to realize a forum where it could become possible for the pupils to reflect about 'the other' in oneself, for both categories of pupils. It is not possible to attain its high aims without offering pupils the opportunity not only to reflect on the cultural or religious meaning-making systems that other people are a part of, but also to reflect on those cultural perceptions guiding their own lives. This task might increase the likelihood of accomplishing the goal of intercultural understanding also for the wide majority of the pupils, namely the nonreligious.

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