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"It's just very natural" – interpersonal knowledge as a didactical device in guided classroom conversations in religious education

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Abstract: This article investigates how teachers in religious education (RE) think and act as professionals while working with differences in religious and philosophy of life experiences and beliefs in class and trying to do this in respectful and inclusive ways. It analyses data from two research projects that were carried out in lower secondary school in Norway. The main research question is: What is the relationship between teachers' contextual knowledge and knowledge of the child and how do these two dimensions of professional knowledge interact when religious education teachers try to strike a good balance between inclusion and productive learning in their teaching practice? The data analysed were drawn from three different data sets featuring three Norwegian religious education-teachers. The research was part of the EUfunded "REDCo"-project and the "Religious education and diversity" - project ["ROM"] funded by the Norwegian Research Council. The interviewees emphasized the potential of the religious education subject to contribute to a wider tolerance for difference and to support individual students in their identity management. The analysis shows, however, that considerable contextual awareness - of the classroom and of the local community - is needed to realize this potential. It also shows the importance of interpersonal knowledge between the teacher and each student if contextual awareness is to be effective in terms of inclusion, participation, wellbeing and good learning outcomes for all students.

KEYWORDS: RELIGIOUS EDUCATION, DIALOGUE, CLASSROOM CONVERSATIONS, PROFESSIONAL KNOWLEDGE, CONTEXTUAL KNOWLEDGE, INTERPERSONAL KNOWLEDGE

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Introduction

The relevance of this article refers to the Norwegian Education Act of 2009 which states that "Education and training shall provide insight into cultural diversity and show respect for the individual's convictions." (KUNNSKAPSDEPARTEMENTET 2009, section 1-1). Further, while referring to the new patterns of plurality characterizing todays Norwegian society and the role of the religious education subject in relation to this, the act states that the teaching "... shall promote ... the ability to carry out a dialogue with people with differing views concerning beliefs and philosophies of life" (ibid, section 2-4). The national curriculum for the religious education subject "Religion, Philosophies of Life and Ethics" (RLE), confirms and specifies these aims, impelling religious education (RE) teachers in lower secondary school to create classroom conversations where students may activate personal knowledge related to their religious and secular worldview backgrounds (KUNNSKAPSDEPARTEMENTET 2008, 8). The relevance of the article also refers to the international scholarly debate, where these professional challenges are reflected in an increased focus on the importance of contextual and interpersonal knowledge as aspects of teachers' professionalism (Hattie 2009; 2014; Pianta 2004; O Connor 2011).

Research has shown that certain characteristics need to be in place if students' contributions in classroom conversations in the form of personal knowledge are to be productive – both in terms of learning outcome and of mutual respect between believers of all faiths and convictions (Want, Bakker, Avest, & Everington 2009). Religious education teachers have regarded it as particularly important to have sufficient content knowledge as well as practical knowledge of how to create a safe space in the classroom allowing for students' agency without risking that they be ridiculed or hurt (Everington 2009; Johannessen 2009). In my own research, I have shown the importance of contextual knowledge for creating favourable conditions for students' personal contributions in guided classroom conversations about religion and worldviews (Johannessen 2013). To be productive, this contextual knowledge must combine knowing the local community where students belong, including family relationships, organizational belonging and networks on one hand, and knowing the classroom environment with its own proper dynamics on the other (op cit).

In this article, I investigate in more detail what contextual knowledge as an element of teachers' professional knowledge may imply when they work with differences in students' belief- and philosophy of life experiences and strive to maintain an inclusive and safe learning environment in their classes at the same time. I take as my point of departure certain practices and descriptions of practices that surfaced in two religious education research projects where I analysed teachers' talk and interaction in

religiously diverse classes and their reflective talk about their practice. However, the article is also motivated by a theoretical interest in clarifying the relationship between teachers' knowledge of the child on one hand and contextual knowledge of the other. The main research question is: What is the relationship between teachers' contextual knowledge and their knowledge of the child? More specifically, I ask: How do these two dimensions of professional knowledge interact when religious education teachers try to strike a good balance between inclusion and productive learning in their practice? Further, how do religious education teachers provide a "safe space" for sharing personal knowledge in practice, and what benefits do they see in terms of learning outcomes?

I base my investigation on the premise that the aims of inclusion, respect and dialogue stated in the Education act and national curriculum of RE should be balanced against the equally important aims of valuing and working with difference and of offering an intellectually challenging learning situation which connects to and critically investigates the students' lifeworlds. This balancing of intellectual quality and connectedness with supportiveness and recognition of students' contribution is what I call a *productive learning process*, with reference to Debra Hayes *et al*'s productive pedagogies (Hayes 2006) In this article I particularly focus on the aspects of a productive pedagogy that deal with supportiveness, safe learning environment and the valuing of difference. In teachers' daily practice, these aspects are closely interwoven with issues of subject knowledge and concerns about the students learning outcome. The analysis of incidents and learning situations described in the article, confirms this. However, due to space constraints, this important aspect of a productive pedagogy will not be addressed systematically.

In order to answer my research questions, I have produced data from interviews and field conversations with three teachers about their work in religiously diverse student groups. To analyse the data, theory about professional knowledge, contextual knowledge and discourse development proved fruitful. I will start by presenting these theories and continue with a short account of my research method and analytical approach before I present and analyse three empirical cases.

Theoretical basis

The empirical material I analyse are teachers' experience near, everyday concepts, metaphors and images (Claesson 2004; Clandinin 1985a; Connelly & Clandinin 1984; Hargreaves 2000; Jackson 1968). They appear in the data in sequences of talk that are episodic rather than narrative in character. This fits with theory that describes teachers' professional way to share experiences and knowledge with colleagues as "anecdotic" (Doeche, Brown, & Loughranm 2000; Huberman 1992; Jackson 1968). In the beginning of the process of coding my interview and conversational data, the idea

¹ See footnote 2 in subsection 3 ("Method, data and analysis") for more details about the research projects.

of "knowing their students personally" seemed to be important for the teachers, although they hardly used this term themselves. As I will show, this category of "knowing personally" was hidden in anecdotes and surfaced as a result of analysis.

The assumption in profession theory is that *personal knowledge*, although it tends to be tacit, forms an important element in professional practice (Bawden & Zuber-Skerritt 2002; Clandinin 1985b; Connelly & Clandinin 1984; Polanyi 1958, 1983). Personal knowledge in this meaning refers to the existential, emotional and moral aspects of a teacher's knowledge and practice either it is gained or acted out within the professional or private realms of life (Clandinin 1985, 376-377). In this meaning it is also referred to as value knowledge (Hartman 2005) and knowing how to be (Bawden & Zuber-Skerritt 2002). "The personal" both as an element of professional practice and of a person's private experience may be regarded as sensitive by the holder (Claesson 2004, 25; Clandinin 1985, 376). However, it may also be made explicit and shared with confidence in communicative events if they are characterized by openness and mutual respect and the participants have sufficient relevant knowledge to act tactfully (Van Manen & Levering 1996). This may be the case for both students and teachers (Driscoll & Pianta 2010). John Hattie and colleagues in an extensive quantitative study from New Zealand finds that the student factor - with subcategories like students' self-expectations, self-worth, motivation – and the teacher factor are two of the most important impact factors when it comes to students' achievement and learning in school. They also find that the communication and feedback both ways between the teacher and the student is the single most powerful factor influencing achievement in education (Hattie 2009, 2014)

This means that in order to analyse what the teachers tell in the interviews about their teaching practice and the importance of knowing personally, it is necessary to expand the perspective from just looking at the existential, ideological and value aspects of teachers' personal knowledge. What should also be counted in are the relational, interactional and intersubjective aspects of knowing personally. They refer to teachers and students' memory of their interaction in different social settings in school and local community where interpersonal knowledge of various kinds is negotiated and produced.

To be able to handle this relational and interpersonal perspective in more detail in my analysis I have turned to Van Dijk's theory of contextual knowledge and discourse production (Van Dijk 2005).

Van Dijk's point of departure is how discourses are produced and comprehended. He finds that a vast amount of shared knowledge is required if meaningful and productive communication and interaction is going to take place. Knowledge in this respect can basically be defined in terms of "shared beliefs satisfying the specific criteria and needs of a community" (Van Dijk 2005, 73). In this definition therefore, the functional aspect of knowledge in a community of practice is highlighted. Van Dijk particularly mentions the importance of considering the situational and interpersonal aspects of the production of each actors' *context model* for the interaction and communication taking place (Van Dijk 2005, 80). A context model is defined as "... the mental representations of the participants [in ongoing events] about

the relevant properties of the social situation in which they interact and produce and comprehend text or talk" (ibid, p. 75). A crucial point is that the participants must have "mutual knowledge about each other's knowledge" to be able to interact meaningfully. Therefore their personal memories of specific events in the past telling about who were present doing and saying what, becomes important. Such knowledge is stored in the participants' episodic memory according to Van Dijk (ibid, p. 74). In a particular social situation, it is combined with elements of abstract, propositional and scientific "knowledge of the world" stored in semantic memory. Together these two types of memory offer the relevant mental inputs to the participants' context model of a given situation. The context models of the teacher and the students in for example a religious education lesson is therefore the combined elements of RE lessons in the past and selected elements of RE knowledge. Based on these elements of information and knowledge, each of them can decide which are the relevant properties of that situation, on the basis of which they may interact and communicate (ibid, p. 75). Consequently, for the researcher it becomes important to reconstruct at least parts of these models when conducting an analysis of classroom conversations.

Calculating the total inventory of relevant knowledge represented in the context models of the members of a religious education class, is an immensely complicated task. To handle strategically what the students already know, and what they should or should not be informed about in a given sequence of classroom interaction is equally complicated, and demands tact and professional judgement. Van Dijk gives examples of verbal strategies that social actors may use to signal to an audience -for example what they know and need to know - and what their own intensions and interests are in the situation. In my analysis, I identify both verbal and non-verbal strategies of a similar kind adopted by three religious education teachers. I see them as indicators of a professional sensitivity in their relationships with their students, appearing on three different levels of interaction. I find a parallel to these levels in a taxonomy of knowledge types presented by Van Dijk for the purpose of examining some of the hypothetical strategies he assumes to be available in changing situations (Van Dijk 2005, 72). I am particularly interested in three basic and lower scale types of knowledge. These are personal knowledge, interpersonal knowledge and group knowledge. The other forms he mentions are institutional/organizational knowledge, national knowledge and cultural knowledge. For my needs here, however, I also want emphasise local knowledge (Geertz 1983), somewhat at the expense of institutional/organizational knowledge (the school level) since "knowing the community" emerges as more important in my analysis. Both the latter forms are, as I see them, in certain respects hybrid forms of knowledge. They will always be loaded with many elements of situational/interpersonal knowledge from the episodic memory of the interacting partners while also carrying much abstract, accumulated knowledge from semantic memory. This includes important, generally known facts about social events in the community or organization, all of which they cannot possibly have experienced first-hand. However, on this level of scale, many social facts will also be closely attached to personal, interpersonal and situational knowledge, and this will colour their connotative meaning for the participants. Much local knowledge may

therefore be experienced as sensitive, emotional and "private" in character by individual actors and subgroups within the community. My theoretical point here is that between this level and the next levels upwards in social scale (the regional and national levels) we can assume a marked breach in continuity regarding the extent to which knowledge elements will be closely attached to and coloured by elements from episodic memory.

Van Dijk's structures his taxonomy according to a logic of *scope* in terms of both social scale and distribution in social and physical space. He combines the dimensions of "who knows" (the knowing subjects) and knowing what (objects of knowledge). My particular interest has been to come to terms with the distribution of situated and interpersonal knowledge specifically, and this is where I find a breach in continuity somewhere between the levels of local knowledge / organizational knowledge and higher scale levels. On the level of local knowledge, while teachers and theirs students in the RE class are sharing knowledge about the local community or the school organization they belong to, they must still take into account a lot of knowledge from their episodic memories to be able to navigate tactfully and safely. On the other hand, the category of local knowledge must also include important layers of propositional knowledge (socio-cultural facts) about the local community to make sense. Now to sum up this part, I will take a closer look at the knowledge types in Van Dijk's taxonomy and the typical communicative strategies that may be attached to each of them. The variables involved in examining such strategies for each type of knowledge, are scope, specificity, concreteness, objects and firmness of any unit of knowledge (Van Dijk 2005, 78-80).

The concept of *personal knowledge*, according to Van Dijk, points to autobiographical knowledge gained in specific situations while people interact with specific others (Van Dijk 2005, 78). It is related to personal experiences not yet shared with others in the present communicative situation. The typical assumption for such knowledge is that it tend to be private in character, and that it is only known (in similar form) to those who were part of the original experience. Such personal knowledge is mainly stored in people's episodic memory. As such it is typically subjective, narrow in scope and both situation- and person specific.

Interpersonal knowledge on the other hand is personal knowledge shared between individuals and based on previous interpersonal communication or common experiences. The typical assumption is that most interpersonal knowledge is shared and remembered as elements of storytelling and therefore also narrow in scope and situation- and person specific (Van Dijk 2005, 78). When it comes to personal and interpersonal knowledge, according to Van Dijk, the general strategy of social actors is to search in episodic memory and try to recapitulate if their context models contain relevant knowledge elements for use in the present situation.

Group knowledge is socially shared knowledge. Mainly it is shared in the sense that it is based on common group experience. However, it may also be general abstract knowledge, as long as it is collectively acquired by or regarded typical or necessary by all members of a group, such as a professional group, a religious group, a peer group or a religious education class. In the first case, common experience may well be told

to new members in the form of collective stories (anecdotes). In the second case, necessary group knowledge will be taught as general, abstract "knowledge of the world".

Local knowledge the way I define the concept here, shares most characteristics with institutional / organizational knowledge (Van Dijk 2005, 79). Local knowledge is common knowledge of everything from implicit codes of conduct to tacit and expressed assumptions about the world that is shared and generally acknowledged by the subgroups within a local community. It becomes common knowledge and accompanies and guides interaction among community people as they live their lives close to each other within a restricted geographical area like a neighbourhood, a village or small town or "valley". Local knowledge resembles national knowledge in the sense that it "will be presupposed in most conversations and in most public discourse" locally (Van Dijk 2005, p 79). It combines genuine local elements stemming from peoples everyday practices with knowledge elements from various "great traditions" like political, religious and other ideational systems (Geertz 1983). As already discussed above, local knowledge compared to group knowledge necessarily combines more propositional knowledge stored in semantic memory and relatively less situational and interpersonal knowledge stored in episodic memory. However, it is assumed, that if the community is small enough, it may still be possible for most locals to keep track of what "goes on" socially speaking, in the most important social arenas at all times.

According to Van Dijk, the researcher should aim at identifying the users' context models, covering as many as possible of the relevant factors influencing a communication event. In discourse analysis, the context model is therefore mainly the researcher's "...reconstruction of the mental representations that guide every participant in their interaction and communication and which are stored in their episodic memory" (Van Dijk 2005, 73). In this article, interpersonal knowledge is central, referring to knowledge shared between the religious education teacher and individual students in RE. As such it mediates between students' personal knowledge that may have been of a private character and group knowledge already shared between all members of the class in RE. Interpersonal knowledge is not just about certain personal and subject relevant phenomena, it is also about the relationship itself: It involves the explicit and intuitive information about what can be shared between teacher and student, what is confidential between them, under which circumstances (where and when) may it be shared with others and in what form in terms of emotional distance, level of detail and "tone" (Palludan 2007) or "temperature" (Skeie 1998).

When it comes to the ambition of reconstructing the context models of teachers and their students, this necessarily is a very demanding if not impossible enterprise. I have limited my analysis to focusing on the interpersonal knowledge of the three teachers with some of their students and partly their knowledge of the religious education classroom (the group) and the local community as relevant contexts. Doing this, I develop Van Dijk's concept of the context model to cover the particular case of professional communication and interaction in education. I hereby try to reach a deeper understanding of what knowing interpersonally, knowing the group and

knowing the local community is all about in the teaching context and to what extent they constitute important and separable elements of contextual professional knowledge in religious education.

Method, data and analysis

In order to answer my research question, I have analysed empirical data from two parallel and institutionally interconnected research projects conducted in the south-western part of Norway between November 2007 and June 2010 (Skeie 2010; Want et al. 2009)². The analysis is based on three different data sets featuring three Norwegian religious education-teachers. They work in schools in the same geographical region, and it may be assumed that some major patterns of cultural continuity and change within and between generations and socio-economic class divisions will tend to be the same and recognizable in the same way across the region. The data analysed are mainly interview data and conversational data from reflexive conversations after classroom observations. In presenting Gunnhild's case in the empirical part, and in my interpretation of her reflective talk, I also draw on observational data from selected sequences of teacher-student interaction in her class.

Firstly, Frida and Astrid's statements originate from a set of six semi-structured interviews conducted for the REDCo "Teacher Role project" (Johannessen 2009). The interviews were carried out following an interview guide, audio-recorded and transcribed.

In the case of Gunnhild, the citations originate from a second data set, generated during a fieldwork that was carried out as part of the ROM project (Johannessen, 2013). The data consequently were generated from multiple fieldwork-related sources such as semi-structured introductory interviews, open and spontaneous field conversations during and after classroom observations, planned reflexive conversations between the researcher and the teachers after observation and concluding, semi-structured interviews by the end of the fieldwork period. Finally, the third data set stems from semi- structured interviews with nine teachers who participated in one of the ROM communities of practice (Skeie 2010). The reasons for combining data from two different research projects were partly practical and partly based on other methodological considerations. The two projects were conducted in the same region and were partly overlapping in time and in personnel. This saved a lot of time and effort in getting access to the field and gaining confidence and in the recruitment of informants. However, I also found it rewarding during the first

² The "Teacher role" sub-project within the greater European research project "Religion in Education. A contribution to Dialogue or a factor of Conflict in transforming societies of European Countries" (REDCo) (http://www.redco.uni-hamburg.de/web/3480/3481/index.html) and the "Religious education and diversity" (ROM), an action research project financed within the educational research program Praksis FoU of the Norwegian Council of Research http://www.forskningsradet.no/prognett-praksisfou/Avsluttede_programmer_utdanningsforskning/1224698019600

analytical reading of the interview and fieldwork material to be able to draw on a greater data material when generating categories from RE teachers talk about their students and relationships with them.

The sequences of interviews and conversations I site or refer to in the following section were selected from the greater material described above after a careful and thorough re-reading and coding process. Nvivo software was used in this coding process.³ I first set up a structure of tree-nodes based on core concepts from the interview guide and the research questions. As my analysis developed and I discovered new aspects of the teachers' knowledge of their students and ways of knowing their students, I added new "free nodes" as they are called in the Nvivo system. By constructing queries, I could identify sequences from all the uploaded transcriptions where certain key terms and expressions were used.

The comprehensive coding and re-coding of the teacher's anecdotes finally led to the development of the analytical categories "the religious education teacher's sensitivity to differences among their students", "productive and tactful ways of working with difference" and subcategories under these main categories. These categories emerged from the way the teachers talked about their interaction with their students and as part of the coding process. Sensitivity, tact and productive ways of working were seen to appear on mainly three scale levels; 1) the dyadic level where teacher interacts with individual student, 2) the delimited group level where teacher and students interact in class and 3) a more public level I have labelled local—where teacher and students interact outside the classroom and in public and open community settings with each other or with others. In the next subsection, I will show that these levels of scale correspond to three different types of professional knowledge.

It is a methodical challenge that the teachers and pupils' assumptions about known and relevant knowledge in any classroom situation may not be directly accessible for observation since such assumptions tend to be tacit knowledge (Polanyi 1958). Their talk – their speech acts (Bernstein, 1990) – and their actions are accessible, however, and will give clues to their assumptions of "what is going on" and "what is at stake" pedagogically speaking. I have already mentioned the episodic form as a characteristic form of talk in my interviews with the teachers. I regard this sharing of anecdotes to be a purposeful discursive practice (Lave and Wenger 1991, 109). In the anecdotes, the teachers inform each other of sequences of communication and interaction in particular situations where important professional issues are at stake. In this way a particular discursive form is produced that may be characterized as "talking within and talking about practice" (ibid). In my analysis I have used use such anecdotes together with teachers' and students' talk in classroom situations as data for identifying elements of the religious education teachers' context models. In accordance with Van Dijk, I see the context models as the "cognitive interface [... in the form of mental representations ...] between social situations and discourse" (Van Dijk 2005, 75). Discourse analysis therefore comes to my aid as one pillar of my

³ http://www.gsrinternational.com/products_nvivo.aspx

analysis. I also make use of an ethnographic approach in my analysis, referring to an analysis of shared concepts and meanings in the social landscape where the anecdotes are told (Madsen 2003; Spradley 1979). An ethnographic analysis and a discourse analysis therefore mutually inform each other making the results richer and more solid (Chouliaraki & Fairclough 1999, 62).

Teachers talking about difference and inclusion

From personal to interpersonal knowledge - Frida

Frida is a teacher in a lower secondary school in a coastal city in the south-western part of Norway. She was 28 years old and recently had got her teachers' license when interviewed. She was class teacher for a form 8 class (13 -14 year olds) teaching religious education, German and athletics.

The religious diversity in Frida's class was represented by an unmarked ethnic majority of students (presumably) baptized in the Norwegian State Church, while some students had a secular humanist background and two students were Muslims with Somali and Malayan backgrounds respectively. The ethnic Norwegian majority group had been rather anonymous when it came to revealing clues to religious identity and belonging. Nevertheless, the interview with Frida was rich in descriptions of episodes where she interacted with or observed interaction between ethnic minority students in different school arenas and where religious belonging was made topic.

During the interview, Frida told various small anecdotes to explain and illustrate her points of view. In the sequence below, Frida described how she and the Somali-Norwegian boy exchanged looks in a classroom situation.

Yes and then someone posed the question whether a Muslim must do the ritual washing even if he or she took a shower the same morning. And then – OK, this was something I just didn't know, and then I simply gave the Somali boy a short look at the corner of my eye without.... Just a small look to see if he's got an answer. And then I see that he is eager to say something. I don't expect an answer from him, just giving him a look, and then he says: "Yes you have to anyway." So then we got that cleared up. You see? As natural as possible. So I think it is a resource for both teacher and class that specific questions the young may have about these issues, may be answered without there being long theological explanations.

In my interpretation, what took place in this incident was that the Somali-Norwegian boy decided to share personal knowledge from his episodic memory with the group. By doing so, he converted it to two elements of group knowledge (Van Dijk 2005, 78). One element was the fact that "Muslims have to wash their hands anyway" which was a contribution to his classmates semantic memories (ibid p. 73) and the other was the fact that "I, your Somali-Norwegian classmate know this and may tell you about it" and that would be stored in their episodic memories. The strength in his statement as expressed in Frida's description, must have informed everyone present that this was knowledge gained from personal experience at home or in the Muslim

community. Frida knew professionally that the two elements of knowledge by necessity are inseparable and that the latter would influence the boy's ongoing identity management as member of the learning community and the peer group. She also knew that sharing such information might have an impact on his wellbeing there and then. Frida, in my interpretation, was here professionally informed by interpersonal knowledge allowing her to exchange small nonverbal signs with the boy protected by mutual confidence. She used this in order to make the right decision in this situation in terms of increasing the learning outcome for all (to understand the function and meaning of a religious ritual) balanced against the Somali-Norwegian boy's best interests and wellbeing, She had a professional interest in the boy's knowledge of religious practices but also in his wellbeing. He had personal interest in maintaining his freedom to decide when to share personal knowledge, what to share and how much.

The signification process – meaning the communication of conditions of transaction in this particular occasion (Daniel 1984; Grønhaug 1975) – presupposes elements of interpersonal knowledge like the meaning of nonverbal signs showing eagerness and confidence to share personal knowledge. Frida's self-confidence and expressed sensitivity in describing the episode, pointed to knowledge stored in episodic memory, gained through sufficient face-to-face confidential talks with the boy, touching upon his life as a Muslim, but also how he identified with Islam.

By the term "as natural as possible", Frida summed up all the important elements in this complex situation – as perceived through her professionally tuned senses. The term "natural" both characterized and evaluated the nonverbal communication going on between her and the Somali-Norwegian boy, but since the signification process predominantly was a tacit one, it can only be tentatively recapitulated. On the other hand, also in other parts of the interview, Frida described how a situation could become "natural" and what the "natural state" of things in the classroom had to offer the students and the learning community, and these descriptions gave clues to my analysis.

My interpretation of this quote is that "natural" refers to what does not attract particular and unwanted attention since it is regarded as an established fact. Here, the fact that the Somali-Norwegian boy had first-hand knowledge about Muslim religious practice was not surprising to anyone while compared to earlier classroom episodes. In addition, his classmates also seemed to "know" from their episodic memories that he—like anyone else in his class—may share such personal knowledge and experience in classroom conversations when it was asked for and if it suited him.

By telling the anecdote, Frida could emphasise the interpersonal knowledge needed to be able to make personal knowledge relevant in a sensitive and inclusive way by creating space in the class for this kind of utterances. She wanted to make it into a "just-a-matter-of-fact" phenomenon that students in her group had different experiences and knew different things – also when it came to religious and philosophy of life practices and knowledge. Frida's "low key" way of opening up for the boy's special contribution gave him the important freedom to ascribe his particular religious experience the value and weight he himself found convenient for his presentation of

self among his classmates (Goffman 1971). In another episode, a student asked for and was then granted time in a religious education lesson to show the class the ritual they performed at home before reading the Qur'an. Frida in that occasion learnt that opening up for students' contributions like this, may lead to difficulties they or she cannot fully foresee and which may cause harm for themselves or others in the class (Johannessen 2009)⁴.

Through telling this and similar anecdotes Frida revealed that she was focused on the social wellbeing and inclusion of all her students in the RE community of learning. However, it was also important to her to create a relevant and intellectually challenging learning situation where students' experiences from diverse communities were acknowledged and became a resource for subject learning. To be able to facilitate such learning in her religious education class, she herself needed to be familiar with local, everyday religious practice.

Frida was aware that she did not know the right answer to all her students' questions. In this particular case, she could have commented on the cleansing ritual in Islam as a contrast to the mere physical cleaning of the body, but she felt that this kind of religious studies explanation would miss the point among these 8-graders. Another alternative, she mentioned, would be to consult a friend of hers in Oslo who would know from experience a lot about Muslim religious practices and life style in general and also how this particular ritual is practiced in her community.

I have shown how Frida used a way of talking about religious phenomena in a narrow, matter-of-fact way that "bracket away" their flavour of being weird or controversial. By activating knowledge from episodic memory she managed to "cool down" the conversation (Skeie 1998) about washing hands by not elaborating on its meaning as a ritual and sign of religious devotion, but instead focusing on what "people must do or not do" being Muslim. In the same situation, the issue of knowing the rules as a possible sign of religious devotion was toned down by hardly looking at the Somali-Norwegian boy who "happened to know the answer".

Frida also presented an incident that took place in the girls' dressing room in the physical education department. A Turkish girl took off her hijab, and Frida heard that some other girl of majority background commented how beautiful her hair was. Then started a conversation amongst them about her practice of wearing hijab and how it had changed during the last couple of years. Last semester she had not been wearing a hijab when the class photo was taken, but now she was wearing it all the time. Why was that? The Turkish-Norwegian girl then informed that now, because of her age, she could not leave the house without it any longer. Frida's anecdote continued as follows:

You know in a gym wardrobe when there are no adults present, they ask the questions they themselves find interesting: Like "... why is that?", and

conversation at home or with someone they really trusted when it comes to such big issues.

⁴ In this article I describe how the class conversation soon took the path of "possible consequences for life after death if you don't perform rituals correctly", and in this conversation, some students really became worried that they may come to hell. At this point Frida stopped the conversation and instructed her students to rather continue this

"...but can you wear it there?" and "...what do you wear when?" – all very innocent questions in a way, no mocking or ridiculing, because then I would have opened my door and listened and eventually stopped them...

In the interview Frida here used the term "innocent" to describe the girls' way of interacting and talking together about the practical set of rules governing the hijab dress code. The concepts of a "natural" way of non-verbal communication while referring to personal religious belonging and the "innocent" questions of the classmates mirror Frida's pedagogical aim of creating opportunities for students to share relevant personal knowledge and experience in a classroom context. By being observant and listening to her students' talk, Frida learnt that her young students were competent cultural brokers (Chalanda 1995) while sharing personal knowledge about life outside school and negotiating a common meaning of home rules set by parents. They seemed to know practically how to talk in inclusive ways about a potentially conflictive theme with great danger of transgressing the borders of embarrassment and intimidation. Frida detected that "innocent" comparisons of parents' principles, rules and concerns are "natural" strategies of communication among girls in their early teens. They simply were elements of ordinary talk, and by getting to know these internal discursive practices and the sharing of personal knowledge, Frida thought she could connect in more productive ways to their lifeworlds, for example during classroom conversations,

The analysis of Frida's two anecdotes shows that her context model of interacting with her class in RE is a highly complex phenomenon as it keeps together and processes many different elements and types of knowledge. The complexity is not least related to the fact that she needed to keep track of her interpersonal knowledge shared with maybe 30 students, of which some parts may have been known to fellow students, parents and friends in other contexts and some not. To reach the collective goal of productive and inclusive learning for the whole group of learners, Frida needed to balance interpersonal knowledge that may increase the outcome for all if shared in class, with the best interests of each student whose trust and confidentiality had granted her access to personal religious knowledge. Frida was aware that the interpersonal knowledge she had gained access to in her capacity as religious education teacher contained a lot of subject content knowledge of potentially great value. She may use it to connect to her students lifeworlds, to challenge them intellectually and raise their awareness of the richness and value of religious differences.

Other aspects of Frida's interpersonal knowledge, stored and kept track of in her episodic memory, helped her to modulate her professional interventions in classroom conversations to be both tactful and productive towards the student. Through person-to-person conversations with the individual student in her religious education classes, Frida has learnt how to talk, what to talk about and under which conditions. These aspects of her context models for classroom conversations in different religious education classes, gave her the confidence she needed to draw on this particular resource for learning.

From interpersonal knowledge to group knowledge – Gunnhild

Gunnhild was 29 years old, a subject teacher in religious education and a trainer in Norwegian as second language at a lower secondary school in a town in the south-western part of Norway. Compared to the average class in this part of the country, her class was ethnically and religiously heterogeneous. 14 out of 27 students belonged to other religions or denominations than the Evangelical Lutheran Christianity, and about 20% of the students from diverse ethnic and religious backgrounds presented themselves in class as non-religious. Unlike Frida's class, Gunnhild's class was more homogeneous in terms of student performance.

Gunnhild knew quite a lot about the private life of her students outside school - like friendships, family relations and leisure activities. When it came to her students' religious belonging, practice and faith or affiliation to a secular philosophy of life, Gunnhild was generally more informed than Frida. The frequent use of classroom conversations over a longer period of time (1½ years), may have added to this knowledge and also the fact that Gunnhild was Norwegian-as-second- language teacher for several of the students in her religious education class. From classroom observations and discussions with Gunnhild, it became evident that knowledge conveyed to her in person from individual students about themselves or others informed her interpretation of classroom interaction and dynamics:

Steinar was also very engaged and personal today. And I don't know if you noticed, but Svein listened very attentively to what Steinar was saying. The two used to be very close friends and inseparable throughout primary school. Now they have separated and are following different paths - Svein is a humanist-ethicist and Steinar has become a very committed Christian and a leader in a Christian youth organization. Now, being challenged directly in class about his conviction, he said that "yes, I am a Christian". I could see the respect in Svein's face when he observed Steinar at that moment.

The quotation illustrates what I in my fields notes called "Gunnhild's extraordinary sensitivity to social dynamics between her students" when they were discussing religious and life-view matters in class. How can this sensitivity be understood more in detail and what types of knowledge may nurture such sensitivity?

A remark about three students of African background gives some further clues:

We viewed the three African students as very different from the rest of the class. Now they are just like the others.

..... You know – there were a few remarks in the beginning, and [... XX and XX - two girl students ...] were completely silent. But now they speak freely and are accepted.

When Gunnhild and her team 1½ years earlier had got this unusually diverse group in terms of first language, ethnicity and religion, they made a decision to focus on expressions of difference and promotion of difference as a value all from the beginning. This decision had obviously made both Gunnhild and her colleagues more attentive and focused on all the students' personal backgrounds. In the quote, Gunnhild said "....Now they are just like the others..." This phrase indicated an

interpretation of the class environment and its social dynamics that was different from my own after having observed her class. I saw that the classroom was marked by many distinct styles of interaction and self-presentation and displaying general acceptance for exposing diverse experiences, beliefs and values within religions. Gunnhild chose to emphasize the adaptive skills of three recently arrived refugees, while I as an outsider was more focused on the rather unfamiliar style created among the students in this religious education class, quite different from, I thought, the mainstream style among 15 year olds. Gunnhild also referred to the hard work that had to be carried out, both by the teachers and the students to be able to adapt to a classroom situation that was new to them all.

Gunnhild here enters the classroom in a particular class to teach a particular subject and carry with her what Van Dijk calls a context model containing a wealth of information about the individual students, what they know about each other, their interpersonal encounters and relationships and how all this has changed over time. The context model also includes knowledge about the RE learning group's particular code of conduct, communicative style and group dynamics. Further, it informs the teacher that the students' roles and status positions may be different in religious education compared to other subjects and the way roles and status positions develop may be different as well. All this will guide her actions as an informed and committed professional. However, if a teacher knows a group of students in one subject only, there may be a danger that his or her context model for that particular setting is not connected and open enough for clues to negative consequences in other settings. In a field conversation with Gunnhild, she expressed fear that one particularly outspoken boy may get problems outside school because of what he had just revealed in class. This had happened before and she therefore had tried to delimit his contribution.

What stands out stronger and more explicit in Gunnhild's case compared to Frida's, is the degree to which Gunnhild's interaction with her students in the religious education lesson was informed and guided by her knowledge of the group, meaning what was common knowledge among them in the RE class setting. Her context model contained a wealth of information about what they knew about each other, what they had revealed and may come to reveal about themselves and each other and the patterns and dynamics of interaction in the class. The richness of Gunnhild's group knowledge, combined with the interpersonal knowledge she shared with many of her students and her solid subject knowledge, stands out as a particularly important element in her professional practice.

Group knowledge reflecting local knowledge - Astrid

Astrid was 53 years, a form teacher in a lower secondary state school in a small town in the south-western part of Norway who taught mathematics, social science and religious education. She had worked at this school for 25 years. Her students in religious education were two 8-form classes.

In the interview, while presenting the local socio-cultural landscape, Astrid described two partly parallel, partly opposing developments taking place. One was a

growing materialism and consumerism that tended to narrow down the perspectives of the young and lead to increased conformism and sameness in personal style. The other was a tendency towards greater individualism and diversity regarding values and also a more distinct and explicit secularism among the students. These processes had both led to greater differences in her classes regarding philosophy of life and lifestyle, but also to a greater pressure towards "being unique the appropriate way".

According to Astrid, also other developments over the last years had gradually changed the socio-cultural landscape of the community. A right wing political tendency had caused an increased scepticism towards what was regarded "a foreign cultural influence" caused by immigration. There was also a charismatic movement that for the time being had a marked influence on the youth.

The traditional differences between the distinct school cultures in the region seemed to be less exposed to change and continued to influence the diversity in the classroom. As an example Astrid would know, based on which primary school each student came from and who their teacher had been, what learning strategies they would be familiar with and which parts of the national curriculum in religious education they would know well and which parts hardly at all.

Astrid's knowledge of her students tended to be of a kind that positioned them in the local social context along these dimensions of difference. Her descriptions often took as their point of departure the students' relation to the religious movements in the community. Her sensitivity in "reading" the classroom situation and the situation of every student in the light of the local socio-cultural and religious context was distinctive for her among the other teacher informants. In the following excerpt, Astrid describes how different the local cultural codes may be even within a few miles distance in her region. She referred to her son who was student at the university and had come home for Christmas, seeing her preparation sheets for next day's RE lesson. Among them were copies of Christmas carols, and this surprised him: Was she going to sing them with her students? Astrid then explained how differences in the local socio-cultural landscape regarding religion might influence the school culture and teaching practices within a few kilometres distance in her region.

Yes, there is some difference, I think. And here they are ... here it is natural, sort of [to sing Christmas carols], and the students like it a lot. So ... but how did I get here? ... Oh, yes, well I am, you see, as a teacher very conscious about avoiding hard confrontations.

The interview with Astrid revealed that local knowledge had informed her while making her professional judgement regarding this delicate issue. She regarded the likeliness of having a confrontation with any student or parent about this classroom activity was very little. In case a dispute had been a likely outcome, she would have avoided the activity. The interview with Astrid took place before the amendment of the Education act in 2008 that changed the overall aims of education in Norway in a more non-confessional direction (KUNNSKAPSDEPARTEMENTET 2009; Skeie 2012). Already before this, however, and around the time of the interview, headlines in public media showed that practice differed considerably regarding how Christmas was reflected in school's activities in December. I understand Astrid's confidence as

being based on knowledge about the strong position of both the traditional prayer house movement and the new charismatic Pentecostal movement in the community. However, her interview also confirms that what may be regarded as "natural" in the sense of being experienced as ordinary and uncontroversial, in these matters may vary considerably between communities and catchments areas within the municipality, and even between classrooms in the same school. Further, it was disputed how sameness and/or diversity in the local religious field may be expressed in the religious education class. In order to avoid "hard confrontations", Astrid therefore had to consider many conflicting sentiments, interests and values on the local level when working with difference. While connecting to her students' lifeworlds in order to build a productive and intellectually challenging class environment, she constantly made complex professional analyses, partly based on these "thick descriptions" of the local cultural scene (Geertz 1973). In her context models for the religious education classes, she combined this extensive and deep local knowledge with interpersonal knowledge shared with individual students and group knowledge. Together these different sources of knowledge gave her the clues for deciding the relevant properties of the classroom situation and to plan her lessons and lead conversations in an inclusive and productive way.

Discussion

While researching the relationship between professional knowledge, productive learning and inclusion in religious education, some experience near concepts surfaced from the data, which turned out to be fruitful. The teachers' use of concepts like "natural", and "innocent" when they talked about their practice, triggered my interest in finding out more about tacit assumptions behind their talk. Analysing in particular their anecdotes, I found that my informants were trying to capture aspects of their interaction and relationships with their students, which they considered positive and fruitful in terms of inclusion.

Further analysis showed that when using the word "natural", the teachers were referring to situations where processes of identity formation and identity management were going on and potentially contradicting interests and values were handled in a well-balanced way. Such processes are regular elements of social life, particularly when young people are together, but in the context of religious education teaching and learning, the personal dimension has been politically sensitive. My analysis shows that issues related to what may be seen as personal, intersects with other elements of what has been called the teacher's context model. In order to perform their work as religious education teachers they continuously use a whole stock of knowledge from this mental reservoir where the personal is but one, but still an important aspect. The religious education teachers in Gunnhild's school were all aware that they were heavily involved in processes of personal reflection and interpersonal exchange, and that much awareness is needed to address this properly. Many hints and explicit utterances throughout fieldwork indicated clearly that class teachers in lower secondary school regarded religious education as a good arena to give these processes

of identity formation extra focus. By doing this, they consciously opposed positions that argue in favour of what may be called a "de-personalisation" of teaching and learning in religious education.

While dealing with the personal dimension, the teachers were drawing on strategies they had found in use among the students themselves to create a "safe space" for communicating about differences. The conversation about the use of hijab exemplifies this. All three teachers expressed an awareness that it takes hard work and persistence to learn to respect and to value unfamiliar differences between the members of the group.

The analysis of anecdotes shows that the teachers refer to certain actions, social situations and developments that stroke a good balance between difference and sameness, uniqueness and conformity and exposure versus anonymity. Sameness, conformity and anonymity may represent the safety of being a fully accepted group member while complying with the group's code of conduct. Difference, uniqueness and exposure represent the freedom of being spontaneous and trying out new presentations of self and ways of contributing as individuals to the community. In short, what the teachers described as "natural" and "innocent" seemed to point to a good balance between enough freedom for the students to present themselves as the persons they were and wanted to be right now, and enough safety represented by a trustworthy social context. This trustworthiness is closely linked to knowing the learning community's set of rules while trusting that somebody (the teacher) or something (the class code) would mark and guard the limits of the individual freedom of the others to turn against you.

This pattern mirrors known features of Norwegian mentality, where the modern tendency towards individualism is checked by conformism in a peculiar combination leading to a strong notion of sameness (Johannessen 2009; Seeberg 2003). In the lifestyle of young people this cultural trait may lead to rather narrow frames of what is considered appropriate expressions of difference in personal style and presentation of self, or a kind of "uniformed individualism" (Egeland 2013).

Here perspectives from theory of inclusive education may offer fruitful insight by characterizing freedom as sufficiently broad "smooth spaces" where the construction of the self is experienced to be open for choice (Allan 2008). All social landscapes are "striated" and "furrowed", but they differ in the sense that some have more smooth spaces and some have furrows that are deeper and steeper (Deleuze & Guattari 1994). In the south-western Norwegian context, religious belonging and commitment seems to be one of those "furrows" that remains difficult to escape from once you find yourself in it, voluntarily or not. Therefore, to express religious belonging and commitment openly among your classmates, carries with it the risk of being ascribed a rather locked and stereotyped religious identity as a dominant social marker (Iversen 2012; Johannessen 2009; Lippe 2011). Young people know that this stereotyped social identity may restrict their ability to roam the smooth spaces of identity formation (Lippe 2011).

What Frida did to minimize the possible negative cost of attaching the Muslim and religious tag too strongly to the Somali-Norwegian boy, was to make his contribution

as much "matter-of-fact-like" as possible. This is professional practice informed by *interpersonal knowledge*.

In Gunnhild's religious education class a more explicit and verbal meta-communicative form developed where rules of a respectful sharing of differences in religious practice and meaning were discussed and a *meta-linguistic* understanding (Bateson 1972, 274) was achieved by the introduction of concepts that could connect between seemingly highly different socio-cultural phenomena from the students backgrounds (Johannessen 2013). Seemingly, the students on a rather subtle level had managed to internalize both the multicultural reality itself and the strong inducement of their teachers to create an inclusive and productive learning environment capable of valuing difference. The importance of the contributions of the teachers in this creative process may vary, as may the contributions of the students. In any case, Gunnhild's class was a reminder of the importance of *knowing the group* with all its internal relationships and its dynamics as a didactic resource.

The religious education teachers presented here, while connecting to the lifeworlds of their students, chose to open up for and draw on, but also sometimes to sanction cultural resources that were activated in the classroom. In these processes, they needed to activate a wide variety of knowledge simultaneously, also including what I have called *local knowledge*. My analysis shows that teachers' knowledge of the surrounding local community is an important component of their knowledge device (Van Dijk 2005), informing their context models for professional practice. This local knowledge comprises the widely accepted socio-cultural premises that form the basis for the students' gradual enculturation into their community. For our purpose we may say it comprises all kinds of knowledge "taken down" from the "great tradition" (Geertz 1983), and then has been interpreted and adapted to local needs in the local community - the "little tradition" (ibid). For teachers to have local knowledge means to know this little tradition, including its local codes of conduct and sets of norms and values. However, it also means to know the different regimes of belonging and loyalty that they and their students must relate to, along with the statuses, roles and identities that follow from these other group memberships. A substantial part of local knowledge therefore will be situational in character. As such it is an important resource for teachers when they try to connect between subject knowledge and their students' experiences and best interests.

Sometimes particular sets of norms and values may be experienced as an obstacle when teachers try to reach their pedagogical aims. Astrid mentioned the dominant negative political attitudes towards religious and cultural diversity that had come with the arrival of a new charismatic movement. Under such circumstances, local knowledge may prove to be even more important in order for the teachers to be able to navigate well and make good professional judgements. Another example of sociocultural phenomena that may hamper the teachers' aim to develop an interreligious dialogue in religious education, is the underlying valuing of sameness identified as a dominant trait in Norwegian mentality (Johannessen 2009; Seeberg 2003). All in all the analysis of Astrid's mental representations of the local socio-cultural patterns and dynamics influencing the learning environment in her classes, revealed to me the

didactical relevance of local knowledge while planning for a relevant and intellectually challenging teaching in religious education.

This far I have identified two different types of contextual knowledge that teachers need to apply when connecting to the students' personal religious experiences in classroom conversations. These are local knowledge and group knowledge, meaning knowledge of the group dynamics of the class in RE. Now to sum up my analysis, I will argue that interpersonal knowledge is the important context model element that connects and modulates between the semantic and episodic elements in the two types of knowledge in such situations and which makes it possible for the teacher to use them in productive and inclusive ways. Firstly, the interpersonal knowledge that floats in the relationship between the religious education teacher and a student and between the students in the same RE class, may have the form of shared personal information about experiences and practices, belonging and beliefs connected to religious or philosophy of life organizations in their community. This may be used as didactical material for building meta-linguistic categories of religious phenomena on an abstract level (Bateson 1972). Secondly, interpersonal knowledge may also be shared personal information, given verbally or non-verbally about what information about religious or philosophy of life practices, belongings and beliefs are too sensitive to talk about in public, what may be talked about to whom and under which conditions. Such metacommunicative categories and understanding (ibid, p. 275), which stems from interacting with the students in class and in face-to-face settings, is of great importance for the teachers when they must modulate elements of subject content knowledge in order to maximize learning for all and maintain an inclusive environment. In that sense, sensitivity stemming from building interpersonal relations with students will bring important information to the teachers' context models. Such information will in turn inform and specify their knowledge of both the group dynamics and the local dynamics and therefore improve and make more relevant their context knowledge for their work in the classroom.

Conclusion

In this article I set out to investigate how religious education teachers think and act as professionals while working with differences among their students in terms of philosophy of life beliefs and experiences. I was particularly interested in the degree to which and in what way contextual knowledge played a role in their professional judgement and how such knowledge was balanced against knowing the student. My analysis has shown that to be able to act professionally to the best of each learner in terms of inclusion, participation, wellbeing and learning outcome, the three religious education teachers interviewed made use of what I, with reference to Van Dijk, will call interpersonal knowledge (Van Dijk 2005). In turn, this interpersonal knowledge informed and was informed by two different forms of contextual knowledge, which I have called group knowledge and local knowledge (Van Dijk 2005, Johannessen 2013).

The professional talk of the religious education teachers interviewed and observed showed to be autobiographical and episodic in character and particularly sensitive to the relationship between the teacher and the learners regarding the content, quality and meaning characterizing their relationships. An important element was the teachers' knowledge of the student as a person. In terms of content, their focus was on the students' personal experience with religious meaning, belonging and practice, informed and articulated through content knowledge in religious education. Content knowledge was used as a bridge where personal experiences and knowledge could meet and be shared within the framework of the professional teacher – learner relationship. The interpersonal knowledge gained through these dyadic relationships became an important didactical resource in expanding and enriching the teachers' understanding of their religious education classrooms while they were striving to connect to the students' lifeworlds, work with difference and build inclusive learning environments.

Concerning quality, the relationships described were characterized by mutual trust, respect, engagement and willingness to share. However, the teachers also described moments of tension and insecurity where the classroom conversations could have come out of control or where individual students' openness in class could cause that they were ridiculed or hurt on other arenas. Also in these cases, interpersonal knowledge was important to clarify the situation and minimize damage.

In terms of meaning, the teachers were aware that an important aspect of working with religious and philosophy of life differences in religious education was its potential for connecting with the identity work typical for the lower secondary school age group. The interviewees emphasized the potential of the subject to contribute to a wider tolerance for difference while expanding the smooth spaces of accepted differences and evening out the deep furrows that limit individual students in their identity management. My analysis here confirms that considerable contextual awareness is needed to realize this potential, both in terms of the established norm for diversity in the local community, the explicit and implicit codes of conduct and communication in the classroom and those differences and behaviours that transcend and challenge these norms. To be effective, however, such contextual awareness also needs to be informed by interpersonal knowledge between the teacher and each student.

For all the three teachers interviewed, what surfaced from the analysis was the importance of their relationships with their students and the interpersonal knowledge they created. In some situations, this interpersonal knowledge connected predominantly with group knowledge of the class in religious education, in others predominantly with local knowledge of the community, but in all episodes all these three dimensions of knowledge were acted out and interacted as necessary elements of the teachers' context models.

The main responsibility of the teachers will always be the student as "a new beginner" for whom school is the main opportunity to "come into the world" and who has the right to be met as a unique, different individual "capable of its own beginning" (Arendt 1998). In order to facilitate this encounter between "beginners" and society,

teachers in the end will always have to rely on their professional judgment. In this article, I have pointed especially to the importance of interpersonal knowledge to inform this judgment.

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