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Conditions for Teaching and Learning Religious Education (RE) – Perspectives of Teachers and Pupils at the Beginning of the 6th Grade in Sweden

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Abstract: In this article empirical findings from interviews with teachers of three classes of 12-year-old pupils are presented, together with questionnaire-responses from these 54 pupils. The interviews focus on teaching aims for Religious Education (RE), a subject that in Sweden, besides dealing with religion, also explores other kinds of beliefs, ethics and life questions. In the questionnaire the pupils are asked to solve four RE tasks with content that is central from a Swedish curriculum perspective. The research involves pupils at the beginning of the sixth grade and the purpose of this article is to look at the teachers' aims and the pupils' responses, and consider what these may indicate about conditions for teaching and learning RE in these classes. The findings show that the perspectives of the pupils at the beginning of the sixth grade seem to be rather far from the expectations of the RE syllabus. The pupils' statements are rather vague with regard to religion as a phenomenon and there are few examples of pupils interpreting religious symbols in a way that is useful in further analysis. While existential and ethical plots, messages and point of views are comparatively easy to describe, it is harder to express multiple perspectives, reasons, comparisons and questions. A problem for the teachers in developing the perspectives of their pupils is that they find it hard to say what kind of general difficulties pupils have in RE, a fact that makes it hard to direct the teaching. Another challenge is that the teachers' RE-aims are rather overarching and primarily related to fostering fundamental values. What improves the conditions for teaching and learning is the teachers' concern for the pupils and their relationships with the teacher and with each other, a factor which is of vital importance for learning and which can also be used as a specific teaching method in subject matter education.

KEYWORDS: DISCURSIVE PRACTICE, SPEECH GENRE, LANGUAGE, RELIGIOUS EDUCATION, TEACHING, LEARNING, INTERVIEWS, TEACHERS, PUPILS, QUESTIONNAIRE, 12 YEAR OLD.

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The central aim of education is, of course, for pupils to develop and learn. Seen against this background, it is not surprising that questions about factors that enhance these processes receive a lot of attention. Two overarching factors that have been brought out as the most vital in explaining learning are the *pupils* themselves and their *teachers*. According to John Hattie's meta-studies, the pupils, especially their previous knowledge, are responsible for about 50% of the variance of achievements, and factors related to the teacher account for about 30% of the variance (Hattie, 2003). It is therefore all the more surprising that research on these topics is not more frequent. In religious education (RE), research on both of topics is rare, which holds for Sweden as well as, for example, Great Britain and Germany (Jackson, 2004, p. 22; Larsson, 2004, p. 308; Osbeck, 2012; Schweitzer, Ziebertz & Riegel, 2009). Simply put, there is not much information available concerning either RE teachers' aims with their teaching or the pupils' knowledge, i.e. the state of RE, which according to Hattie also gives information about learning outcomes.

This article, which draws on material from an ethnographical study in three grade-six classes with children who are about 12 years old, contributes to this sparsely researched area by examining the aims of the teachers as expressed in initial interviews and the responses of the pupils in the first RE questionnaire given to them in this project. *The purpose of the article is to look at the teachers' aims and the pupils' responses, and consider what these may indicate about conditions for teaching and learning religious education in these three sixth-grade classes.*

The research questions are: Firstly, what kind of aims do the four teachers express with regard to their RE teaching? Secondly, what can be said about the responses of the pupils to the questionnaire, which focuses on skills related to Swedish RE? Thirdly, on the basis of these findings, what may be said about conditions for the development of the pupils' RE skills?

In order to interpret and make sense of the perspectives of the teachers and pupils, their perspectives are presented in relation to accounts of: 1) the knowledge field of RE; 2) actions and skills important in enhancing pupils' knowledge; 3) aims of RE teachers as described in previous research and 4) pupils' difficulties in RE according to available studies. These accounts are placed in a frame of how one can understand subject matter knowledge and learning in this field.

RE knowledge, teaching and learning

A study of how conditions for teaching and learning RE are affected by teachers' aims and pupils' skills needs a frame that offers an understanding of RE knowledge, teaching and learning. The theoretical perspective that works as an overarching frame here is related to discursive theories of (re-)construction of knowledge and socio-cultural perspectives on learning (see e.g. Wertsch, 1991; Bakhtin, 1986; Davies, 2003; Foucault, 2002; Säljö, 2000). Here it is fundamental that our understanding of reality is related to the socially and discursively structured communities where we are active. The function of language cannot be stressed enough.

A possible way to describe subject matter knowledge is as languages which relate to certain spheres of reality (Postman, 1998; Skogar, 2000), through which pupils will gradually become able to think, speak and act in a richer and more nuanced way. Knowledge of RE can – based on its double aim of learning about and learning from religion (Grimmitt, 1987) – be described both as a “language of religions” and as a “language of life”.

However language and concepts are not something that we have or do not have (see e.g. Säljö, 1995, p. 12). Different kinds of language are privileged, used and developed in different practices, which means that we are linguistic in different ways in different settings (Skogar, 1992, p. 6; Wertsch, 1991, p. 12). An RE class is one discursive practice where a language of religion and a language of life are practised, but all RE classes do not develop the same kind of language. Discursive practices develop their own hegemonic speech genres, where form and content are intertwined (Bakhtin, 1986), which affects the pupils’ potential RE learning, since a hegemonic speech genre influences the expressions, phrases and concepts that can be heard and said in a setting. A hegemonic speech genre may be understood to be negotiated by teacher and pupils, who all are depending on it for the opportunity to express themselves (Osbeck & Lied, 2011).

Planning for RE learning can partly be understood as launching and encouraging practices of speech genres concerning religion and life, which invite, allow and open up for new, specific and varied sets of concepts and narratives. This is, of course, also related to the activities that are on-going, the tools that are being used and the people who are present. Learning RE is related to opportunities to practise sharp, critical and conceptually rich speech genres concerning religion and life, and to enrich these genres. A richer and sharper language will make it possible for pupils to interpret and analyse different kinds of traditions, their surrounding communities and also their personal life in a more multifaceted way.

The knowledge field of RE

From a school perspective, teachers’ aims and pupils’ skills are necessarily related to the state’s educational aims, stated in the curriculum. This does not mean that educational research has to apply these perspectives as norms. It is an important task of research to scrutinise, criticise and perhaps argue in favour of other perspectives (e.g. Dahlin, 1989, p. 4). However, the curriculum cannot be overlooked.

Internationally the current knowledge field is often named religious education (RE). In Sweden the school subject is literally called “knowledge of religion” and has been a non-confessional, neutral and plural subject since the sixties. In its present form both learning-about and learning-from aspects are stressed. Paying attention to pupils’ life questions has traditionally been important, although the most recent curriculum of 2011 prescribes a more descriptive-analytical approach than before (Selander, 2011).

The current syllabus is structured into three areas: aims, central content and knowledge requirements, and the central knowledge area is divided into four sections:

“Religions and other outlooks on life”, “Religion and society”, “Identity and life issues” and finally “Ethics”. Therefore the name of the subject is a bit misleading. The content is broader than religion. The teaching of “Identity and life issues” should, for instance, take into account how “different life issues, such as what is important in life and what it means to be a good friend, are depicted in popular culture.” (The Swedish National Agency for Education, 2011, p. 178 f.). In “Ethics” the teaching should among other things pay attention to ethical concepts and what it may mean to do good. When “Religions and other outlooks on life” is on the agenda, the pupils aged 10-12 years old are supposed to work with topics such as rituals, holy places, key ideas and religious narratives in the world religions. Also the concept of religion itself is stressed as central. “Religion and society” focuses on the relation between religion and society, such as, for instance, the influence of Christianity upon values and culture in Swedish society. The movement of RE towards being a more descriptive and analytical subject is most obvious with regard to knowledge requirements and central content. The section relating to aims still stresses the importance of pupils’ personal involvement, interpretations and a development towards a “...personal attitude to life and an understanding of how they and others are thinking and living.” (p. 176).

In summary, the Swedish knowledge field RE is broad, including life questions, philosophies of life and ethics. This sketch of the syllabus provides a background for understanding teachers’ and pupils’ RE perspectives.

Actions and skills that enhance pupils’ knowledge

A deep and multifaceted understanding of the knowledge field is an important competence for a teacher according to John Hattie. In a paper focusing on what distinguishes expert teachers from experienced teachers (2003), he highlights three broad competences. Besides 1) a multifaceted understanding of the subject, Hattie stresses the importance of the teacher being directed towards 2) relationships and the classroom climate as well as 3) goals and working processes. For all these competences a crucial aspect is the ability to communicate with the pupils.

Behind what is here referred to as a deep and multifaceted understanding of the subject, one finds a teacher who has made the subject his/her own, who can be flexible in his/her teaching, adapting the teaching to the pupils and to other themes that may arise. A detailed written plan is seldom used but instead a clear mental intention is present that governs the teaching. Where possible, themes are linked to other themes as well as to previous teaching of the same theme. The profession is practised with ease, which makes it possible for the teacher to be aware of parallel processes in the classroom and to read the pupils.

The fact that the teacher is focused on relationships and classroom climate means that she builds her teaching contextually in relation to a specific group of pupils, their experiences and their resources. It also means that she shows respect and concern for the pupils. She creates a tolerant atmosphere, where mistakes are acceptable, questions

are frequently asked and engagement is the norm. The teacher contributes to the pupils' self-esteem as learning subjects and has high expectations of them.

To be goal and process aware means firstly that one is clear and explicit about goals and expectations. Secondly, it means that one is aware of the on-going process as it relates to the goals and in that sense aware of one's current location in this process. The teacher grasps easily what the pupils can and cannot do, as well as what they are more interested or less interested in. Such awareness makes it possible to carry out relevant actions to enhance the learning of the pupils. Central actions are, for example, giving relevant feedback, formulating challenging tasks – not too easy and not too difficult – and problematizing and generating hypotheses about one's teaching.

In relation to the theoretical framework presented earlier, it may be observed that the contextual awareness of the teachers is stressed. One might say that the teacher encourages a discursive practice with a hegemonic speech genre of curiosity, questions and subject focus.

Aims of RE teachers

Hattie's studies show the importance of being clear about educational goals, but in RE we do not know very much about the kind of goals teachers set for their teaching and the methods they use to achieve these goals. Previous research has focused on teachers of older children, in lower- and upper-secondary school (about 13-19 years old). Here two studies are summarised: one interview study with four upper-secondary teachers (Osbeck, 2009), and one questionnaire study with 120 lower- and upper-secondary teachers (Osbeck & Petterson, 2009). This will mirror the aims of the teachers as presented in this article.

Goals and aims

The interview study (2009) reveals a dimension that describes teachers' various objectives with regard to RE, which is similar to the dimension "learning-about/learning-from religion". The aims of RE can be described as being to provide information about society or to interpret existence to a greater or lesser extent. The aims of the four teachers were described as follows: 1) to provide opportunities to understand how phenomena are interconnected 2) to contribute to religious literacy and continuing progression 3) to give opportunities to see oneself in the meeting with other and 4) to shape an ability to see the conditions of life and human potential. The questionnaires, which tested support for learning-about perspectives versus learning-from perspectives, showed that 95% of the respondents backed up the statement measuring learning-about and 49% supported the learning-from statement.

When the teachers speak about the goals of RE, not only do they pay attention to facts and skills but they also stress goals connected to fostering fundamental values and goals for generic skills (Osbeck, 2010). Hence, there seems to be reason to divide the learning-from goal into at least two parts: a personal and a societal dimension (Skeie, 2011).

Methods

The survey included 17 teaching methods about which questions were asked, both in relation to how often they were used and in relation to how important they were considered. Three methods stood out as being often or very often used: “explaining religious issues in front of the students”, “discussing religious or societal questions” and “work on religious issues in small groups”. When methods that were sometimes used were included, three more methods emerged: “telling stories from the religious traditions”, “seeing films on video or dvd” and “reading text from textbooks”. Among the three methods considered most important, two were also often or rather often used: “explaining religious issues in front of the students” and “telling stories from the religious traditions”. The third important method was rather seldom practised: “visiting places of relevance out of the school yard”.

The teachers in this article are teaching younger pupils and have received less education than the teachers in Osbeck and Pettersson’s study, and therefore it can be noted that “telling stories out of the religious traditions” and “seeing films on video or dvd” were more common for teachers with less education and “reading text from textbooks” was more common for teachers of younger pupils.

The three methods most commonly marked as “often” or “very often” used, are also frequently mentioned by the four interviewed teachers (2009). They say, for instance, that together with their pupils they: analyse traditions in relation to, for instance, a life-view model, analyse and discuss news with RE knowledge as an analytical tool, and also discuss existential questions. In addition, study visits are used and are regarded as central. But the interviews also reveal perspectives that are not seen in the questionnaire study. The relationships between a teacher and his/her pupils are stressed as more important than the teaching methods. The teacher’s commitment to his/her profession, to the student and the subject is pointed out as central. It is emphasised that it is vital to use your own personal relation to aspects of the subject. Also the importance of having a clear direction when teaching, even in an informal discussion, is stressed. Thus, it may be noticed, in relation to both the theoretical frame used and Hattie’s findings, that the interviewed teachers stress the contextual and communicative dimension of being a teacher.

Pupils’ difficulties in RE

Since studies of pupils’ RE skills are rare, findings from national evaluations initiated by the Swedish National Agency for Education are important. The most recent of these was carried out in 2003 and some of its central findings will be briefly summarised here, along with a few results of previous research.

The national evaluation of RE from 2003 involved 955-1800 pupils in grade nine, (about 16 years old) and related to the three knowledge areas of the curriculum of 1994: “Issues concerning life and its interpretation”, “Ethics” and “Belief and tradition” (Jönsson & Liljefors Persson, 2006). It shows that generally the pupils are interested in life questions and they regularly think about issues such as the world and

its future, the meaning of life and what happens when one dies. However, life questions do not seem to be on the teaching agenda very often. For the three most popular life questions, less than 40% of the pupils state that they have discussed these questions during lessons (p. 20).

From the questions related to “Belief and tradition”, it appears that knowledge about the Christian festivals is greater than knowledge about the Islamic ones. About 90% of the respondents connect Easter and Christmas with Christianity and about 65% link Ramadan to Islam. 13% also give correct answers concerning the meaning of Ramadan (p. 29). When they are asked to give an example of a religious story that shows how one is supposed to act towards other people, 7% retell a story and interpret it.

In relation to the sub-subject of ethics, the pupils perform quite a few tasks where they are supposed to evaluate different alternatives, chose among them and give reasons for their answers. Special attention was given to the pupils’ perspectives in relation to the democratic values stated in the curriculum. One finding is that solidarity seems to be a value of less importance for the respondents of 2003 in comparison to the respondents of 1992 (see, for example, p. 37, 41). Another finding is that it is difficult for the pupils to argue about ethical issues, a result in line with previous evaluations showing that it is harder to defend a statement than to state a point of view and support democratic values (1992, p. 174).

Another evaluation from 1998 pays attention to the degree to which the pupils notice dilemmas in the tasks, discuss more than one cause, and ask questions (Dahlin, Kåräng & Osbeck, 1998). The evaluation shows that these skills were not very common and the differences between age groups were generally small. “Civic and moral competence”, the focus of the study, was found to be related to language competence (p. 131), which in relation to the theoretical frame used here can be interpreted as underlining the importance of the kinds of speech genres that are practised in RE classrooms.

Three schools, four teachers and three classes

The empirical studies in this article include three schools, four teachers and three classes. The teachers are called Christer, Elisabeth, Nina and Hans. Christer and Elisabeth work together with 33 pupils at an inner city school, here called X, with 210 pupils. They teach almost the whole range of subjects and have been working as teachers for 30 and 12 years respectively. Lately, they have been working with new sixth graders each year. They describe the school region as a mixture of two housing areas where one is dominated by private houses and families with good jobs and the other area as dominated by flats where the families sometimes have difficulty finding employments.

Nina teaches Swedish and social studies to a class of 16 pupils at a small school, Y, with 62 pupils. She is not, however, the mentor of the class. Nina has been a teacher for seven years but almost exclusively of younger children. She describes the school

area as a typical industrial village area where unemployment has resulted in social problems for quite a few families. There are also people who commute to cities in the neighbourhood.

Hans teaches in a smaller municipality where more than 50% of the inhabitants commute. The school Z, which has 105 pupils, is located in an area dominated by detached houses. Hans describes the pupils of the school as children with a lot of experience, which they also bring to their classrooms. In Hans' class there are 16 pupils of whom he has been the mentor for two years. He has been a class teacher, teaching the whole range of subjects, for more than 20 years. Hans describes the school as a school of which teachers, parents and pupils are proud.

Goals, content and methods of education, especially in RE

The teachers' perspectives on their general teaching commission, their goals, content and methods for RE from the initial interviews will be studied in terms of what these may indicate about the conditions that they create for learning.

The general commission

Something that all of the teachers have in common is that they consider it to be of the utmost importance for the children to have acquired a sense of security, happiness and curiosity *by the time they leave the sixth grade*. It is an overarching goal of their teaching to establish these conditions although they emphasise it in different ways.

For Christer and Elisabeth, security as a goal is related to experiences of school in general but also to ways of working in order to learn self-assurance. They also stress that it is important that the pupils leaving sixth grade are on their way to reaching the final goals of compulsory school.

Elisabeth: The commission that we have had is that everybody should be on their ways to achieve the goals. They should be used to how secondary school works. They should feel safe in this environment.

[...]

Christer: Yes it is not a commission that we have from above directly, that I am going to say now, but it is something that Elisabeth and I have worked with, and it is to present different ways to achieve knowledge in different... They have therefore made their own books, they have made wall charts, they have made a power point, they have read – as for example here – read and answered questions, they have made an over-head presentation. [...] The aim with all this all the way through is of course is to try to get them to find a way where they feel secure in their own knowledge acquisition.

In Hans' speech, security is more related to a general joyful perspective on life and on activities at school, a perspective that he wants his pupils to develop.

Hans: *Security and joy are the most important words for me; that school isn't a place where you didn't feel good. You should feel secure and you should think it is fun to go there. That is the most important thing. Then - different facts and so on are of course important, you try to cram that into their heads as much as you can, but it is not the main thing, definitely not for me as a person.*

[...]

I try in all subjects really to plant in them some kind of zest for life, a "God-how-wonderful-life-is-feeling", as much as I can. To exaggerate that almost, because I think that it is a good driving force to learn things that you... "Oh, that would be fun and that I want to do!"

Nina's point of view may be understood as being between the two positions described above. She stresses the security or confidence in knowing how one can find out things, the joy of being able to learn more and the desire to learn more, a curiosity as the central thing that she wishes that her pupils to have gained when they leave grade six.

Nina: *The desire to continue to learn, learning as something positive, that you still want to continue and that it is fun going to school. The challenge... like knowing that you can, even if it is a bit difficult right now, "Keep trying for a little bit longer and it will work". That you learn all the time. That they become curious people, eager to learn. That is what you strive for all the time. And that you don't have to know everything but you should know where you can find facts about things. I think that is important. That you get the tools where you can search for more information.*

To make it possible to *develop* a sense of security and self-assurance in learning processes and gradually achieve the goals of the curriculum, Christer and Elisabeth emphasise *how* the teacher provides frames and tools for the pupils' own work. There are many ways to learn and the teacher must give opportunities for the pupils to test a broad range of ways. To be explicit with expectations during this process is extremely important.

Elisabeth: *That they are aware before we start a new area what will be expected of them, that they are prepared beforehand, that we tell them: "This is the way we are going to work with this and this will be expected of you when we have gone through it and this is how much time we have".*

[...]

Christer: *When we train them in taking responsibility and acquiring knowledge, when we present different ways of learning, it is very important that we give them instruments [clear instructions] to do that.*

In addition to this, Christer and Elisabeth also say that it is vital for a teacher to be well-informed, good at communication and to have a passionate interest in the themes being dealt with.

Like Elisabeth and Christer, Nina emphasises the importance of working with a variety of learning methods in order to maintain the pupils' curiosity and interest in learning. But she also stresses the importance of creating an atmosphere where the

pupils dare to be critical and to question statements. Here she sees the dynamic of the group as essential. It is important that there are positive leaders and a tolerant atmosphere.

Nina: You try to cater for all learning styles. [...] You try to find parts in all work that are suitable, because you can't... We are not suited to doing everything, all of us. They [the pupils in question] are very eager to learn and having discussions comes very easy to them, and you want that of course. That they dare to question, that they dare to wonder why and how etc. [...] If there are positive leaders who strengthen and encourage their mates to dare to talk, to step forward, then it is of course easier.

The sort of security and joy that Hans wants to safeguard develops, according to him, in relation to a teacher who sees the children, who has close contact with them and their parents.

Hans: It is important that everybody is seen [...], that they can come to me if anything happens. I have a lot of contact with their parents. [...] It takes some time but I think it is worth a lot.

The zest for life, the kind of curiosity about the surroundings that he wants to create through his teaching, develops, according to Hans, in communication with the pupils. He tries to ask questions that make them reflect. Together they have created an atmosphere where both he and the children like talking, Hans maintains.

The commission as an RE teacher

There are also many similarities among the teachers when it comes to *central goals of RE*, what they want their pupils to have achieved through the teaching. All of them want to show the pupils that there is a variety in peoples' ways of looking at life. They want to create acceptance and respect for these differences but also to shape insights concerning peoples' similarities and common limitations. As earlier, their emphases and ways of expressing their perspectives differ.

Christer and Elisabeth particularly stress that they want to depict different ways of thinking through their RE teaching, how deeply rooted these perspectives can be and how important it is to help the pupils to see that and relativize what is seen as exotic.

Christer: To give insight into different peoples' different ways of thinking, how one thinks in different religions and really try to convey the idea that nothing is really right or wrong and that people have to respect each other and must understand that people can look at things differently.

[...]

Elisabeth: And how deeply hereditary some religions really are, that you also include that. It also looks very different depending on where one comes from. [She develops this later on in relation to different conditions for girls and boys].

[...]

Christer: We usually mention in a joking way, because they think that it is a bit odd when we read about Buddhism [Hinduism] and they have their

elephant nose and do different things, that it is also very strange on the 24th of December when a masked man dressed in red comes here and so on. Like trying to make them understand "Yes, but they must think that it is very strange the things that here we think are very normal".

Nina emphasises the importance of similarities among religions, how all religions express ideas about how one should be as a human being and how one can live a good life. This is the central goal of her RE teaching.

Nina: That we see that there are similarities in all religions, that it roughly speaking comes down to the same thought; how one is as a human being and how one should live one's life in a good way. That is the basic idea in all religions and I think that this is the important thing to know that they take this with them.

To Hans it is most central that the children become aware about prejudices and its problems from his RE teaching.

Hans: To talk about prejudice, what it is and what it can lead to and what one can do in order to defend oneself against it. That is what I think is important with RE.

The *methods* that the teachers use to achieve these goals differ. Christer and Elisabeth have an established practice where for six weeks the pupils read textbooks and answer questions individually. This is partly due to the teachers' perception of RE as consisting of a lot of facts and their ambition to present different learning methods to be used in different fields in social studies. The method and the area fit well together, according to the teachers. They also find the questionnaires in the textbook helpful. The pupils receive basic information about each religion. Often aesthetic learning processes are also used. The teachers stress that an important factor in their RE teaching is that they remain neutral, that the pupils can feel secure as they know that their teachers do not judge religions. "We just communicate how it actually appears" (Elisabeth).

Hans' and Nina's stories about how they work in order to achieve their goals are more similar. They do not describe any course in detail, as Christer and Elisabeth do, and therefore describe their RE teaching more generally. Both stress the importance of class discussions in RE.

Nina: I still believe very much in discussions, that one can talk, that they can ask questions and have thoughts. And then that you capture... If something comes up, then you have to try to discuss that and perhaps put aside what you had originally planned.

Hans says that it is central to the discussions in his classroom that he uses and relates to everyday events, which can be events that the pupils have told the class about previously. In that way the children are inspired to talk about their experiences and Hans gets a repertoire of possible stories to use, for example, in the work against prejudice, which is a central RE goal of Hans'.

Hans: For instance I have a boy whose brother has been meditating in India. Of course: "Tell us! What is this? What do they do?" That kind of thing in

order to... "Oh, do people do that? Has the person who lives here in [the name of the municipality] done that?" And "Yes there's nothing strange about that."

Both Hans and Nina relate that they have sometimes experienced *difficulties in motivating* their pupils for RE and explain how this has affected them as teachers. For Nina it is therefore essential to find modern angles within religion, often with help from films. Hans tries to avoid the heading Religion and goes directly to a specific issue in his teaching.

All the teachers were asked about which *difficulties with learning in RE* they have noticed their pupils having and which strategies they have used in order to solve these difficulties. These turned out to be hard questions. Elisabeth and Christer maintained that they had not noticed anything special. But later they describe how at least one pupil had difficulties in understanding the concept of reincarnation and how the term "level", common in computer games, made all the difference.

Christer: There was a pupil, we were talking about Hinduism, and he didn't really understand the thing with being reborn and then by coincidence we used the word that you reach different "levels" [originally in English], and then, you could see from the look in his eyes, then he understood completely what we were talking about.

Nina mentions the motivation problem as a learning difficulty in RE.

Nina: I can't say that they had difficulties with anything [special] but I guess it was to keep the interest alive. That was the difficulty.

As a possible explanation for the low interest in RE, Hans suggests that the subject's requirements for abstract thought may be difficult for some pupils and result in low interest. He also stresses that some people do not reflect on life very much. Hans considers that a challenge of RE. He thinks that it is easier for a pupil to improve his/her knowledge when it comes to facts and harder to do so when it comes to identifying relations and making comparisons. The tool that Hans uses here is class communication. He directs questions also to pupils that do not automatically get involved in the discussions. He gives the pupils hints about connections during the class discussions and creates debate that he believes will also develop the thinking skills of pupils who find this kind of abstract reasoning difficult.

Hans: [Examples of hints about connections when they, for example, focus on the Roman Empire:] "One was called Augustus; Do you recognise this?" "Well, yes! Tax registration...!" And that is something that you often do through conversations. [...] If you tried that task as a written question, then you have half the class and the other half is not with you at all. They just sit there looking completely confused. But if we talk about it then you see a pupil that.. "But.. Yes! How..." They are following you much more [in comparison to an individual written task]. There you get a blank sheet of paper back. It hasn't given the person anything [...] The group forms much of the teaching content. In my work at any rate.

Findings from the initial pupil questionnaire

The four RE tasks which the pupils in the three classes worked with are related to the four sections of Swedish RE. In the first part of the test the pupils are presented with paraphrases of two stories: Aesop's fable about the fox and the stork, and the bible story of the prodigal son here called "A young man and his dad" instead of the Swedish bible heading, "The lost son". The version used in this task did not include the son who stayed at home. By looking at various questions about messages, similarities, rightness and wrongness, fairness and unfairness, the task is designed to capture the pupils' ways of expressing and arguing for their ethical and existential interpretations but also how informed they are about a central Christian story. In the second part of the test the pupils are confronted with two pictures and one imaginary situation. The first picture, showing both a mosque and a church in the background of a square in Stockholm, was chosen in order to see whether and how the pupils identify and make sense of religious symbols. Could the picture have been taken 100 years ago? Why? Why not? In the other picture, a boy is reading in a synagogue after becoming Bar Mitzvah. The pupils' ways of interpreting the picture, reading the religious symbols and making comparisons to other religions as well as arguing are investigated with a couple of questions. In the imaginary situation, the pupils are asked to write questions to a classmate with an unknown religion who is willing to answer questions about her religion but not to speak freely. What will they ask in order to get as much information as possible? In all these questions a skilful use of academic language is a central resource.

Generally, it is quite clear that these tasks are demanding. This means that one risks assessing the pupils' interest, patience, energy and degree of adaptation to the school context as much as their knowledge, skills and abilities in the RE field. Despite this reservation, there is much to learn from how the pupils solve these tasks in this context.

Two stories in relation to each other

The first task concerns interpretations of the two stories in relation to each other. The responses reveal concepts that are used by pupils in order to express ethical and existential interpretations and points of view in this specific case. Through the analyses of the responses, it is also possible to get ideas about what concepts would have worked as resources if they had been in use. Some of the concepts that were used were surprising but seemed to work effectively in the pupils' descriptions. The responses also show how idiomatic expressions and proverbs are effective tools in making ethical messages clear. Despite the instructions, pointing out the option of expressing more than one interpretation or standpoint, few respondents chose to do that. It was also rare that the pupils wrote questions that could be discussed in class, despite having been asked to do so. Among the few answers involving potential questions for class discussions there were quite a few statements instead of questions. Furthermore, the responses show that it was rare for similarities among the stories to be identified and expressed, which could be related to difficulties in interpreting the

stories on an abstract level. Generally speaking, points of view were more frequently expressed than justifications and arguments for one's position.

The message of Aesop's fable is most often understood to be about how victimization tends to create a spiral of revenge. "One should not treat anybody badly because that person could become sad or angry and do the same thing as revenge" (Z, 2, boy; i.e. stated by Pupil 2 at School Z who is a boy). The bible story is interpreted by most pupils as being about the importance of taking good care of one's economical resources. Three versions can be identified. Firstly, that you should not waste *all* your money. Secondly, that you should not waste all your money *immediately*. Thirdly, that you should not waste all your money on *unnecessary* things: "That you should not waste everything that you have and you should not throw away your money on entertainment" (Y, 11, girl).

A central concept that is mentioned in comments on the fable is revenge and, with regard to the bible story, the concept of forgiveness is mentioned, which also indicates an alternative interpretation of the latter story. "[A young man and his dad] is about a child that does not think twice and wastes all his money but is loved anyway. That you should be able to forgive." (Z, 7, girl). Concepts which are not present but could have been used in order to clarify points that are hinted at are, for instance, injustice (oförrätt), reconciliation (försoning) and unconditional (ovillkorad) [love]. The unexpected concepts and expressions came from the everyday vocabulary of young people. These could be seen as slangy and in certain contexts unsuitable. Despite this the expressions turned out to perform a specific and important clarifying function for the pupils who used them. There were, for instance, a considerable number of the pupils who explained that what the fox actually did was to "fuck with" the stork (jävlas med). One pupil also evaluated the action of the stork and maintained that it was good that "the fox was owned (ägd) [by the stork]" (Z, 3, girl). Examples of proverbs that are used by the pupils in order to sum up the ethical messages of the two stories are "to get a taste of your own medicine" [att få smaka på sin egen medicin] and "a penny saved is a penny earned" [den som spar han har].

The welcome given by the dad is, in particular, understood as being a correct and important action in the bible story. "The dad did the right thing in welcoming the son and loving him although he was poor." (X, 32, girl). Not only is the dad's action regarded as right, but quite often also the son's approach when he came home. "That the young man went back with the intention of working in order to get the money." (Z, 6, boy). Being kind is stressed as a value in itself and as a reason why, for instance, the dad's action is right. Other pupils argue for their point of view by stressing the good consequences such as greater opportunities for satisfied needs (food and work) and the preservation of a relationship is also mentioned. "[Welcoming and forgiving the son was right because] the son was able to live with his dad." (Z, 3, girl)

The son's way of spending money is identified as an unjust action in the bible story. As mentioned above, different aspects of this act are emphasised. The reasons for regarding the action as wrong also differ. Some argue in relation to ideas of what one should or should not do. A few maintain for instance that one should respect a gift

and they thereby point towards gifts as valuable in themselves. "You should not sell things that you have received as gifts." (X, 15, boy). Others consider an action wrong because of the good consequences that would have followed if the action had *not* been done. "If he had not wasted his money, he would not have had to starve." (Z, 14, girl).

An action that is frequently regarded as right in Aesop's fable is the repeated dinner invitation issued by the stork. It is sometimes argued that this is something that you should do. Retribution seems to constitute a value, a right, in itself. "I think the stork had the right to do the same thing." (Y, 8, girl). But the action is also sometimes argued for on the basis of the good consequences of the action. "Since he [the fox] had to experience it himself, he will not do it again." (Z, 15, boy).

A considerable number of the pupils stress offering food in a way that makes it impossible to eat as an example of an unjust action in the fable. But revenge is also frequently considered to be unjust. "The stork did wrong because he was mean in return." (Y, 14, boy). Being anti-revenge can be regarded a value in itself, explaining why an action is wrong, but spiral effects, consequences of actions, can be given as reasons for why the action is wrong. "One should not take revenge. Because then it will keep on all the time." (X, 24, girl).

Finally it is significant that six of 54 children claim that they have heard the biblical story before, three state that the story comes from the Bible and one pupil answers the question about whether they have heard another title for the story "the vanished son".

A square in Stockholm

From the answers regarding the picture of the square in Stockholm, one can conclude that it is difficult to notice and interpret religious symbols. 12 of the 54 pupils mention the moons on the mosque when they are asked to describe and explain what they see in the picture. Two of them use the moons to identify the building as a mosque and another two identify it as an Islamic church. Three use the information as reasons for why the picture cannot have been taken in Stockholm 100 years ago. "I think that the religions were not on good terms with each other in those days." (X, 19, boy). "Back then there were no mosques." (Y, 13, boy). "The Muslims were probably not welcome in those days." (Z, 9, girl).

Bar Mitzvah

The findings of the other picture task show that 16 of the pupils identified the boy as Jewish and here the reason given most frequently for this identification is the Israeli flag with its star, shown in the background. Two pupils base their argument on the Torah scrolls that the boy reads from. There are only a few pupils who write answers to the questions about what the community wants to demonstrate with the celebration and about similarities in other traditions.

A classmate with an unknown religion

The most frequent questions about religion that are put to the classmate with an unknown religion can be placed in five major categories where the last category differs a bit from the other four. The questions are about:

1) the name of the religion or a God,

“What is the name of your God? Which God or religion do you believe in?” (Y, 4, boy).

2) regulations

“Is there something special in your religion that you are not allowed to do? Can you eat whatever you like?” (X, 25, girl).

3) special practices

“Do you do something special? Do you have fasting?” (X, 29, boy).

4) festivals

“Do you celebrate Christmas? Do you have any other festival that I do not have?” (Z, 15, boy).

5) the classmate’s subjective position in relation to his/her religion.

“Why have you chosen this specific religion? (Y, 8, girl).

“Do you have any rules that you do not like?” (Z, 12, girl).

It is significant that there are only two pupils who have asked questions about a special text and one other who asked about a possible place of worship. Even if the categories above are the most frequent categories, they include very few responses. About 15 pupils have not written questions that can be related to the task in a comprehensible way. It also appears that some pupils have confused “religion” with “region” in their answers. The concepts have quite different meanings but are pronounced in a similar way in Swedish. Because of the misunderstanding the pupils ask questions about a geographical area but use the word religion. “Which religion do you come from? Is it a beautiful religion? Is it usually hot or cold? Is it a poor religion?” (X, 24, girl). But also other pupils associate an unknown religion with coming from another country in such a way that they ask questions about the geographic area instead of the religion. “Which language do you speak? Which country do you come from? How old do you have to be to be allowed to drive a car or a moped?” (Y, 2, girl).

Concluding summary and discussion

So, what can be said about the responses of the pupils in relation to previous studies of pupils’ RE, the syllabus and the learning theory described above? How do the teachers’ aims appear in relation to the aims described by other RE teachers, the syllabus, research on the actions and skills of teachers that enhance pupils’ learning, as well as the learning theory presented above? What are the prerequisites for development of the pupils’ RE skills? Do we have reason to believe that the teachers

will be able to develop the kind of skills that the questionnaire indicates are lacking or only present to some extent?

Perspectives on the responses of the pupils

In summary, it can be said that the pupil-responses to the questionnaire are not as rich as one might have expected on the basis of the goals expressed in the RE syllabus. It is hard to say that one knowledge area of the syllabus is more richly represented than another. The limited answers relate to all four areas. It may be said, using an expression used in history education, that both substantial and procedural aspects of the subject are involved. The substantial aspects include a less developed understanding of religion as a phenomenon – even as a concept (religion/region) – and of facts related to the field. Certain procedural skills such as descriptions of plots, messages and points of view are quite well developed and the values defended by the pupils are mainly in line with the fundamental values of the curriculum. However procedural skills such as existential and ethical interpretations are less developed especially regarding multiple perspectives, reasons, comparisons and questions. Tasks in which substantial and procedural aspects of the subject are combined, where pupils are supposed to use RE facts in order to interpret, discuss and draw conclusions later on, are consequently also difficult. So, broadly one might say that it seems like the pupils, at the beginning of grade six, have quite a lot of the RE syllabus left to study.

The findings of the questionnaires are, for the most part, in line with earlier studies concerning Swedish pupils' knowledge about RE, even if these studies have been conducted primarily with older children. The values expressed by the pupils are mainly in line with the curriculum, but they are not very used to working with existential questions. The fact that few of the pupils in this article identified the Jewish boy can be compared to the earlier finding that 45% of the respondents in grade nine did not connect Ramadan with Islam. In addition, the lack of familiarity with religious stories has been remarked upon in previous research, as have the difficulties with arguing in defence of a particular position, declaring multi-dimensional perspectives and formulating questions.

Findings that have not been described in previous studies are the difficulties that pupils have in understanding religion as a phenomenon, interpreting religious symbols for further analysis and drawing conclusions.

Grasping religious, ethical and existential dimensions, interpreting them, identifying similarities and connections, formulating questions, taking a particular position and arguing for it can, in relation to the theoretical frame used here, be understood as being related to the kinds of language, speech genres and discursive practices the school offers.

Perspectives on the teachers' aims with regard to RE

The overarching aims of the teachers in this study are directed towards their pupils' experience of school as being safe, as well as being a source of happiness and

curiosity. It could also be said that the teachers argue for a mainly societal and value-related RE where social cohesion is given priority. Christer and Elisabeth emphasise the importance of relativizing aspects of religions that seem exotic to the pupils. Nina stresses the similarities of religions and Hans stresses the importance of preventing prejudice. The teachers are rather general, not very specific, when it comes to the content they use in order to attain these goals. Elisabeth and Christer are, however, quite specific with regard their RE model: how the pupils practise reading the text book and answering questions. Both Nina and Hans avoid being very concrete. However, Hans is quite specific about his pupil's difficulties with comparing, finding connections and thinking of life in an abstract way. Therefore he works with classroom communication where the pupils have the opportunity to develop their ability through experiences of other voices in the classroom.

In relation to the knowledge field of RE, ethics and life questions as knowledge areas of RE are invisible in the speeches of the teachers, and existential goals, with the exception of the strong social cohesion and fundamental values perspectives, are quite marginalised.

The absence of an aim to develop the pupils' personal existential thinking stands out in comparison with the studies of Swedish upper secondary RE teachers mentioned earlier. Two of the four teachers interviewed particularly emphasise the learning-from dimension of RE with an existential focus. However, the teacher survey described earlier shows weaker support for the learning-from dimension in comparison to the learning-about dimension. The upper secondary teachers interviewed are also more concrete concerning the content of RE. Methods such as discussions, textbooks and films, which are mentioned by the teachers in this article as the most frequently used methods, are also among the ones most frequently mentioned in the survey of teachers of older children. In that study, the use of textbooks and films is shown to be more frequent among teachers with lower education. The most common method described in the questionnaire study, "explaining religious issues in front of the students", is not specifically mentioned by the teachers in this study. The teachers in both the upper secondary interview study and this study stress that the fundamental value perspective of RE and the relationships with their pupils are central. They even say that these are more central than the selection of methods.

Following Hattie, it can be said that the teachers are doing exactly the right thing in stressing the climate of the classroom and the pupil-teacher relationship as crucial, if they want to enhance pupils' achievement in school. However Hattie is a bit more specific about exactly how the relationships between teacher and pupils are important, as seen from his achievement-horizon. These relationships can be used to make the teaching of the subject contextual, which Hans also explicitly mentions. He can bring in experiences from India, for example, since he knows his pupils, knows who to ask and when to ask. Here Hans has an advantage since he has worked for a long time with his pupils and knows them well. The sixth-grade teachers' aims that school should be a place where the pupils feel secure and happy can also indirectly be related to Hattie, when he emphasises an atmosphere where mistakes are allowed. Here also

Hattie is a bit more specific and underlines the importance of an atmosphere where pupils ask questions and engagement is a norm. The explicit goal orientation of Elisabeth and Christer, and Hans' focus on the pupil-difficulties that he needs to work with – process orientation – are issues that are also stressed in Hattie's research. However, the deep and multifaceted understanding of the subject, which is emphasised by Hattie, is perhaps not very easy for a generalist, a class teacher, to achieve. The relational, contextual and subject-specific communication, which is shown to be central both by the teachers – especially Hans – and by Hattie, can also in the theoretical framework used here be described as relating to the character of the discursive RE practice and its hegemonic speech genres.

Pupils' responses and teachers' aims in relation to each other

So, what can be said about the conditions for teaching and learning RE in these three classes on the basis of the teachers' and pupils' perspectives? The pupils seem to have rather a long way to go in order to achieve the goals of the syllabus. The most striking findings are perhaps the pupils' rather vague perceptions of religion as a phenomenon. To what extent the teachers are aware of this, in particular, we do not know. But we do know that the teachers find it hard to describe learning difficulties in RE generally, which hinders a directed teaching. It is of course also hard to develop an awareness of pupils' difficulties when you as a class teacher do not teach the same RE content more frequently than every three years. Another challenge for teaching and learning in these three classes is the teachers' rather general goals in RE, the degree of dominance of fundamental values perspectives and the rather vague descriptions and exemplifications of content. It is, of course, also a difficulty that parts of the Swedish RE subject are more or less invisible in the interviews with the teachers (teaching about ethics and the development of existential interpretations), a fact that may be related to the narrow and misleading name given to the subject in Sweden ("knowledge of religion"). Perhaps one could interpret the fact that the values expressed by the pupils seem to be mainly in line with the fundamental values of the curriculum as resulting from these perspectives being the predominant aims of the teachers. The fact that many pupils can describe ethical messages and determine whether actions are right or wrong in accordance with these values is, of course, a resource to draw on, as is the fact that their teachers promote pupils' well-being and advocate positive relationships in school. Trustful relationships between teachers and pupils can be understood as important in creating favourable conditions for teaching and learning generally, and they can also, as is shown in this article, be used as tools that subject matter teaching of RE can draw on.

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CONDITIONS FOR TEACHING AND LEARNING IN RELIGIOUS EDUCATION (RE) -
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SWEDEN

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CONDITIONS FOR TEACHING AND LEARNING IN RELIGIOUS EDUCATION (RE) -
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