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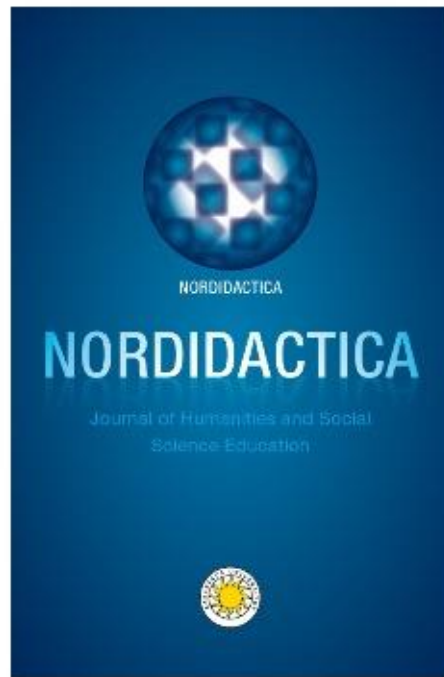
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## **Should there be wonder and awe? A three-dimensional and four levels comparative methodology used to discuss the ‘learning from’ aspect of English and Norwegian RE**

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*Abstract: In this article, I will discuss how the idea of ‘learning about and from’ religion in Religious Education (RE) exist in both the English and Norwegian context. A main purpose of this article is to present a suggested template for comparative studies in religious education, where the discussion of this particular issue serves as example of how this can be applied. This template is a synthesis of two sets of ideas. The first is an idea of three dimensions in comparative education: supranational, national and sub-national processes. The second is the idea of levels of curriculum: societal, institutional, instructional and experiential. A basic criterion for my concept of comparative studies is a conception of comparative studies as studies of developments in specific countries/ nations in a supranational perspective. This methodology provides a framework for capturing different levels of national processes within a supranational context, which I believe are relevant for further international and comparative studies of religion in education.*

**KEYWORDS:** METHODOLOGY, COMPARATIVE STUDIES, ENGLAND AND NORWAY, RELIGIOUS EDUCATION, LEARNING ABOUT AND FROM

**About the author:** Oddrun Bråten, PhD, has taught religion in teacher education since 1996, and has worked at the Department of Teacher Education at Sør-Trøndelag University College, Trondheim, Norway since 1998. She holds a PhD in Education from the University of Warwick from 2010 on the topic of international comparative studies in religious education, published by Waxmann as *Towards a Methodology for Comparative Studies: A study of England and Norway*. She also has an interest in practice focused classroom studies, as an important aspect of the developed methodology is the relationships between different levels of and aspects of religious education, linking practice and theory, national and supranational. She is also a member of several networks and seminars, including the International Seminar for Religious Education and Values (ISREV).

In connection with the shift towards a multifaith approach in Religious Education (RE) in Norway in 1997, many were looking to England for ideas regarding how this kind of teaching could be done. I wanted to do a systematic comparison, and started on a PhD project at the University of Warwick. A major issue soon became how to conduct the comparison. In the course of my study, I developed a specific approach to the comparative study (Bråten 2010). Published as a book the title is *Towards a Methodology for Comparative Studies in Religious Education: A study of England and Norway* (Bråten 2013b). In this paper, I present this methodology and exemplify its use in relation to the issue of ‘learning about’ and ‘learning from’ religion.

## **Introduction**

The concepts of ‘learning about and from’, religion in RE originate with Michael Grimmitt and Garth Read (Grimmitt & Read 1975, see also Grimmitt 1987, p. 225-226). I see Grimmitt's introduction of these concepts as a means to distinguish between different kinds of learning in RE in times of change in British RE. The teaching of world religions became established through Locally Agreed Syllabuses in some areas, and was confirmed in the Education Reform Act of 1988. Since Grimmitt's introduction of the concepts they have been widely used in RE research in England as well as internationally, often as one of several means to distinguish between different “types” of RE in European countries (Schreiner 2004, Jackson 2007, Bråten 2014a). When the concepts are used internationally, however, they may acquire different meanings reflecting factors like local language, formal curricular requirements, academic debate about the meaning of concepts and general differences between educational systems, as I have also discussed elsewhere (Bråten 2013a, 2014a).

In this article, I will take a closer look at what the concepts of ‘learning about and from’ may mean in two different national contexts, but also on the different levels of curriculum in England and Norway, applying the three-dimensional and four levels comparative methodology. Is the distinction between ‘learning about and from’ present in law texts or formal curricular documents? If so, in what form? What concepts are used in Norwegian language? What content, in the Norwegian curricular documents, could be understood as having similar meaning to the English concept ‘learning from’ religion? Further, I address how ‘learning from qualities’ in RE are understood by English and Norwegian teachers. Do English and Norwegian teachers have different ideas about what ‘learning from’ may imply? Finally, I also address how ‘learning from’ qualities can be traced at the level of students. I refer to empirical material collected for my PhD thesis in 2004 and 2005, but also to new investigations (Hella & Wright 2009, Teece 2010, Domaas 2014). The focus here is on England and Norway, but there are potentially wider implications. For example, one may ask how those concepts are used and understood in other national contexts, and thus there is a general question of the meaning of these concepts when they are used in the international literature. Before I proceed to the comparative analysis, I will clarify

how I understand ‘comparative studies’ and describe the basic ideas of the methodology used.

### **What are ‘comparative studies’ in religious education?**

An immediate understanding of comparative studies in education is of a comparison between two or more cases, for instance countries/ nations educational systems. An example of this is Alexander (2000) *Culture and pedagogy: international comparison in primary education*, which is a comparison of five countries. Another is Schiffauer *et al.* (2004) *Civil Enculturation: Nation-State, School and Ethnic difference in The Netherlands, Britain, Germany and France*, which discusses how integration of immigrants in schools takes on different styles in those four countries. One approach to defining comparative studies in RE, is to look empirically at what studies exists, as Schweitzer (2012) does in his article ‘Comparing Religious Education in Schools in European Countries: Challenges for International Comparative Research.’ Based on a survey of existing studies he suggests a preliminary typology.

While recognizing the value of Schweitzer’s approach, the basis for my understanding of comparative studies, is as studies of internationally shared problems: to look at issues in an international perspective (Bråten 2014a, 30-32, Kallo & Rinne 2006). An important background for this is found in the general field of comparative education, seeing that in today’s globalized world educational systems and RE in different countries are faced with many of the same challenges. For example in RE there tends to be a shift of focus from traditional confessional to more inclusive forms of teaching, where aims of dealing with the pluralization of society is more in the forefront (Haakedal 1986, Kyuk *et al.* 2007, Jackson 2007, Willaime 2007, Franken & Loobuyck 2011, Rothgangel *et al.* 2014). However, the conceptions of modern RE vary greatly between countries, particularly in the crossroads between the national traditions and the supranational processes (Bråten 2014b). The perspective that comparative studies are about exploration of the development in one country’s educational system, in an international context is a central principle in my approach to comparative studies.

From the broader field of comparative education, Karlsen (2006) is an example of a study based on this kind of understanding. This is not an explicit comparison but perspectives on developments in Norwegian educational politics in an international perspective, specifically in view of influences from international educational politics. In my methodology, this is conceptualized as formal educational processes (see below). Kallo & Rinne (2006) *Supranational regimes and National Educational Policies* is an anthology based on this same kind of understanding. Here it is implied that a study does not have to be an explicit comparison, but it can be, and my original study was also an explicit comparison of RE in England and Norway. I think these are important principles to apply to explicit comparisons. On the other hand, it is also an important perspective that one needs to have profound contextual knowledge for a

comparison to be valid, a point I found support for in the profoundly self-critical field of comparative religious studies (Paden 1994, Bråten 2013b, p. 32-33, 2014a). RE scholars have also often discussed contextually as central to RE (Schweitzer 2006, Leganger-Krogstad 2007, Skeie *et al.* (2013)).<sup>1</sup>

### **The three-dimensions and four levels methodology**

The methodology is a combination of two sets of ideas:

1. That there are three dimension in comparative studies: supranational, national and subnational processes (Dale 2006).
2. That there are different levels of curriculum in a country, operationalised in this methodology as: A. societal level, B. institutional level, C. instructional level and D. experiential level (Goodlad & Su 1992).

The dimensions are an analytical tool to capture processes of supranational, national and subnational nature that influence RE in a country. Supranational refers to that which transcends national boundaries. Because of the ever-changing nature of the field of education, the model is conceptualizing religious education as processes. The different levels of curriculum provide a tool to catch some of the complexities in the national dimension, as it ensures that the focus is not only on formal documents, for instance, but also on the relationship to what students learn. Depicted as a model it provides a structural overview of how some of the areas of relevance for RE are connected (Bråten 2013c):

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<sup>1</sup> For more information about the background for the methodology, see Bråten (2013b), pp 29-55.

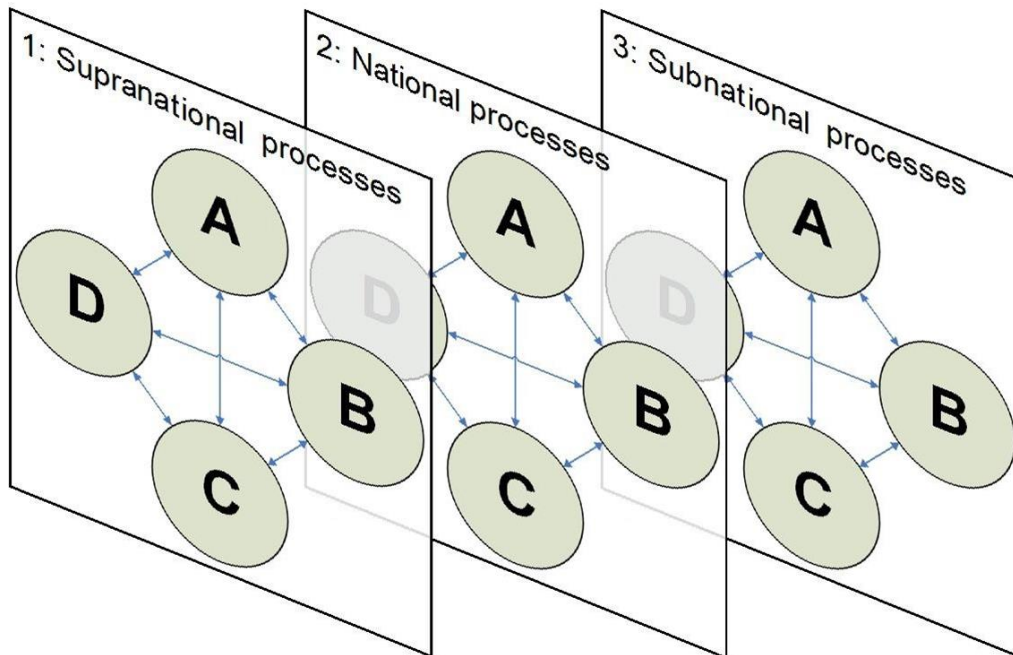


FIGURE 1.

*A. Societal level, B. institutional level, C. instructional level, D experiential level of curriculum.*

In the three dimensions, I also distinguish between *formal and informal* processes: *Formal processes* refer to formal politics or juridical issues that may be of a subnational, national or supranational character. Examples of formal supranational processes would be international educational policy for instance in the EU, or the court cases concerning Norwegian RE which went on both nationally and supranationally (Lied 2009). *Informal processes* refers to social and/ or political developments which goes on both through formal processes but also independent of them, such as secularisation, pluralisation and globalisation (Bråten 2013b, p. 47-52). Other less recent examples may be Christianizing of European countries, the reformation, the European enlightenment or the Christian ecumenical movement (Doney 2015).

Combined these two ideas provides a tool for taking seriously the depth of the national context while also considering the significance of the impact of supranational processes. The subnational dimension refers to variations within a nation, especially relevant in countries with decentralized educational systems, such as Germany (Jäggle, Rothgangel & Schlag 2012, Bråten 2014a, 27-30), but also England with it's system with determining the syllabuses for RE locally (Bråten 2013b, p. 83ff). In subnational settings, influences may be both from national processes and from supranational.

A third set of ideas are also important analytical concepts in this methodology, that of social imaginaries, national imaginaries and social enculturation (Schiffauer *et al.* 2004, Andersen 1991). National imaginaries are the dominating self-ideas of a nation, where social enculturation in schools is a main source of building and maintaining these ideas. This allows me to see some national differences as part of national styles, and to analyse particular empirical finding in relation to a generalized idea of, for instance ‘Norway as multicultural’. However, I also discussed these ideas critically, and suggest that in today’s globalized world, also supranational imaginaries exists (Bråten 2013b). In my reading of Buckhardt’s (2015) article in this issue, I consider that she digs deep into the imaginaries of Norway, Denmark and Sweden when she investigates the role of cultural Protestantism in the Nordic welfare state model. A Nordic imaginary would be a kind of supranational imaginary.

## **Learning about and from religion in RE**

In formal documents (level B) in English RE, we find the concepts ‘learning about and from’. For instance in the Non-Statutory Guidelines for RE from 2004 (QCA 2004), learning ‘about and from’ are formulated as explicit goals for RE. In England there has not been a national curriculum for RE, even if there has been for other subjects since 1988. It is statutory for schools to offer RE, but the syllabuses are produced locally and the Non-Statutory guidelines are important for this local work. In many of the locally agreed syllabuses we find the concepts of learning about and from. Even if the QCA 2004 is formally only advisory, it is an important document, and the way it is defined here may be seen as representative of its “formal” meaning. The concepts does however also refer to debates on the societal level of curriculum (level A), and RE scholars have generalized these concepts from the English context and used them in supranational contexts.

In the Non-statutory guidelines specific descriptions of these concepts serves as attainment targets in the subject. These definitions of the concepts are already different from Grimmitt’s original meaning (Grimmitt 1987, s. 225-226)<sup>2</sup>. According to QCA (2004):

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<sup>2</sup> When I speak about pupils learning about religion I am referring to what the pupils learn about the beliefs, teachings and practices of the great religious traditions of the world. I am also referring to what pupils learn about the nature and demands of ultimate questions, about the nature of a ‘faith’ response to ultimate questions, about the normative views of the human condition and what it means to be human as expressed in and through Traditional Belief Systems or Stances for Living of a naturalistic kind.

When I speak about learning from religion I am referring to what pupils learn from their studies in religion about themselves – about discerning ultimate questions and ‘signals of transcendence’ in their own experience and considering how they might respond to them. The process of learning from religion involves, I suggest, engaging two though different types of evaluation. Impersonal evaluation involves being able to distinguish and make critical

***Learning about** religion includes inquiry into, and investigation of, the nature of religion, its beliefs, teachings and way of life, sources, practices and forms of expression. It includes the skills of interpretation, analysis and explanation. Pupils learn to communicate their knowledge and understanding using specialist vocabulary. It also includes identifying, developing and understanding of ultimate questions and ethical issues. In the national framework, learning about covers pupils’ knowledge and understanding of individual religions and how they relate to each other as well as the study of the nature and characteristics of religion.*

***Learning from** religion is concerned with developing pupils’ reflection on and response to their own and others’ experiences in the light of their learning about religion. It develops pupils’ skills of application, interpretation and evaluation of what they learn about religion. Pupils learn to communicate and develop their ideas, particularly in relation to questions of identity and belonging, meaning, purpose and truth, and values and commitments.*

These definitions are quite extensive, and seem to reflect different kinds of developments in English RE and the RE research. Even if the Non-Statutory Guidelines define the concepts of ‘learning about and from’ religion in RE well, it is not clear how teachers and pupils understand this, or how this is reflected in teaching practices. Among RE scholars the meanings are also contested (Hella & Wright 2009, Teece 2010). Within the English context, the understanding of these concepts will vary. What happens when they are used in another national context?

What would ‘learning about and from’ religions mean in the different levels of curriculum in Norway? While the concepts ‘learning about’ and from (“lære om og lære fra”) are used in academic debate about RE in Norway (Meier 2009, Domaas 2014), they are not used at the formal level of curriculum. In a central background document (NOU 1995:9) as well as in the 1997 RE curriculum itself, the ‘learning from’ aspect had a prominent place, for instance in its aims to support identity development through dialogical approaches.

It is generally held that ‘learning from’ aspects have been toned down in Norway with curricular changes in 2002, 2005 and 2008. These changes are related to the legal actions taken against the KRL subject for not being neutral enough to be compulsory for all (Lied 2009). It is an interesting perspective which Meier (2009) is arguing; that this did not necessarily have to be the case if a general right to withdraw had been allowed. Meier refer to the English context where there is a parental right to withdraw their children, and discuss how this could have taken some of the pressure of the

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evaluations of truth claims, beliefs and practices of different religious traditions and of religion itself. Personal evaluation begins as an attempt to confront and evaluate religious beliefs and values [and] becomes a process of self-evaluation.



political debate about RE in Norway. Because of the general right to withdraw, he argues, it is possible to keep the aim of ‘learning from’ in the English context. However, ‘learning from’ religion has never really been an explicit goal in Norwegian curricular documents or in law texts, at least not in those terms. It is therefore a question of interpreting aspects of Norwegian RE as representing ‘learning from’ qualities. However, I will argue that the ‘learning from’ aspect is still present even in the latest national curriculum for RE in Norway (RLE 2008).

In the introduction to RLE (2008), it is said that dialogue adjusted to pupils of different ages should be part of the subject, and further that the subject should be a meeting place for pupils with different backgrounds, where they all should be met with respect. It should also stimulate to generic formation (“allsidig dannelse”/ “bildung”), and be a space for wonder and reflection. Seen in relation to the definition of ‘learning from’ in the QCA (2004) above, it is reasonable to claim that this represents ‘*learning from*’ qualities. In the ways that basic learning skills (reading skills, writing skills, oral skills, mathematical skills, and ICT skills) are formulated (specified for each subject), it is possible to identify ‘learning from’ qualities. For instance, as part of the description of what ‘oral skills’ in RLE implies, it is stated: “Oral skills like conversation, dialogue, storytelling and lecturing are means to acquire wonder, reflection and argumentation.”

The learning outcomes descriptions also provide opportunity to identify ‘learning from’ qualities. For example according to learning outcomes in the area of philosophy and ethics after year 10, pupils should be able to discuss values and reflect on ethical questions and show respect for different people (RLE 2008, s. 9). This implies that a ‘learning from’ dimension exists even in the current Norwegian National Curriculum for RE, all though implicit.

I find more evidence of this in general parts of the curriculum and especially in the purpose clause, § 1 of our education act which states the overall purpose of general education in Norway (which was revised in 2008). Domaas (2014) has demonstrated that we can here find the intention that students should not only “learn about”, but even learn to appreciate specific values mentioned there<sup>3</sup> as “our values”. In the general aims in the RE curriculum the following is stated about what ‘learning about’ religion in the subject imply to aid pupils in interpreting their own existence and to understand cultures in their own environment as well as worldwide. If we see these elements together, it becomes reasonable to argue that ‘learning from’ qualities exists here. A concept that is used “danning” (generic formation/ bildung); Domaas simply takes to be synonymous to the English ‘learning from’: what students through their learning in all the issues discussed in religious education (including philosophy, worldviews and ethics) learn about themselves.

Besides the concerns about how the concepts are understood, the normative question of whether there should be a ‘learning from’ aspect or not is also debated.

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<sup>3</sup> Example of values mentioned are human dignity, freedom of spirit, love of ones neighbor, equality and solidarity as (Opplæringslova 2012).

Academics and even politicians (level A) sometimes love to engage in endless discussions over such issues, however when we are talking about education, we are dealing with a practical field. It is important to ask questions and keep investigating what such discussions on a societal level (A) mean in practice. Do they mean anything at all?

Reminded by the model to move on to the levels of practice, I will not go further into academic discussions about these concepts here. Rather, I shift my focus to the levels of practice. With reference to the discussion of ‘learning about’ and from religion in RE in the societal (A) and institutional (B) levels of curriculum above the question is raised regarding the instructional level: how do English and Norwegian teachers understand the concepts and ideas of ‘learning about’ and ‘learning from’ religion in RE? I will firstly present English teachers and pupils views, then Norwegian, followed by a comparative discussion. The sample is mainly from three English schools and three Norwegian, interviews with teachers and four students from each school, collected in 2004 and 2005 (Bråten 2013b), but I will also refer to other relevant research.

## **English teachers about ‘learning from’**

The three English teachers interviewed for my study (Bråten 2013b) were all well-educated to teach RE, and all knew the concepts of ‘learning about’ and ‘learning from’ religion. They were convinced that their students were ‘learning from’ religion as well as ‘learning about’ it. For example, ‘Ruth’<sup>4</sup> said:

*‘I think it is important that they feel it is related to their lives, because (...) a lot of our pupils are not interested in the academic study for the sake of academic study; we are looking for how the academic study can help you.’*

Another of the English teachers, ‘Vicky’, said that the ‘about bit’ was ‘the bit that the pupils like the best, and that ‘that’s the bit that generates all the conversations and discussions’. ‘Sally’ talked about wanting to inspire awe and wonder, because she did not think the children got much opportunity for that kind of experience in other learning contexts. All three teachers gave examples of what they understood the ‘learning from’ aspect. ‘Ruth’ claimed the children sometimes experienced awe and wonder from their encounter with each other’s religion:

*“I think they are sort of having that respect for each other. They are kind of in awe of each other about things. We watched a video, you know, Michael Palin when he went to The Golden Temple recently (...) and then, when we watched it the kids were like ‘oh wow, have you been there? Oh what is it like?’ and I think it does create respect.”*

‘Ruth’ connected the issue of ‘learning from’ with promoting positive attitudes to other people, and thought this was especially important in her school as it was so

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<sup>4</sup> Teacher from the English school with the most ethnically mixed students population («multicultural» school).

religiously plural. The English teachers stressed the importance of factors outside RE in relation to what influences pupils with regard to developing respect and understanding. For example, ‘Sally’ said:

*“We have a saying here, you can take a horse to water, but you can’t make it drink. It’s the same here: you can introduce all these ideas to the kids, but if they don’t want to accept it, then you’re not going to develop them spiritually. They’ll just know about things without ever taking it on board.”*

Here it becomes clear that she regards the ‘learning from’ aspect to depend on the students and factors which influence them other than their RE. All the teachers, three English and three Norwegian in this study, and several of the students as well, were all noting how RE itself might have a rather modest influence compared to other factors, for instance the media. This reminds us that RE itself is just one small item in wider school or societal contexts. These contexts are therefore relevant to consider for RE teaching and learning.

## **English students**

While being convinced that the students were ‘learning about’ and from religion in RE, the English teachers predicted that, their pupils would probably not be able to say what the difference between learning ‘about’ and ‘from’ religion would be. They were right. Some of the pupils did try to reason what it could mean, and one Muslim boy suggested this: *‘Like if some religion says you should give money to charities, you learn from that and you give money to charities?’*

In three English and three Norwegian schools, I conducted interviews with groups of four students, and in the more ‘multicultural’ of the English schools, pupils said they thought RE was special compared to other subjects, because: *‘RE’s got to be contemplated (...) because you may get the religions mixed up, and people do get defensive. It isn’t like maths or English, you might get defensive’*. English students from this school also said that they could express thoughts and feelings in RE. It was quite clear that they related RE learning to their own lives; because they said, for example, that RE made it easier to talk to their friends about their different religions and understand them better. They expressed a first-hand experience of why it was important, much in accordance with how it was described by their teacher. They said they did think RE contributed to their personal growth.

Also in one of the other English school, from a suburban and less multicultural setting, they expressed themselves in ways which indicated ‘learned from’ qualities in their teaching: *‘Because before we were like laughing and everything about what they were doing and everything, but now we know more about what they’re doing and why they’re doing it. So, it’s their life’*.

In the third of the English schools, which was in a rural setting, students said they did think RE promoted respect for other people: *‘this is the big thing (...) and the most important point’*, but were hesitant as to whether it really had the effect of making them or their classmates more tolerant. All the English students in the sample saw RE

as promoting learning to be respectful, but were, like their teachers, hesitant as to whether it actually had this effect on themselves or their classmates. Even in the most ‘multicultural’ of the English school, they expressed doubt that it had the same positive effect on everyone, saying that some would still be racist.

### **Norwegian teachers about ‘learning from’**

In the Norwegian Curriculum for RE the terms ‘learning about and from’ are not used, but given a certain understanding of the concepts it is reasonable to claim that this is an aspects of RE learning in Norway (see above). However, it is clear that there should be no attempt to convert children into a particular faith, which is the same as in England. It is an interesting suggestion that this is only possible because “religion” is conceptualised as “culture” in the Nordic welfare states, i.e. the use of the concept of religions as cultural heritage, see Buchardt (2015). The Norwegian RE National Curriculum from 2002 was the one in legal use at the time of my interviews (spring 2005). This states that *pupils should get both knowledge and experiences* (‘opplevelser’) through the subject:

*“In all age groups, the pupils should get both knowledge and experiences in their encounter with the content of the teaching. Variation in approaches are emphasised, including for instance repeating what they have learned, play, drama, artistic activities, music, work in projects and dialogue adjusted to age stage. Making connections to local events should contribute to making the subject more alive (LS 2002:14).”*

I saw this as a related to ‘*learning from*’ qualities in RE, but this depends on an argument that the word ‘experiences’ (‘opplevelser’) includes the possibility for pupils to *learn from* religion. ‘Experiences’ (‘opplevelser’) then need to be understood not just as something happening ‘outwardly’, but also as having an internal ‘experience’ from, for example, reading a text that makes you think of something new, or having conversations with other students which provides the student with new insights. It needs to imply an experience that offers the learner something on a personal level. b

However, the Norwegian teachers did not immediately understand ‘having knowledge and experience’ in this way. They all had basic training as RE teachers but were less specialized than the English teachers in this sample were. These Norwegian teachers tended firstly to understand this in relation to exciting methods of teaching suited to give students more outwardly experiences, such as going on excursions. ‘Oline’ was the teacher in the most “multicultural” of the Norwegian schools in this sample. She said that the great experiences (‘opplevelsene’) might not appear very frequently: implying that her teaching was not as varied methodologically and probably did not give the students many experiences. Excursion or teaching methods which is suited for giving students ‘experiences’ in an outwardly sense, might of course also be well suited to facilitate ‘learning from’ qualities as described above. However, the point here is that these Norwegian RE teachers did not understand what I meant by my question. The notion of ‘learning from’ was not a familiar idea.

When I explained what I meant – as, for instance, to learn to have respect for others – ‘Oline’ did not immediately ‘connect’ to this idea. It appears that this was not in accordance with her understanding of the central aims of the subject. Rather to her, this was connected to passing on the (Christian) cultural heritage and inform those who came from another background about that (Bråten 2013b, p. 155-158). Here we see that the imaginary of Christianity as cultural heritage is present and dominating in the way this teacher understands Norwegian RE (see Buckhardt 2015). Related to the multicultural student group of ‘Oline’s’ school, her comment was that she had never seen any cultural conflicts or any racism. This was a positive statement, but still a very different perspective from that of the English teachers who strongly put the multicultural makeup schools forwards as an asset for RE<sup>5</sup>.

My choice of words when I asked the Norwegian teachers whether they thought pupils were ‘influenced by’ (*påvirket av*) what they learned in RE, was probably not well enough thought through. While my reference was an understanding of RE as pluralistic and aiming to influence pupils positively, to develop tolerance and have a better understanding of different religions, the teachers’ primary reference was of a different kind. ‘Oline’ immediately got defensive and stated that they were not proselytizing!

The debate in Norway regarding whether children get too much of a religious/Christian influence through KRL or too much influence from the ‘wrong’ religions makes the question of whether pupils are ‘influenced by’ the teaching in KRL a sensitive issue. ‘Jon’, the teacher in the more rural school in my Norwegian sample, also hesitated when he got this question, replying that it would depend on whether I meant influenced in a good way or in a bad way. When I explained, that I meant the latter he said he did try to influence them positively and saw a good opportunity in RE to work with students attitudes:

*We talk about things; that this gives them something which, which ... they feel are engaging them and make them want to share their own points of view about it and, that they have experienced something in that lesson, and ... that it was valuable in a way. (...) I often say that I see KRL as a place to draw your breath in the hectic everyday life in school, where we can lean back a little and have awe and wonder.*

*‘Jon’*

When I explained what I meant a positive kind of influence from RE, all three Norwegian teachers said they did think that their pupils were also ‘learning *from*’ religion, meaning that they got personal benefits from the RE lessons. When *influenced by* the teaching was understood positively, the Norwegian teachers did think RE contributed to pupils’ personal development, but this was not immediate like

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<sup>5</sup> In Bråten (2013, s. 161) I discuss whether the teachers in my sample understand similar aims for RE in England and Norway respectively, in different ways, related to the national dimension, as plurality might be imagined differently related to national specific history of religion and state relations.

it was with the English teachers in this sample. For ‘Oline’ any ‘learning from’ qualities was connected to her belief that respect would be a result of knowledge: *‘the more you know, the less dangerous the unknown would seem. (...) and I assume that at least some would get some more respect’*. In an article about teachers in the REDCo research, Lund Johannessen (2009, p. 103) also described how Norwegian teachers saw knowledge about religion as important for making pupils more tolerant and open-minded. ‘Ingunn’, the third of the Norwegian teachers in my study said she liked to think that KRL contributed to pupils becoming respectful of other people. She saw pupils’ participation in discussions as contributing to this. However, ‘Ingunn’ also stressed that influences outside of the school from homes, peer groups and other school subjects like Norwegian language or Social studies would also be important. ‘Jon’ also saw it as an ideal aim that KRL should contribute to developing respect for different people, but was unsure whether it would have this effect.

## Norwegian students

We have seen that the Norwegian teachers were not familiar with the concepts of ‘learning about and from’ as such, and they were not clear to the pupils either. Like their teachers, the pupils understood the terms ‘getting both knowledge and experience’ as referring to outward experiences from interesting methods of teaching, rather than personal growth resulting from encounters with learning material. Looking beyond the problems over how concepts were understood however, I concluded from my Norwegian sample that pupils were learning both about and from religion, life views and ethics through their RE. The clearest indication of ‘learning from’ religion in the Norwegian sample was found in the Norwegian school in the rural setting. In their interviews they used information from their RE teaching to express their personal life views:

*“I feel I am kind of in the middle, I feel there is much that sounds right or things that I can take with me from many different religions and you can have opinions and thoughts from all the religions, and make your own religion.”*

They could not have done this, even in this rather playful manner (Bråten 2013b, p. 183-186), if their RE learning had not had a ‘learning from’ quality. In this school pupils agreed that RE was contributing to their own life: *‘I think we all develop a lot when we have KRL’*. In the most ‘multicultural’ Norwegian school, the students in the group interviewed included two Muslim girls who were first generation immigrants, and two indigenous Norwegian girls. These pupils first said they did not think KRL was an important subject and did not see that it had any relevance for their own life. However, as the questions of the interview revealed to them the aims according to the National Curriculum, it turned out they did think RE might be important ‘because they learn more about other religions’. In other words, these pupils thought RE might be important when the focus was other religions. However, this might not be in

accordance with what they had experienced in practice. We have seen that their teacher 'Oline' did not see this as a very prominent quality of RE teaching.

Domaas (2014) refer to a wider and more recent study of 12 cases and a survey when he discuss teachers and pupils expressions in relation to 'learning from' qualities of Norwegian RE. He also see that there is a difference in teachers and pupils thinking of "why" they have RE, or what they think they are supposed to learn from it. While teachers have a tendency to refer to "our" history, cultural heritage, and an deepened understanding one's own cultural background, the pupils mainly understand it's purpose as 'learning about' "others" and learning to respect "others". This finding conforms with the wider and more recent sample, the tendency which I noted in the small sample in my own fieldwork in connection to the thesis (Bråten 2013b): there seems to be a difference between the student and the teacher levels (D and C) on the Norwegian side, which is was not noted on the English side. Here there is more harmony between teachers and pupils conceptions of the main aims of RE.<sup>6</sup>

The question of whether RE was contributing to pupils becoming more respectful was answered explicitly in the case of the two Muslim girls in one of the students groups in the one Norwegian school. They had been giving a presentation about Islam to classmates. *'We get more respect when we tell others about Islam'*. Both the indigenous Norwegian girls in that same group of four pupils, also agreed they gained respect through 'learning about' different religions but were skeptical of whether it had that effect on their classmates.

In the last of the Norwegian schools, the student group has a strong secular worldviews element. Here they said they thought RE was an important subject, because *'the things we learn in KRL might be stocked at the back of our heads for later in life, while things we learn in maths for example will be forgotten'*. In this school, the pupils did see themselves as respectful of other people, but not because of their RE. This was exactly what their teacher 'Ingunn' said they might say. In this Norwegian school, the pupils could distinguish between getting a better understanding and becoming more respectful. For example, one boy was so critical of Christianity and religion in general that it was difficult for him to say he had respect for it. At the same time, this boy also criticized textbooks for being biased and said it would have been better if someone who really believed in Islamic religion for instance, could have explained it.

This bias towards emphasizing Christianity because it is our 'cultural heritage' comes through to them both from their teachers' understanding of the subject and from their textbooks. Their awareness of, and critique of, this bias could be seen as connected directly to the societal level, as it echoes critiques formulated in the political debate about the KRL subject, for instance by the Norwegian Humanist organization. Influences across the levels like this are conceptualized as a "bypass"

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<sup>6</sup> On the English side I cannot refer to newer or broader samples. I need also to stress that I am only theorizing from non-representative samples.

between levels, (Bråten 2013b, p. 193, Bråten 2014c). However, it can also be seen as a younger generation being more connected to REs relevance as an integrative subject, while the older generation sees the aims of enculturation of the traditional Norwegian religion as more central. We find both those kinds of aims in the legislation and the formal curricular documents, described by Skeie (2006) as RE in Norway running on two tracks.

## Comparative discussion

If we first look at the relationship between the levels in each country, we see that the concepts of 'learning about and from' is used and disputed at the societal level in both countries; both in academic debates and in political debates. The concepts originate in England, so it is a supranational influence that they are used in Norway and elsewhere. The concepts are used in the institutional level in England, but not in Norway. Since it is present in the societal level in Norway, it could have been used also in the institutional. Perhaps this would have made the issue of '*learning from*' in Norway clearer, if it was defined there in a specific way. As it is now, in my sample (Bråten 2013b), and in later research (Fuglseth 2014, Domaas 2014), it is quite unclear to teachers and students whether there should be a 'learning from' quality in Norwegian RE. It's disputed in the academic debate whether this is an aspect of Norwegian RE now, as some have argued that a consequence of recent developments is that it needs to be strictly 'learning about' (Meier 2009, Domaas 2010). This uncertainty may be related to the fact that these concepts are not well defined in the Norwegian academic discourse. Perhaps it is the case that the Norwegian (Nordic/German) concept 'danning' are just as suited to discuss in the Norwegian context whether there should also be a *learning from* quality. It is a complicating factor for the comparison that different concepts are used in England and in Norway, and the issue of different use of concepts is highlighted also elsewhere as complicating comparative efforts (for instance in the *Signposts* (Jackson 2014b).

It is an important contrast to the Norwegian scene that in the English context, the concept and idea of 'learning from' it is long established in the academic debate and is given a clear definition in the QCA 2004. In my material English teachers were well acquainted with the concepts, while 'learning from' was not something the Norwegian teachers in my sample were ready to discuss. However, the meaning of the concepts is not clear to teachers in the English context either, as its meaning is both understood differently by various teachers and debated academically (Hella & Wright 2009, Teece 2010). In the Norwegian context the same uncertainty is present with the term 'danning' as well. The English teachers in my sample are however clear that 'learning from' is seen as a central part of the aims of RE, while this was not so with these Norwegian teachers.

We cannot conclude anything from this very small example, but what I attempt to do is to analyze the particular answers in relation to other contextual elements in each nation, like what concepts are used in the curricula. Looking beyond the barriers of



different use of concepts however, we saw that both English and Norwegian teachers talked about inspiring to awe and wonder, and of RE as a special subject where students can express themselves and where knowledge goes hand in hand with gaining tolerance and respect. I see this as evidence of the existence of ‘learning from’ qualities in both contexts.

It is supranational processes which has caused the aims of RE in both England and Norway to shift from traditional Christian nurturing RE to more open multi-faith approaches where a main purpose is to educate the young in relation to present day religiously plural societies. Examples of supranational processes of relevance for this shift include secularisation, pluralisation and globalisation, and, it may seem, the Christian ecumenical movement (Doney 2015) and in the Nordic countries cultural Protestantism (Buchardt 2015). In England the shift started earlier and was confirmed in law in 1988, in Norway the shift did not occur until 1997, and was more ‘top down in’ (Bråten 2013b). It seems however that what this shift imply in terms of RE having an integrative function rather than a tradition preserving function is a slow and painful process throughout the levels of curricula in Norway. Even recent research indicate that it might still not be so clear to some teachers and pupils exactly what the point of RE is now (Domaas 2014).

This is perhaps not so surprising given the ambivalence in the societal and institutional levels about the main aims of RE. Purpose, aim, content of RE is presently discussed and disputed not only in England and Norway, but also across Europe (Rothgangel *et. al.* 2014, Council of Europe 2014). In Norway the National Curriculum for RE has changed rapidly, and while aims are formulated and clear in each, the frequency of the changes may blur the aims for the general audience as well as for teachers and students. I think it is fair to say that the purpose as well as content of RE are currently negotiated, in both Norway, England as well as most other European countries. In our culture(s) debates about the nature and purpose of RE are ongoing on the societal levels of curriculum, being both of a political and academic nature (Jackson 2014a). It is perhaps not that often that teachers or students read or reflect on the formal aims of the subjects as formulated in legal and curricular documents (Bråten 2014c). Still I believe it to be extremely important that the purpose of the subject is clear for the RE teachers, but especially for students (Bråten 2013b, 174-177). If it is not, the teaching will be without meaning to them, and there will be a risk of RE in its current form disappearing. We see in the recent research into the practicing of the Norwegian RE subject, that it is played down by some teachers and school leaders, and that some students but also teachers question its justification as a school subject (Fuglseth 2014).

Neither English nor Norwegian students knew the distinction between ‘learning about and from’ religions, but for different reasons, stemming from the national dimension. There is similarity in that they *were learning ‘from’* religion, life views and ethics, judging from the way they talk in the interviews. They think they do learn and get personal gains and talk about RE as having a special quality compared to other subjects, for instance in that “it got to be contemplated”, or that it ‘get stuck in your

head for later in life’. It is perhaps especially in meeting with each other’s religion that the ‘learning from’ aspect occurs. It is immediate for the students in the ‘multicultural’ English school what the purpose of RE is. The relevance of RE for their own lives was quite clear for them. I see this as a result of the combination of the multicultural makeup of the schools population and the clarity of the teacher and school about the aims and relevance of RE. In all the other schools, this was less clear, including in the ‘multicultural’ Norwegian school.

Is it perhaps the case that in practice learning ‘about and from’ are not two separate kinds of learning, and that ‘learning about and from’ are best understood as analytical concepts describing different aspects of the learning process? Domaas (2014) even raise the question if it is possible to get any ‘learning about’ if there is not also ‘learning from’? What else would motivate learning if there were nothing to learn from it? Thus, it may be perfectly logical that this distinction is not clear to students.

### **Final remarks regarding the methodology**

It is an important aspect of the three-dimensional and four level methodology to include the instructional and the experiential levels, the levels of practice. This is challenging because it is demanding to gather the empirical data, and demanding because such data becomes outdated, and needs constant updating. Schreiner (2014) has criticized the original study (Bråten 2014b) for “the empirical basis for the hermeneutical conclusion”, for generating theory without solid enough basis in the empirics. This is however a misunderstanding, because the basis for the methodology itself is not the empirical data, but on discussion of sources of advice for comparative studies in academic disciplines such as comparative education, comparative religion and pioneering works in comparative religious education (Bråten 2013b, p. 29ff), including some of Schreiner’s own work (Schreiner 2007).

I suggest this to be a model suited for analyzing available materials. Of course the quality of the material is crucial for the quality of the analysis, but it does not necessarily indicate anything about the quality of the tool. In this article, as well as in the original study (Bråten 2013b), the theoretical basis for the methodology is not based in the empirics, rather the empirics serves to exemplify the use of the methodology.

Surely it could have been wished for in this comparative discussion of the notion of ‘learning about and from’ RE in England and Norway that I had more recent and more extensive empirical basis for that. Still the analysis of the available material may be valuable, for instance to renew the focus on this issue. Another example that available material with its limitations can be analyzed with this methodology is found in in the article ‘New social patterns: Old structures?’ (Bråten 2014b). Here I used the limited information in the articles in that issue (Rothgangel *et al.* 2014) to do a comparative analysis about how the countries of Western Europe deal with religious plurality in Education. As the chapters had little information about the levels of practice, this was not emphasized in the analysis, but the model still bring in the view of the importance

of those levels. In this discussion, I even delimited the focus further, to mainly Scotland, Belgium and France, in order to be able to do justice to the complexity of each national contexts in comparative analyses. It is important to recognize that delimitation is also a quality, a necessity in any study. The point is, of course that the chosen delimitation needs to be justified with reference to the aims and scopes of the study.<sup>7</sup>

A continued focus on the levels of practice needs to be maintained even if it may be demanding, or else research are in danger of being without relevance for that aspect. Education is a practical field, and it's theory needs to reflect this. Efforts such as the reports of surveys in the articles from Iceland (Gunnarson et al. 2015) and Finland (Ubani et al. 2015) in this issue of *Nordidactica*, are therefore highly valuable, as are Kjærgaards (2015) focus on the relationship between the levels. To develop theory in proximity to practice is also a relevant way forward in educational theory, but this also has it's challenges as Haakedal (2015) discuss in her article in this issue. At the same time factors of importance for RE are found in all levels of the curriculum and in the three dimensions, and with this suggested methodology I have made an effort to systematize how the levels and the subnational, national and supranational dimensions are linked. I see this as not only useful but also necessary as we are steadily moving further into the age of globalization, even in RE.

The levels can be seen as different contexts of relevance for the practice of teaching about (and from) religion (and worldviews) in a specific class (Bråten 2013c). Taking the learners perspective, one may ask how academic debates about distinguishing between ‘learning about and from’ religion (and worldviews) affect learning opportunities. What is included in formal legislation and curricular documents is of importance for the practical teaching of children and young people, but so is the instructional level (C), the teachers and their knowledge and skills. It is necessary to engage in reflections about the relationship between the levels to understand how this work.

Rather than a top down model, it is possible to see the methodology as a way of insisting on a child centered approach. With such a perspective, those other aspects, which the other levels and the dimensions represent, are considered as more or less relevant to the learning outcome (Bråten 2013c). The levels, from societal to experiential are on the one hand moving from text to practice, while on the other also representing a movement from macro to micro level, from the supranational through the national to the subnational level, where the actual classrooms and their learners exist. The point of the model is to bring the dimensions and the levels together. The dimensions are even conceptualized as processes, building on the view that RE must be seen as a continuously developing phenomena at an intersection where school, religion and society meet. Many would agree that right now we are moving in the direction where is RE becoming more and more relevant for intercultural learning (Jackson 2014b, Franken & Loobuyck (2011), Bråten (2014b)).

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<sup>7</sup> Of course, I also do this in Bråten (2013b, p. 26).

## Summary and conclusion

In this article I have discussed the notion of comparative studies in RE presenting a suggested three-dimensional and four levels methodology as a systematic way of approaching such studies in the age of globalization. I have presented an example comparative analysis of the distinction between ‘learning about and from’ religion, worldviews and ethics in England and Norway to illustrate this methodology.

A main point is that the model relates the micro level of the individual learner to a larger whole. All the levels exist in one nation, the idea of the levels is a tool to capture some of the complexity of what goes on in relation to RE in one country. For example, one can look at different understanding of ‘learning about and from’ religion (and worldviews). However, it is not the case that what influences the teaching of religion (and worldviews) in public schools only originates from within the nation, but rather it is subject to supranational influences as well. It is therefore necessary to consider a supranational dimension in comparative discussions of reasons for similarities and differences between different kinds of RE. This model offers a systematic way of approaching comparative studies. A model will by nature be less complex than the reality, but this is precisely why it is useful, it can be used to analyze this complexity (Bråten 2009).

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SHOULD THERE BE WONDER AND AWE? A THREE-DIMENSIONAL AND FOUR LEVELS  
COMPARATIVE METHODOLOGY USED TO DISCUSS THE “LEARNING FROM” ASPECT OF  
ENGLISH AND NORWEGIAN RE

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SHOULD THERE BE WONDER AND AWE? A THREE-DIMENSIONAL AND FOUR LEVELS  
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ENGLISH AND NORWEGIAN RE

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SHOULD THERE BE WONDER AND AWE? A THREE-DIMENSIONAL AND FOUR LEVELS  
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