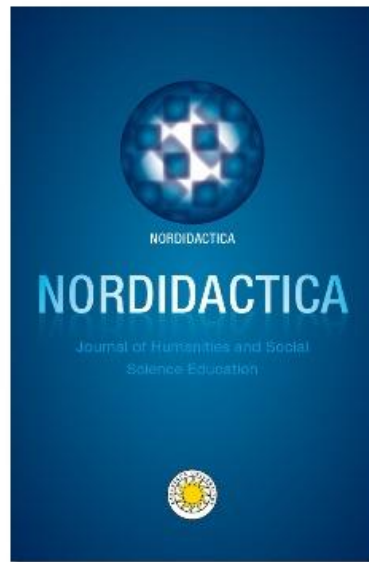


Examples of knowledge contributions in Swedish RE – A discussion of disciplines as frames for knowledge re/production

Christina Osbeck



Nordidactica

- Journal of Humanities and Social Science Education

2017:1

Nordidactica – Journal of Humanities and Social Science Education

Nordidactica 2017:1

ISSN 2000-9879

The online version of this paper can be found at: www.kau.se/nordidactica

Examples of knowledge contributions in Swedish RE – A discussion of disciplines as frames for knowledge re/production

Christina Osbeck

University of Gothenburg, Department of Pedagogical, Curricular and Professional Studies.

Abstract: The aim of this article is to examine kinds of knowledge contributions – in a) RE research, exemplified by three dissertations, and b) three textbooks for RE student teachers – in relation to the academic disciplines/milieus in which these knowledge contributions occur, and to discuss how these milieus work as frames for knowledge development. Characterisations of knowledge contributions in subject didactics and RE are used as analytical tools while the study as a whole draws on socio-cultural perspectives on learning and activity theory which stress how learning takes place in the discursive practices where people are active. A striking similarity between the dissertations is that none of them has been developed in an RE discipline, with an RE supervisor, or in an academic milieu specialising in RE. The different academic contexts have contributed to interesting combinations and developments of theoretical perspectives but simultaneously there is a lack of milieus that deal with these findings and integrate them into further developmental processes. Moreover, there seem to be larger differences in RE knowledge contributions between the dissertations and the textbooks as groups than within these groups. While the dissertations represent empirical studies of the participants in the teaching practices and use the findings as foundations for discussions and problematisations of RE teaching, the student teacher texts take the RE content and curriculum for granted to a larger extent. One conclusion of this article is that in order to strengthen the RE field – both in school, teacher education and research – extended cooperation between these different practices is needed.

KEYWORDS: RELIGIOUS EDUCATION, DIDACTICS, KNOWLEDGE, DISCIPLINES

About the author: Christina Osbeck PhD, is Associate Professor in Religious Studies and Senior Lecturer in Social Studies Education as well as deputy head at the Department of Pedagogical, Curricular and Professional Studies, Gothenburg University, Sweden. Her research is primarily focused on religious education and values education and concerns at present mainly the research project "What May be Learnt in Ethics? Varieties of Conceptions of Ethical Competence to be Taught in Compulsory School"

http://idpp.gu.se/english/Research/research_projects/what-may-be-learnt-in-ethics

Introduction

Some years ago I had a discussion with a colleague about a research overview of classroom studies in religious education (RE) that I had conducted based on published articles available in ERIC, the Education Resource Information Center, from 1985 to 2010 (Osbeck, 2012). The overview had made it clear to me that the picture of research as developing cumulatively and researchers as figuratively standing on each other's shoulders was not valid here. Instead, the RE knowledge field seemed to grow horizontally rather than vertically. I remember that I characterised my impression of the available research as "scattered showers" and my colleague confirmed this with another metaphor, saying that it is hard to talk about a "knowledge front" at all in this field. Dissertation projects in Swedish RE reminded us both more, as we said with another military metaphor, of single guerrilla attacks.

Perhaps one could have added that the impression of a research field made up of individual actors could be a consequence of having a front line that is so wide, with so few participants. RE can be understood as belonging to the broad educational field where subject matter education is today beginning to have an established position. The educational field is, as such, wide and draws traditionally on methods and theories from both psychology and sociology. In the field of RE, it is possible to carry out research concerning most of the questions that are of interest in the general field of education, if they can be related to religion, world views or ethics. In order to study these specific phenomena, you also need theories about how to understand them, developed from religious studies and theology. Often specific RE theories are also used in order to understand these particular practices. The RE field of knowledge must therefore be understood as being at least as wide, multi-disciplinary and complex as general education. At the same time, each year in Sweden, there are about 80 dissertations in general educational but not even one per year in the field of RE. This means that it will not help in such a context to stand on each other's shoulders although it also means that we do not replicate each other's studies or argue about valid findings and quality in the field, which, according to Bourdieu, characterises a scientific field (cf. Schüllerqvist, 2005, p. 11). Even though it is an often-repeated piece of scientific advice to search for research gaps, it is not certain that it is a good argument for doing a study that no one has done such a study before.

Despite the fact that the RE front line is wide and that the work of individuals can at first glance be perceived as occurring randomly in the field of RE, researchers in practice seldom act in isolation. Both junior and senior researchers are active in collective practices that are to a greater or lesser degree also part of networks involving other practices. Since our actions and perspectives can be understood to be related to the practices where we are active (see, for example Engeström, Miettinen, & Punamäki, 1999; Säljö, 2010), a strategy to better understand knowledge contributions and knowledge production in the RE field would be to pay attention to the contexts that have surrounded work in this area (Afdal, 2008). These disciplinary contexts could be understood as conditions for knowledge re/production.

The aim of this article is to examine kinds of knowledge contributions in a) RE research and b) textbooks for RE student teachers in relation to the academic disciplines/milieus in which these knowledge contributions occur, and to discuss how these milieus work as frames for ongoing development of knowledge.¹

Swedish Subject Didactics, RE and Kinds of Knowledge Contributions

Today in Sweden, RE is not an academic discipline in itself. Rather it can be understood as a research field where the knowledge contributions are produced in different disciplines. The same situation occurs in many other areas of subject matter education – here called subject didactics [ämnesdidaktik] – even though didactics and subject didactics are PhD subjects in some universities in Sweden. In this section, a brief background to the current Swedish RE situation is presented, as well as ways of characterising knowledge contributions in subject didactics. These ways of characterising knowledge contributions will be used as analytical tools later on in this article.

In Sweden, subject didactics has developed in relation to teacher education – which in Sweden has been a part of the university system since the 1970s – and the desire to bring questions about teaching and learning closer to specific subject-content areas. The present-day discussions started in the 1980s (Kroksmark, 1989). However, at that time, religious education [religionspedagogik] had since 1973 already been an academic field in the faculties of theology in Uppsala and Lund (Larsson, 1992, p. 11).² Religious education has been related to two comparatively strong practices traditionally, schools and churches, which have both been interested in knowledge development in their respective sectors.

As described elsewhere (e.g. Osbeck & Lied, 2012), it is hard to find a widely accepted, specific definition of didactics. On the contrary, a search for a common perspective results in rather general descriptions, such as the one where didactics is understood as being related to the three didactical questions, what, how and why

¹ This article is a developed version of a paper presented during the symposium “Epistemologies of Religious Education – Examples from Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden”, Nordic Conference of Religious Education, Tartu, June 2015. The aim of the symposium was to examine different conditions for knowledge re/production concerning religious education in the Nordic countries and discuss how disciplines work as frames for ongoing development of knowledge, primarily research contributions. The presenters were asked to use their own dissertation in relation to other dissertations from the country in which the presenter was working, preferably so that the dissertations discussed were from different periods of time. Alternatively, handbooks of RE didactics/pedagogy of religion could be examined. The form of this article is indebted to, as well as framed according to, this format.

² The theological faculties in Uppsala and Lund have in Sweden traditionally been the ones that have organised all disciplinary studies concerning science of religion [religionsvetenskap], which means that there is no clear line between how the words “theology” and “religious studies” are used in Sweden. Nowadays one can study religion at many universities and university colleges in Sweden.

(Ongstad, 2006, p. 22), which also sometimes includes additional interrogatives (Jank & Meyer, 1997, p. 17 f.). Another commonly accepted way of summarising didactics is what today is known as the didactical triangle, pointing out that the relation between content, pupils and teachers is characteristic of didactics. This summarisation, which is said to have medieval roots (Hopmann, 2007), continues to attract attention, for instance when the interconnectedness of these components is emphasised, the humanistic character of content learning is stressed (Straesser, 2007), or when contextual dimensions of didactical focuses are highlighted (Schoenfeld, 2012). Attempts have also been made to define the didactical tradition more distinctly, such as that by Stefan Hopmann (2007), who declares that in the didactical tradition there is a common interest in ‘restrained teaching’, based on a commitment to *Bildung*, to the educative difference of matter and meaning, and the autonomy of teaching and learning.

A common metaphor for subject didactics is the bridge between general science of education and specific subject disciplines (Sjøberg, 2001, p. 12; Schüllerqvist, 2009, p. 14), a metaphor that has been criticised for concealing firstly that subject didactics is a field in its own right, secondly that other disciplines may be just as useful in didactical analyses as general science of education and the specific subject discipline, and thirdly that questions of communication can be understood as being at the heart of such analyses (Ongstad, 2004).

In the absence of a widely accepted specific definition, I have in a previous article (Osbeck & Lied, 2012a) identified and conceptualised eight dimensions where definitions of subject didactics and research in the field may differ (cf. Ongstad, 2004). Firstly, the context for the teaching and learning activities may vary. Secondly, the balance between “what” and “how” aspects may differ. Thirdly, how research- or practice-oriented work in subject didactics is may differ (Englund, 1997, p. 122). Fourthly, the foregrounded actors – e.g. pupils and teachers – may vary (Bernmark-Ottosson, 2005, p. 70). Fifthly, the activities that are focused on may differ, e.g. planning, teaching or evaluative activities (Uljens, 1997). Sixthly, the degree of descriptiveness/prescriptiveness of subject didactics may differ (Buchardt, 2004; Ongstad, 2004). Seventhly, the content that is focused on can be treated as a product to a greater or lesser extent (contrasted with a focus on process, which highlights the changeable nature of the content) (Ongstad, 2004). Eighthly, the teaching and learning processes in focus may be defined as intended, unintended or hidden (cf. Broady, 1998).

Just as it is hard to find a common definition of subject didactics, it is hard to find a definition of religious education that applies generally. One definition from an introduction to the study of religious education [religionspedagogik] in Sweden is Rune Larsson’s, where RE is described as “a scientific discipline working with problems connected to appropriation of knowledge, values and patterns of actions which are of a religious or world-view nature” (Larsson, 1992, p. 17, my translation). I have myself used this definition together with a declaration from a Swedish RE network (Nätverket för religions- och etikundervisningens didaktik [NfRED], 1998) stressing religious education [religionsdidaktik] as a research field oriented towards

practice. The definition that came out of this combination was the following: “Didactics of religion may be understood as a praxis orientated research field. The learning process – where knowledge, values and patterns of acts of a religious and existential nature are acquired – is foregrounded.” (Osbeck, 2006, p. 391).

I have also used this definition of religious education when describing the RE research field, existing types of research and central areas of this research. Using teaching and learning processes themselves as a focal point, one may construct a schematic description of RE research including both studies which could be placed before this point – studies where the results could be described as giving information about prerequisites for teaching and learning processes – and after it – focusing on evaluations and results of such processes (cf. the fifth dimension above along which subject didactical research may differ). In addition to this sequential dimension, I have also paid attention to a contextual dimension and a componential one. Learning processes and RE research can be placed in different contexts, such as schools and communities (cf. the first dimension above). In this schematic description, the components that have been most in focus are actors such as teachers and pupils, content, methods and the purpose of RE learning processes (cf. the second and fourth dimensions above).

I have used this way of sketching the field in three different overviews of RE research, one of which focuses on Swedish research and two of which also describe international research. The overview of Swedish research from 2006, which was limited to the school context, showed that the majority of the RE research could be described as being located before learning processes and that only a few studies paid attention to the learning process itself. One of the components most commonly focused on was “pupils”, primarily their life issues. There were also a considerable number of texts discussing “aims and tasks” of RE (Osbeck, 2006). This pattern has also later been confirmed in other overviews (Johnsson Harrie, 2011). When the same schematic description was used in order to map the research published in the British Journal of Religious Education from 2008 to 2009, a similar pattern was identified. It was the before phase that was mostly studied and the dominance of the component “aim and task” was greater than in the Swedish study from 2006. School was the heavily dominating context (Osbeck, 2011). A renewed study of Swedish school RE research from 2006 to 2011 to a high degree confirmed this pattern. Studies of the before phase dominated, in combination with an “aim and task” component. In contrast to the previous Swedish overview, a focus on pupils appeared infrequently and a focus on teachers was also rare. The kind of task-and-aim studies that dominated were about themes that the authors were experts on and regarded as important to teachers (e.g. Hjärpe, 2006).

In this article, this way of sketching the field and characterising knowledge contributions is used once more. When comparing this characterisation with the eight dimensions where subject didactics may differ, aspects can be identified that are not made visible in the contextual, sequential and componential dimensions of the schematic description. Here attention is not paid to differentiations between descriptive and prescriptive contributions (cf. the sixth dimension above). Among the

eight dimensions where subject didactics may differ there are also some distinctions concerning the components focused on that make the characterisations of the contributions sharper: firstly whether content is treated mainly as a product or a process and secondly whether it is merely intended teaching and learning processes that are focused on or whether unintended processes are also of interest. These additional ways of qualifying the descriptions of knowledge contributions are also used in the analyses below.

Materials and methods

Many RE publications have a popular science character, i.e. they are written as overviews for student teachers and teachers. Consequently an examination of kinds of knowledge contributions and their re/production should look not only at dissertations but also at texts written for student teachers.

The examined material has been selected in order to ensure a sample that is varied with regard to academic contexts and ages of the texts. The selected dissertations are Bo Dahlin (1989) “Religion, the soul and the meaning of Life. A phenomenographic and existential study of the conditions of religious education”, Christina Osbeck (2006) “Life understandings through victimization: An RE study of learning life understandings in school” and Jenny Berglund (2009) “Teaching Islam – Islamic religious education at three Muslim schools in Sweden”. The three texts for student teachers are Edgar Almén, Ragnar Furenhed and Sven Hartman (1994) “Teaching about religion, life issues and ethics in school”, the anthology of Malin Löfstedt (2011) “Religious Education [religionsdidaktik] – Diversity, life issues and ethics in school”, and Christer Hedin (2014) “Religious education [religionsundervisning] – didactics and practice”.

Due to the different character of the two material groups, the analytical questions used have been somewhat different. The current questions for the dissertations are:

1. What information is available concerning the disciplines of the theses and their scientific contexts?
2. How have the studies been conducted (aims, research questions, theoretical frameworks and methods)?
3. What are the knowledge contributions and how can these be described in relation to the presented schematic description of the RE field and the supplementary dimensions where RE research may differ?
4. What interpretations can be made from the findings concerning how disciplines may work as frames for knowledge re/production in RE?

Concerning the three textbooks for RE student teachers, the questions that have guided the analyses are:

1. Who are the authors and which disciplines and scientific contexts do they belong to?

2. What are the overarching focuses and aims of the books (the kinds of RE knowledge that are highlighted)?
3. What definition/s of religious education can be found in the books?
4. What can be said about the character of the RE knowledge and what interpretations can be made from the findings concerning how disciplines may work as frames for knowledge re/production in RE?

The article ends with a concluding discussion, where the kinds of knowledge re/production of the two text genres (the dissertations and the textbooks for RE student teachers) are compared. Attention is also paid to possible influences of the scientific disciplines and contexts.

Three dissertations

Authors and scientific contexts

The three dissertations are conducted in three different academic disciplines. While Dahlin's (1989) is carried out in a department for educational sciences at the University of Gothenburg and Berglund's (2009) in curriculum studies at Uppsala University, Osbeck's discipline (2006) is religious studies at Karlstad University.

It is possible to obtain more information about the academic contexts of the studies from the introductory acknowledgement sections of the dissertations. Dahlin announces his work to be in the periphery of educational sciences since theorists like C.G. Jung and Heidegger are used. At the same time, he stresses that "all important renewal of knowledge comes from its borders, i.e. from the part to which attention is not usually paid" (p. 1). Moreover, Dahlin directs his thanks to certain persons, for example Ninian Smart and Owe Wikström in the field of religion, Peter Kemp in the field of philosophy and supervisor Ference Marton in relation to the thesis as a whole.

In the preface, Osbeck thanks supervisors Henry Cöster in religious studies and Inga Wernersson in science of education. Collective practices that are mentioned are the Centre for Value Studies [Centrum för Värdegrundsstudier] in Gothenburg, the religious and gender studies seminars in Karlstad, the gender in education seminar in Gothenburg and the national "mobile RE seminar" (p. 6).

In Berglund's acknowledgements, the supervisors Carl Anders Säfström in didactics and Göran Larsson in history of religion are thanked. Two collegia of religious studies are highlighted, one in Uppsala and the other in Södertörn, as well as the National Network for Religious Education (NfRED), which is mentioned as being "of great importance to my formation of 'disciplinary belonging'" (p. vi). Seminars for postcolonial theories and intersubjectivity and difference in educational settings are also mentioned.

Despite the obvious differences in the scientific practices in which the authors have participated, a common feature seems to be that they have been active and developed knowledge in quite a few rather varied milieus. The multidisciplinary way of working

stands out as a common feature. One difference is that Berglund and Osbeck refer to specific RE networks where they have participated but Dahlin does not.

Aims and modes of procedure

The aims and the research questions of the three dissertations reveal an interest in different content of the RE subject and also in different actors. In Dahlin, the aim is “to give an existential-phenomenological and a depth-psychological contribution to religious education” (p. 12) and the research questions that he uses to achieve this aim are “1) whether there are at least tendencies [on the part of the pupils] towards the above mentioned perspective on religion [Jung’s understanding of religion] 2) what content and what forms the education should have in order to facilitate the desired understanding 3) what content and what forms can counteract the most common misunderstandings of religion” (p.13).

In Osbeck, the purpose is “to examine the understanding of life that young people re/construct, and in this sense learn, in the discursive practices of school, and to describe how such a re/construction takes place.” (p. 80). The aim also works as an overarching research question that includes describing “the institutional frame and its impact on the relationships formed; the importance of relationships to the re/construction of an understanding of life; the character of the interviewees’ understanding of life; how understanding of life might be re/constructed through victimization as a “teaching tool”; how an understanding of life can lend contextual legitimacy to victimization; potential contribution of RE to the way young people /re/construct an understanding of life” (p. 80).

In Berglund’s dissertation, the aim is to “increase our understanding of IRE [Islamic religious education] as lived classroom experience by examining the formation of its content in relation to: a) the various Islamic traditions and, b) how Islam is understood in a Swedish context” and the research questions are “What is the content of the Islamic religious education offered in each of the selected schools; What are the similarities and differences in content between these schools, and how are these to be understood; What meanings do the selected teachers ascribe to Islamic religious education; How do the teachers account for their selection of IRE content; What is the nature of the educational choices that go into creating the type of Islamic religious education offered in each school” (p. 16).

In order to fulfil the aims and answer the research questions, different methods and theories have been used. The main empirical method in Dahlin is phenomenographic qualitative interviews with 33 individual pupils. Here the theoretical framework draws on the phenomenological tradition, a perspective that is related to the phenomenographic empirical research tradition in which the dissertation is produced, although a Jungian depth-psychological perspective is also stressed. Here, religion is understood as a universal phenomenon at the border of the known and the unknown.

Osbeck draws on a textbook study and on focus-group interviews with 51 pupils. Critical theory frames the study and highlights the importance of prioritising problematic aspects at the expense of good examples. Three concepts are emphasised:

understanding of life, discursive practice and language. Understanding of life refers to the content of the study; discursive practice is both the context in which and the way through which learning takes shape. Language is the prerequisite for both, and discursive theory can therefore be understood as another overarching perspective.

Ethnographical fieldwork is the methodology in Berglund and three Muslim schools constitute the empirical field. Curriculum theory and the frame factor theory are referred to in relation to what affects the content taught. Theoretical concepts of importance are “connectedness”, stressing societal and cultural dimensions of chosen content, and “glocalisation”, which emphasises the culturally dependent dimension of religious traditions.

Findings

The findings from Dahlin’s interviews with the pupils are presented as categories that express different meanings that the pupils see in the three concepts religion, soul and meaning of life. A strongly supported perception concerning religion is that religion is about obedience and orientation towards norms, and another frequently occurring idea is that religion is about belief in the existence of a supernatural power. The single most common category concerning the meaning of the concept “soul” is about seeing it as a kind of underlying function of the human being. The meaning of life is, for most of the interviewed children, understood as about having a good time. In sum, Dahlin maintains that the findings reveal a strong influence from western society but that there are also perceptions in line with Jung’s perspective. On the basis of the empirical analyses and the existential and phenomenological analyses of culture and religion, Dahlin suggests that a foundation for Swedish RE might be an interest in the “unknown” that shows respect for the religious tradition but is also non-confessional.

The main empirical findings in Osbeck are presented as three discourses of understanding life. “Life as adjustment for the benefit of individual competition”, “Life as adjustment for the benefit of collective competition” and “Life as responsibility for the benefit of human unicity and universal community”. Of these three, the first one is regarded as hegemonic. The study shows how victimization can be understood to work as a teaching tool in the re/construction of understanding life and how victimization can be both the cause and effect of this discourse. The findings are related to institutional conditions in schools, such as large-scale school systems, and the task of educating pupils as well as differentiating between them and how this may lead to stereotypical, instrumental and competitive relationships. From an additional textbook study, the conclusion is drawn that RE, through its content, e.g. descriptions of abuse of power, carries the risk of reinforcing the identified hegemonic understanding of life. The overarching findings are interpreted as contrary to the fundamental value perspective of Swedish schools and in line with findings concerning a hidden curriculum tradition.

The main findings in Berglund concern the construction of IRE and how this cannot be understood as a homogenous phenomenon since its content and form vary

so much. However, on an overarching level, the subject can be interpreted as contributing to connectedness between pupils and both the Islamic tradition and Swedish society. There were also features that were common to the teaching in all three schools. For example, in all classes, there was teaching about the Quran as well as religious narratives and songs. However, the approaches to the content and the methods used varied. For instance, three forms of the teaching about the Quran were identified: embodied, literal and aesthetic forms, which differed from each other with regard to, for example, the degree of understanding of the content that was required. Berglund stresses the central position of the teacher for the construction of the subject. Although the curriculum is the same, the actual teaching differs. The teacher's own beliefs and intentions emerge as significant in the study. The teacher does not simply transmit the tradition. Rather, she translates the content of IRE on the basis of her opinion of what is central and comprehensible knowledge for the pupils. The religious stories are of importance and do not only express theological points but also moral points and contribute in that sense to notions of what it means to live as a good Muslim in Swedish society. The stories provide a connection to both the Islamic tradition and present-day Swedish society.

Characterisations of the knowledge contributions

In relation to the previously described ways of characterising didactics and religious education, it is obvious that the three dissertations differ concerning the contextual dimension i.e. the contexts that are focused on. It is also clear that Berglund deviates from dominant RE research by not studying RE in public schools but rather confessional RE, IRE, in Islamic schools. Furthermore, in terms of the sequential dimension, Berglund is unusual since the study focuses on the learning process itself. Dahlin, as with most research in this area, focuses on the prerequisites for learning, and Osbeck can be seen as combining these two focuses, since she regards focus-group interviews as spaces for re/construction of discourses. The components that are focused on in the study differ as well. Both Dahlin and Osbeck pay attention to pupils, and Berglund primarily focuses on the teachers as well as on the construction of the subject and its content.

In relation to the eight dimensions where didactical research may vary, or more precisely those that were not covered by the schematic description of RE research, it is clear that the three studies are also similar. They are all descriptive even though all three have normative elements to some extent. The RE subject and its content have in all three studies more of the character of process than product. None of the studies takes the curriculum for granted or treats it as fixed.

The three studies also make declarations about the position of their RE contributions in RE research. As mentioned earlier, Osbeck has declared that the work draws on both Rune Larsson's and NfRED's definitions of RE when she gives her own definition. Berglund places her study in a didactic tradition, i.e. didactics as a sort of subject didactics per se since its interest is in content. Furthermore, she adheres to Hopmann's definition of didactics as "restrained teaching" with three characteristic

features. Dahlin presents his study as a phenomenographic didactical study where prerequisites for learning processes are focused on and are considered to affect the teaching content. In that sense, Dahlin regards his study as belonging not only to a descriptive didactics but also to a prescriptive tradition.

Conditions for RE knowledge re/production and disciplines as frames for development

The three dissertations have been produced in different milieus and partly in different subjects and times. However, in spite of the obvious differences, I think the striking pattern is the similarities. None of the dissertations have been developed in an academic milieu specialising in RE. None have been conducted with an RE supervisor. The experts that have guided the studies are from science of education and religious studies but not from the RE context. All three authors have worked in several academic contexts in order to compensate for the lack of a milieu specialising in the kind of work that the dissertation represents.

One can also find traces of how some parts of the main academic milieus have influenced the work. In Dahlin, there are signs of the phenomenographic tradition, commonly used in Gothenburg, of focusing on the perspective of the child. In Osbeck, the concept “life understandings” is used in contrast to the life-view tradition that has been strong but also strongly criticised in theological contexts, e.g. in Karlstad at the time that the thesis was written (Cöster, 2003; 2009). Berglund uses the educational tradition of curricular studies in Uppsala, the frame factor theory (e.g. Dahlöf, 1999), as a reference point and stresses the importance of the teacher for the construction of the subject but also the importance of the frames that in turn affect what the teacher takes into consideration and how the teaching is carried out (p. 203).

Three RE student teacher textbooks

Authors and scientific contexts

The three books, written primarily for student teachers, have authors and author teams of different kinds. The oldest book from 1994, just before the curriculum reform of 1994, is from Linköping University. In the author team there is one professor of science of education [pedagogik], Sven Hartman, and one associate professor in dogmatic theology as well as the head of teacher education and former schoolteacher, Edgar Almén, and one PhD student, lecturer, teacher trainer and former schoolteacher, Ragnar Furenhed.

The anthology that is edited by Malin Löfstedt has ten authors in all. On account of Löfstedt’s position, the book project can be said to be located at Uppsala University, at the Faculty of Theology. Six of the ten authors are also affiliated to the theological faculty at Uppsala University. Löfstedt, when the text was published in 2011, had a PhD in theological ethics, and was a schoolteacher and a senior lecturer in religious studies with didactics. Two of the authors are doctors from the Faculty of Theology at

Lund University (history of religions) and the other two are from Stockholm University (Hartman) and Karlstad University (Osbeck). Of these ten, three researchers have written their doctoral thesis in the RE field (Berglund, Hartman, and Osbeck). Three of the ten are described in the author presentation as having a teaching degree and practical experience (Franck, Liljefors-Persson and Wickström). The fact that this information is not given for the other seven authors does not necessarily mean that they lack this formal education, however.

The third book from 2014 has only one author, associate professor Christer Hedin at Stockholm University, who has two research degrees: one in church history and the other in Islamology. He has also been a schoolteacher and teacher trainer for many years.

Overarching focuses and aims of the books for RE student teachers

From a general perspective, taking all three books into account, there seems to be one aspect that is relevant to all three contributions. It concerns the balance between taking the pupils' perspectives into account and discussing aims and content as such. Among the three books, the Linköping contribution can be interpreted as the one which most clearly stresses pupils' perspectives. Hedin's book is the one that most strongly argues in favour of religious knowledge as such. This does not necessarily mean that this book is also the one of the three that pays least attention to pupils' perspective. Empirical research is repeatedly referred to in Hedin's text. In several of the contributions in Löfstedt's anthology, it is the content perspective in itself that is central (Dalevi & Niemi, 2015, p. 5), and pupils' perspectives can be absent, or present in the form of descriptions of the authors' personal experiences of what perspectives pupils can have.

In order to show how the different positions are taken in relation to the balance between pupils' perspectives and content, two quotations will be used. In a critique of a knowledge-centred curriculum perspective, Hartman declares that it: "...indicates an educational approach where knowledge is seen as a prerequisite for student reflection, not vice versa." (p. 21). Hedin, on the other side, can be interpreted as suggesting that empirical studies that focus on the pupils' perspectives are overrated. With regard to such research ("books on teenagers and life issues"), Hedin summarises: "However, the question is whether one always has to read so much to have ideas about what this [teenagers' life issues] is about. Since teachers are living people who have been young themselves, they can easily imagine which questions engage [the pupils]." (p. 27). "Without thorough knowledge of the subject, there is nothing to process in didactics." (p. 11). This balance between pupils' perspectives and content can also be related to the schematic description of the research field and what components are focused on, i.e. primarily pupils or aims and content, for instance.

Leaving the general perspective and continuing with each of the three books, it is important to pay attention to the historical situation in which these books were written and published. The Linköping contribution was produced when didactics as a concept and area in teacher education was quite new (Kroksmark, 1989). The curriculum of

1980 was still in force and new suggestions had been presented. Nevertheless, it was not totally clear what the final version of the 1994 curriculum would be. Löfstedt's anthology was written in a similar situation but was published quite soon after the introduction of the curriculum of 2011. In 2014, when Hedin's book was printed, the curriculum of 2011 was established.

The anthology from Linköping can be interpreted as being in opposition to the reforms that were taking place at the time. The authors were critical of a recently made suggestion for a curriculum and how it neglected opportunities for the development of pupils' life interpretations. Hartman declares the draft curriculum to be an example of a proclamatory curriculum code, in contrast to a dialogical one – concepts which Hartman discusses in relation to general curriculum codes developed by Ulf P. Lundgren. The proclamatory curriculum code is marked by the idea of a high degree of correspondence between what the teacher teaches and what the pupil learns (p. 25 ff.). The aim of the book from Linköping is to "... contribute to the development of teachers' professional expertise in matters of the school's task to teach about religion, life issues and ethics. Our area could qualify as *didactics of religion and ethics education*, but perhaps just as well as *religious education [religionspedagogik]*." (p. 5 f.). The authors express that they want the student teachers to come into contact with current research and professional teacher expertise. The nine chapters vary. There are historical descriptions of the RE subject, reports from empirical research about pupils' perspectives on life, arguments for a life-interpretation approach to RE, various kinds of examples of practical teaching, considerations to take into account when teaching about Christianity and also about ethics – especially with regard to the importance of ethics education being based on teachers' professional ethics, ethical interaction between teachers and pupils and paying attention to implicit learning processes. Despite the fact that priority is given to pupils' perspectives, it is expressed that such perspectives cannot be the only ones that are taken into account when the teaching is planned (p. 69 f). On the contrary, it is stressed that RE is an area with theoretical foundations from different areas. Perspectives from history, social sciences, theology, the humanities and behavioural sciences are emphasised (p. 34). All of these perspectives are also among the sources that the authors draw on, along with a considerable amount of experience of being teachers themselves.

The dominating theoretical perspectives that are taken into account in Löfstedt's anthology come from religious studies and theology. Here also, the authors' experiences of being teachers and working with young people and teachers are used. According to the information on the back of the book, religious education [*religionsdidaktik*] is said to ultimately be about: "... the choices that we make as teachers in connection with our teaching in RE: Who are the pupils that I teach? What should I bring up, and why this subject matter? How should I act in order to make the teaching as good as possible?" Here, the classical didactical questions are stressed and the pupil's perspective is foregrounded in a way that is not very characteristic of the book in its entirety. The expression quoted above "...that we make as teachers..." gives an impression of shared experience between the authors and the readers that

poorly matches the diversity of author presentation referred to previously, where only three of the ten authors were described as having a teaching degree. The aim of Löfstedt's anthology is stated in the introduction to be to "...contribute to a greater didactical awareness among prospective and active RE teachers by providing new perspectives on a number of different parts of the subject RE." (p. 13). While it is unclear what "didactical awareness" means here – perhaps only an awareness that it is good to have when teaching (see below for more about this) – the other part of the statement corresponds well with my analysis of the book as having a focus on content, i.e. subject knowledge of religious studies. The contributions are of a character that was earlier referred to as becoming increasingly common in the RE field, i.e. texts on themes which the author is more or less an expert in and which the author regards as being important to teachers (Osbeck & Lied, 2012a). The critical attitude to the curriculum that marked the Linköping anthology is more or less absent here. Instead the statements in the curriculum are regarded as conditions and frames to navigate within, a didactical perspective that has been criticised when used as a research perspective (e.g. Dahlin, 1989, p. 27; Dalevi & Niemi, 2015). As a whole, the Löfstedt anthology provides a historical perspective on the RE subject, and an examination of RE as a knowledge and research field, as well as looking at life issues, fundamentalism, science and religion, gender and religion, ethics, projects that may be carried out with students about religions in everyday life, the need to work with primary sources in RE, methods in education (such as roleplaying), exploring identity by studying religious narratives, and study visits. Even though the religious studies and theology perspectives together with the experience perspectives form the basis of the majority of the chapters, there are also texts and sections based on empirical studies and reported RE research.

In Hedin's book, the curriculum is also to a large extent treated as an unquestioned starting point, as the political decision it represents. At the same time, the space for the teacher's own decisions is emphasised as being wide and the task of didactics is declared to be figuring out possible alternatives within the framework (p. 5). Moreover, didactics of RE [*religionskunskapens didaktik*] is said to have both a practical and a theoretical side. Practical RE is understood as being directed towards studies of classrooms, pupils' perspectives, learning, and conditions for teaching and learning, while the task of theoretical RE is to study the role and meaning of the subject in the societal context. It is seen as central to theoretical RE to consider the politically assigned task with which teachers are presented, as well as knowledge that is to be taught and values that are to be internalised by the pupils. Hedin's aim (2014) is to contribute to theoretical RE: "That is the subject of this book. It's about the task of RE and the forms for learning that can contribute to achieving the objectives under the given conditions." (p. 5). Accordingly, this aim seems to be broader than the tasks that Hedin assigns to theoretical RE. This circumstance might reflect the difficulty in dividing "practical" RE and "theoretical" RE from each other. Hedin's use of these concepts (practical and theoretical) also gives rise to questions about his understanding of them. The book generally draws on many kinds of sources. It is structured from the perspective of the current curriculum, using the three parts of the

curriculum as headings (“Religions and life issues”, “Religions of the world” and “Ethics education”), and mainly uses religious studies perspectives and the author’s personal experiences as a teacher, but also draws on broader social-science research and empirical RE research.

Definition/s of religious education [religionsdidaktik]

To some extent, the books’ definitions of religious education have already been presented, since their aims and thereby their knowledge contributions have been summarised. However, there are patterns that remain to be described.

In the Linköping anthology, the perspectives on didactics are reported in the first chapter written by Sven Hartman. Since didactics in 1994 was a rather new concept, its meaning is presented in a basic way in this chapter. The Greek word is translated as “art of teaching” and the intention with introducing the concept in teacher education is interpreted as a desire “... to give the ‘art of teaching’ or ‘teacher knowledge’ a scientific basis. This is done partly by developing theoretical aspects of practical teaching skills, and partly by deliberately linking the subject knowledge to a teacher’s teaching tasks.” In addition to the three classical didactical questions, the issue of the identity of a knowledge field, i.e. what characterises a specific field, is presented as a central aspect of didactics. As described above, Hartman also takes this a step further and sketches how a theoretical base for RE could be developed. The importance of the breadth of this theoretical base is stressed.

Hartman is also one of the researchers who contributes to Löfstedt’s anthology, where he gives a definition of didactics and RE, 17 years after the statements in the Linköping anthology. “In this text, I use *religionspedagogik/religionsdidaktik* to describe the research area that is depicted in this anthology. It concerns the scientific study of the conditions for RE and its practice.” (p. 20). In relation to Hartman’s emphasis in the 1994 anthology, one can perhaps interpret this later statement of his as an specification of how the scientific study of religions and world view (the research area that is described in this anthology) can form the main scientific basis for studies of conditions for RE and its practice. A question that could be asked is whether the theoretical basis of this 2011 anthology meets the expectations of the theoretical breadth that Hartman stressed in 1994. There are several theoretical perspectives that are used in other subject didactics research and general science of education [*pedagogik*] that are not represented or present only to a marginal degree in this 2011 anthology. However, the scarcity of educational theory in RE is a challenge that is also observed in other contexts such as British RE (Grimmitt 2000; Erricker 2010).

A problem in the Löfstedt anthology, with its different authors, and also in Hedin’s book to some extent, is how the words “didactics” and “didactical” are being used. Repeatedly, the words are being used in an undefined and spontaneous way that makes their meaning vague and weak. Sometimes they almost appear to be used tautologically and consequently as words whose presence seems unnecessary, apart from serving a kind of legitimating function (cf. Dalevi & Niemi, 2015). Quite often the words seems to refer to teaching and education but since this is the theme of the

entire book, the words instead become mystifying or redundant. For instance, what does it mean when Löfstedt declares that “Hartman's definition above [concerning a life issue] gives us some important didactical insights regarding the life issues that I consider that it is central to bring to RE [*religionsundervisningen*].” (p. 53). What are the characters of the *didactical* insights that she stresses? Does it mean that the insights concern education and the profession of teaching? Perhaps it does, but on the other hand, this is already said at the end of the sentence, so instead of making things clearer, the word is used in a way that is tautological or mystifying. It seems that a vague way of using the concept is so common in texts about RE that one does not react, not even when it is used with several different meanings on the same page. Christer Hedin, for instance, uses it (p. 11) firstly as a knowledge field or discipline: “Without thorough knowledge of the subject there is nothing to process in didactics” and thereafter in a considerably more narrow sense as the skill of transmitting [*förmedla*] knowledge: “Subject knowledge does not give didactical competence. One can be knowledgeable without the ability to transmit [*förmedla*] one’s knowledge.” How the words “didactics” and “didactical” are used, and what this in turn reveals about how one understands RE and knowledge contributions central to RE, is something that urgently needs to be brought up in didactics.

Summing up kinds of knowledge contributions and disciplines as frames for re/production

So, what can be said about the character of the RE knowledge contributions in the three student-teacher books? In relation to the schematic description of the RE field presented earlier, the context of the contributions is the school. Without going into detail with regard to each individual work in the three books, one can say that the dominant sequential phase of the contributions is *before* the learning process, preconditions for learning processes. The components that are focused on are mostly aims and content of the subject in relation to theological, religious studies and philosophical discourses. The focuses of the texts are in turn mainly set by the curriculum. The RE content can therefore be said to be given the character of a product rather than a process. The perspectives are also clearly practice-directed and prescriptive since the texts present ideas about what to do and what to avoid in practice.

While it is difficult to draw conclusions about correlations when using just three examples of textbooks for RE student teachers as material, one may observe that the pupils’ perspectives are emphasised more in the anthology with a scientific leader from the field of education. In a similar sense, the subject matter is highlighted more in the textbooks with an editor and an author from theology and religious studies.

Concluding discussion

One aim of this article has been to discuss how disciplines work as frames for ongoing development of knowledge. The theoretical perspective that constitutes the

background for such an idea is how learning takes place in the discursive practices where we are active and through the daily activities that we share (e.g. Afdal, 2008; Engeström, Miettinen, & Punamäki, 1999; Säljö, 2010). The analyses have also shown how the dissertations seem to have been affected by the disciplines and the specific practices which have been their academic milieus, for instance in theoretical senses. The RE student-teacher textbooks also seem to have been affected by the contexts in which their authors were working, for example with regard to the contentious issue, mentioned above, of how to balance pupils' perspectives in relation to content perspectives in RE.

At the same time as the different specific practices, the institutional milieus, are shown in the analyses to be of importance, it is also possible to study these practices on a more general level which reveals similarities and patterns. In the RE field, it has been emphasised that RE can be understood as being constructed by two activity systems where one is school practice and the other is research practice (Afdal, 2008). However, I have previously argued (Osbeck, 2011) that teacher education could be understood as a third form of practice. I think that the analyses of the three dissertations and the three RE student-teacher books may have strengthened such an idea, at least on the basis of the limited material that has been studied here. The pattern that more general analyses reveal seems to be that there are larger differences between the two text genres (dissertations and textbooks for RE student teachers) than within each of them.

The three RE dissertations show similarities, for example, in that they regard the processes that construct current forms of RE subjects as central, meaning that transmission of content is not possible. Perspectives of teachers are considered to be important but these perspectives operate in close connection with the pupils, whose perspectives are also central for what RE can take place. Parallel to the explicit learning processes, there are several implicit ones, processes that can both strengthen and counteract each other. In order to have an effect upon the pupils' perspectives, their learning, the teacher has to take these specific processes into account. It is not enough to consider one's own experiences as a teenager nor to bring up new findings from religious studies. Religious education is, like mathematics education, a science that has to take the human factor seriously, i.e. the subject matter that is being learnt does not exist in itself but is constructed in meetings between people. That is what the didactical triangle, with its three interdependent components, reminds us about (Straesser, 2007). RE content that affects the pupils does not exist in itself. That means that to better understand teaching and learning of RE, empirical studies and their knowledge contributions are important. However, empirical perspectives are not the only clarifying perspectives. As emphasised by, for example, Hartman, broad theoretical and content-related perspectives are also needed in RE (cf. Bergström & Ekström, 2015), which means that more cooperation between different kinds of researchers is required. The RE field and knowledge front is broad and the participants are few. Many more people are active in teacher-education practices than in RE-research practices. The analyses conducted here have shown that more interaction between these two different practices could be helpful. There is a need for serious

discussions about definitions of RE, the concept “*religionsdidaktik*” as well as central knowledge contributions in RE. This could be important in dialogues and argumentations about important research, valid perspectives and findings. Such a process could also raise the quality of research and contribute to the establishment of a stronger RE research field – which will also strengthen practice (cf. Schüllerqvist, 2005).

While new and important possibilities for RE in Sweden can be seen from the analyses conducted in this study, it is also important to reflect upon what consequences it might have had that a common RE discipline in Sweden is lacking and that research is therefore being carried out in other disciplines, which function as different frames for knowledge re/production. It is obvious, in line with what Dahlin writes about in his preface, that the interactions of different academic contexts have contributed to interesting developments regarding theoretical perspectives. However, the lack of an academic “home-discipline” means that there may not be any milieus that are able to deal with these findings and integrate them into development-oriented research processes. Instead, there is a risk that the findings will simply be exceptions in these separate academic contexts and that no cumulative RE research development will be conducted. If the few RE studies that are being done are to have maximum potential for knowledge contribution, in spite of the lack of a “home”, it seems to put intense pressure on existing networks to compensate for the lack of critical, constructive and knowledge-building work that an academic discipline/milieu provides.

References

Afdal, G. (2008). Religious education as a research discipline: An activity theoretical perspective. *British Journal of Religious Education*, 30(3), 199-210.
doi:10.1080/01416200802170086

Almén, E., Furenhed, R. & Hartman, S. (1994). *Att undervisa om religion, livsfrågor och etik i skolan : texter för lärarutbildning och lärarfortbildning*. Linköping: Linköpings Universitet.

Berglund, J. (2009). *Teaching Islam: Islamic religious education at three Muslim schools in Sweden*. Uppsala: Uppsala universitet.

Bergström, G. & Ekström, L. (2015). Mellan ämne och didaktik – om ämnesteorins roll inom samhällskunskapsdidaktiken. *Nordidactica*, 1: 93-119.

Bernmark-Ottosson, A. (2005). *Demokratins stöttepelare: en studie av lärarstudenternas demokratiuppfattningar*. Karlstad: Karlstads universitet.

Broady, D. (1998). *Den dolda läroplanen*. Stockholm: KRUT.

Buchardt, M. (2004). Religious education in school: Approaches in school practice and research in Denmark. In R. Larsson & C. Gustavsson (Red.), *Towards a European perspective on religious education* (s. 117-126). Skellefteå: Artos & Norma bokförlag.

Cöster, H. (2003). *Att kunna tala allvar med sig själv: utkast till välfärdsskyddets etik och värdegrund*. Karlstad: Karlstads Universitet.

Cöster, Henry (2009). *Livsmodets språk: förkunnelse och sakrament i en luthersk teologi*. Lund: Arcus.

Dahlin, B. (1989). *Religionen, själen och livets mening: en fenomenografisk och existensfilosofisk studie av religionsundervisningens villkor*. Göteborg: Göteborgs universitet.

Dahllöf, U. (1999). Det tidiga ramfaktorteoretiska tänkandet. En tillbakablick [The early frame factor theoretical thinking. In retrospect]. *Journal of Swedish Educational Research* 4(1): 5–29.

Dalevi, S. & Niemi, K. (2015). *Discussing didactics of religious education in a Swedish context*. Paper presented to the 13th Nordic Conference on Religious Education, Tartu, Estonia, 15-18 June.

Englund, T. (1997). Undervisning som meningserbjudande. I M. Uljens (Red.), *Didaktik – teori, reflektion och praktik* (s. 120-145). Lund: Studentlitteratur.

Engeström, Y., Miettinen, R., & Punamäki, R. (Eds.) (1999). *Perspectives on activity theory*. Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press.

Erricker, C. (2010). *Religious education: a conceptual and interdisciplinary approach for secondary level*. London: David Fulton.

Grimmitt, M. (red.) (2000). *Pedagogies of religious education: case studies in the research and development of good pedagogic practice in RE*. Great Wakering: McCrimmons.

Hedin, C. (2014). *Religionsundervisning: didaktik och praktik*. Lund: Studentlitteratur.

Hjärpe, J. (2006). Trons funktion och dysfunktion. Att studera den religiösa traditionens roll för aktuella skeenden. I B. Liljefors Persson & J. Gustafsson Lundberg (Red.). *Religion, politik och globalisering. Religionsdidaktiska perspektiv*. Malmö: Föreningen lärare i religionskunskap (FLR).

Hopmann, S. (2007). Restrained teaching: The common core of didaktik. *European Educational Research Journal*, 6(2), 109. doi:10.2304/eeerj.2007.6.2.109

Jank, W., & Meyer, H. (1997). Nyttan av kunskaper i didaktisk teori. I M. Uljens (Red.), *Didaktik – teori, reflektion och praktik* (s. 17-34). Lund: Studentlitteratur.

Johnsson Harrie, A. (2011). *De samhällsvetenskapliga ämnenas didaktik: rapport från en inventering*. Linköping: Linköpings universitet.

- Kroksmark, T. (1989). *Didaktiska strövtåg. Didaktiska idéer från Comenius till fenomenografisk didaktik*. Göteborg: Daidalos.
- Larsson, R. (1992). *Introduktion till religionspedagogiken (Religio, nr 17)*. Lund: Lunds universitet, Teologiska institutionen.
- Löfstedt, M. (2011). *Religionsdidaktik: Mångfald, livsfrågor och etik i skolan*. Lund: Studentlitteratur.
- Ongstad, S. (2004). Fagdidaktikk som forskningsfelt. I: *Kunnskapstatus for forskningsprogrammet KUPP. Kunnskapsutvikling i profesjonsutdanning og profesjonsutövning* (p. 30-53). Oslo: Norges forskningsråd.
- Ongstad, S. (2006). Fag i endring. Om didaktisering av kunnskap. I S. Ongstad (Red.). *Fag og fagdidaktikk i lærerutdanning. Kunnskap i grenseland* (p. 19-57). Oslo: Universitetsforlaget.
- Osbeck, C. (2006). *Kränkningens livsförståelse: en religionsdidaktisk studie av livsförståelselärande i skolan*. Karlstad: Universitetet.
- Osbeck, C. (2011). Religionsdidaktik som kunnskaps- och forskningsfält. I M. Löfstedt (Red.), *Religionsdidaktik. Mångfald, livsfrågor och etik*. Lund: Studentlitteratur.
- Osbeck, C. (2012). Teaching and Learning Religious Education – What information is available in ERIC? In S. Lied & C. Osbeck. (Eds.). *Religionsdidaktisk arbeid pågår! Religionsdidaktikk i Hamar og Karlstad [Work on the didactics of religion in progress! Didactics of religion in Hamar and Karlstad]*. Vallset: Oplandske Bokforlag.
- Osbeck, C., & Lied, S. (2012a). RE research in Hamar and Karlstad in a subject didactical and international context. *Religionsdidaktisk arbeid pågår! Religionsdidaktikk i Hamar og Karlstad*. Vallset: Oplandske Bokforlag.
- Osbeck, C., & Lied, S. (2012b). Hegemonic speech genres of classrooms and their importance for RE learning. *British Journal of Religious Education*, 34(2), 155-168.
- Schoenfeld, A. H. (2012). Problematizing the didactic triangle. *Zdm*, 44(5), 587-599. doi:10.1007/s11858-012-0395-0
- Schüllerqvist, B. (2005). *Svensk historiedidaktisk forskning*. Stockholm: Vetenskapsrådet.
- Sjøberg, S. (2001). Innledning: Skole, kunnskap og fag. I S. Sjøberg (red.). *Fagdebattikk. Fagdidaktisk innføring i sentrale skolefag* (s. 11-48). Oslo: Gyldendal.
- Straesser, R. (2007). Didactics of mathematics: More than mathematics and school. *Zdm*, 39(1), 165-171. doi:10.1007/s11858-006-0016-x
- Säljö, R. (2010). *Lärande och kulturella redskap: Om lärprocesser och det kollektiva minnet*. Stockholm: Norstedt.

EXAMPLES OF KNOWLEDGE CONTRIBUTIONS IN SWEDISH RE – A DISCUSSION OF
DISCIPLINES AS FRAMES FOR KNOWLEDGE RE/PRODUCTION

Christina Osbeck

Uljens, M. (1997). Grunddrag till en reflektiv skoldidaktisk teori. I M. Uljens (Red.), *Didaktik – teori, reflektion och praktik* (s. 166-197). Lund: Studentlitteratur.