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Response: On RE research in the Nordic countries – a few notes

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Abstract: Considering the complex nature of RE and the RE research the response suggests that RE pedagogy preferably should adopt a multidisciplinary approach in order to grasp the complexity of RE. Nobody can be an expert in every sector of the RE research field, but everyone can learn something from colleagues working with other problems and methods in the complex field of RE.

KEYWORDS: MULTIDISCIPLINARITY OF RE AND RE-RESEARCH; HISTORY OF RE-RESEARCH

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In this issue of *Nordidactica* there are six articles on Religious Education research written by Mette Buchardt, Gunnar Gunnarsson, Christina Osbeck, Geir Skeie and Martin Ubani. In the articles the prerequisites are described for Religious Education (RE) and for research on that field in Denmark, Iceland, Sweden, Norway and Finland. In this paper I will share my reflections on the main content of these articles.

The differences between countries are considerable, also between the Nordic countries. Therefore it is not surprising that research in the RE field is also varying very much. Those who have taken part in seminars of the Nordic Conference on Religious Education during the last decades may have an understanding of the RE research discourse in the Nordic countries. There have indeed been distinct differences between the contributions from different researchers. My own notion has been that colleagues from Denmark tend to write with an historical or philosophical approach; those from Norway in a theological and/or social sciences tradition; Swedish researchers used to write in a behavioural sciences paradigm but later on they have also adopted theories and approaches from the social sciences; colleagues from Finland have worked with empirical research materials with a behavioural sciences approach. I think that there still may be some truth in that understanding. However, my main impression from the six articles is that it is not only considerable variation between the Nordic countries but also *within* each single country. This diversity colours the Nordic discussion on the RE field to day.

A research field with deep historical roots

The reason for bringing together these six articles on RE research has evidently been to investigate the preconditions for RE research or religion pedagogy as a *new* research field or academic discipline in the Nordic countries. In that connection I think it may be advisable to make a difference between RE as an academic discipline on the one hand and RE as a research field on the other. RE research has a long history even if it has not been organized as an academic discipline in its own right.

The border between pedagogy and RE (or religion pedagogy) has always been blurred. Religious Education is certainly not a new field of theoretical reflection and research in Europe. The first professorship in pedagogy in Europe was installed in 1779 in Halle, at a theological seminar that belonged to the faculty of theology. (Wilke 1975) This is perhaps not astonishing since the church had the responsibility for all education in most western countries and teaching religion was a main concern for all schools. Therefore the first professorships in pedagogy seem to have merged with religion pedagogy and vice versa.

Nipkov (1998) underlines that the disciplines of RE and pedagogy from the beginning and still today have many central research problems in common.

I have found an early Swedish example of this connection between pedagogy and RE. It is a licentiate thesis, in two handwritten parts. (Björkquist 1907; 1909) This was even three years before the first professorship in pedagogy was installed in Sweden. The examiner was brought in from Germany. The thesis deals with the goals of the RE

in the Swedish compulsory school and the role of biblical history within the subject. The author defended his thesis for a degree in pedagogy at the faculty of philosophy at Uppsala University. (Aronson 2008)

So, research and reflection on problems of RE constitutes an old research field. I think that this should be stressed today if one tries to find ways to establish the pedagogy or didactics of RE as a separate discipline within the academic structure.

Research leadership and the influence of academic structures

The importance of history and research leadership is also evident in the six presentations. Today you can still trace the influence from the three “founding fathers” of the Nordic Conference on Religious Education (NCRE) Ivar Asheim in Norway, KE Bugge in Denmark and Kalevi Tamminen in Finland. They were among the first Nordic professors in the RE field. Being professors they had the authority to select, supervise and examine RE doctoral students. In that sense they established religion pedagogy (religionspedagogik) as an academic discipline in Scandinavia. At the same time you can see the effects of the fact that Sweden for a long time did not have any professorships in RE. The research on the RE field was carried out within other disciplines. Therefore the impact of university politics and faculty and research organisation on the development of the RE-discipline has been evident. In this respect there have been and still are big differences between the Nordic countries. This mirrors the importance of different frame factors in research development and in university life. There is no wonder that the authors of the six articles come out with such a different picture when writing about RE and research on the RE field. It is so much that is dependent on academic organisation, structure and university politics.

Christina Osbeck (2017) makes it clear that most Swedish dissertations in the field have been examined within the discipline of pedagogy, and that is also my own experience as a retired professor in pedagogy and education (Hartman 2009). This is an effect of the disciplinary academic structure and an example of the fluid boundaries between disciplines in the RE research field. In my opinion this has had a weakening effect when it comes to the theoretical and conceptual basis for Swedish RE research. Some dissertations mirror the debate and state of things within the discipline of pedagogy rather than what has been going on in the RE research field.

The theoretical structure or the epistemology of RE is in different ways dealt with in all six articles. The influence from varied research paradigms is visible over time and in different countries. The relationship or tension between theology and religious studies, academic studies and teacher education, pedagogy and didactics is visible in different contexts. So the variations within the RE field are large and mirrors the complexity of the field.

A complex research field should be studied from varying perspectives

Considering the complex nature of RE and the RE research I have suggested earlier that RE pedagogy preferably should adopt a multidisciplinary approach. (Hartman 2000; Osbeck 2017). If you want to grasp the complexity of RE you have to consider

for example, *the history of education* and the dominating role RE has had in the daily work of the school for so long time. You may also need a *social science* perspective to understand how secularisation and pluralism have influenced RE. You need perspectives of *theology and/or religious studies* to analyse the subject matter of RE. From *behavioural sciences* you may learn about RE pupils and how to communicate with them. You can find these different research perspectives represented in the six articles on Nordic RE. Nobody can be an expert in every sector of the RE research field, but everyone can learn something from colleagues working with other problems and methods in the complex field of RE. That is what research conferences are for.

A Nordic perspective

The articles in this issue of *Nordidactica* were originally contributions at the Nordic Conference on Religious Education (NCRE) in Tartu 2015. What is so special about a Nordic conference? As you can see from the articles there are so large disparities between different approaches in the RE research that you may wonder if the RE-researchers have anything in common to discuss.

The idea of a Nordic community has had its ups and downs. The folk high-schools have often celebrated the idea in the spirit of Grundtvig, so have students' unions at the universities and may be also the scout movement. The Lutheran churches have also embraced a Nordic community. On the political level however have the Nordic countries been divided in modern time; some countries belong to NATO, other don't, some belong to European Union, and other don't. And yet the Nordic idea has survived.

In the beginning the NCRE conferences used "skandinaviska" as the conference language. Nowadays English is used as the common language on the NCRE conferences. I think this can create further complications in the discussions about complex research problems within different paradigms and contexts. The former secretary of the Royal Swedish Academy, Horace Engdahl, has described the dilemma in a few words: "Som svensk blir man dummare på engelska, och den första konsekvensen tycks vara att man inte märker det." [As a Swede you become more stupid in English, and the first consequence seems to be that you don't notice it. My translation]. I suppose that also colleagues from other Nordic countries may have experienced something in that direction.

To talk and write about complex and delicate matters in a foreign language makes communication between colleagues difficult, especially if they start out from different positions in fundamental questions concerning epistemology and research methods. This is of course the same in all international meetings, but Nordic conferences have a great advantage. There are differences in language and research theory and research practice between the Nordic countries, but we have other things in common. The secretary of *Föreningen Norden* (the Nordic Society) Bo R Andersson calls it a *semantic community*. It is certainly true that we are speaking different languages and there are so many differences between the countries, in constitutional practice, political culture, economy, religion, church organisation, secularisation, school, and so

on, in spite of all that we have a common understanding and experience of central phenomena and concepts like history, justice, democracy, welfare society, human rights, religion, school and so on. Because of that we can agree about what we disagree about, and that is a very good starting point for a discussion among researchers.

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