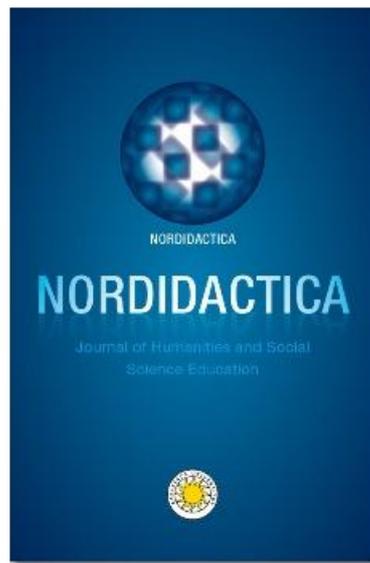# Religious Education in Transition, 1994 to 2024: A Comparative Overview of Research of Religious Education in Schools in South Africa and Sweden

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Religious Education in Transition, 1994 to 2024: A Comparative Overview of Research of Religious Education in Schools in South Africa and Sweden

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Abstract: This article presents a systematic comparative review of research on Religious Education (RE) in South Africa and Sweden from 1994 to 2024. Through analysis of 77 peer-reviewed studies, it examines how historical trajectories, curricular frameworks and societal conditions shape the purposes, practices and conceptualisations of RE in each context. The findings show that both countries address common themes: pluralism, religious literacy, ethics, and existential questions - yet these take on distinct meanings in the two different national contexts. In South Africa, RE is embedded within Life Skills and Life Orientation, reflecting post-apartheid aims of democratic transformation, social cohesion, dignity and relational ethics, including concepts such as Ubuntu. In Sweden, RE functions as a non-confessional, knowledge-based subject grounded in secular norms, analytical comparison and individual meaning-making. Using a comparative–interpretive approach, the study demonstrates how each context illuminates the other's assumptions, highlighting the culturally situated nature of RE and the value of contrast for understanding educational responses to diversity.

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Education serves as a central institution in shaping individuals and societies, reflecting and influencing broader social, cultural, and ideological currents. The way religion is taught in schools, particularly through different constructions of Religious Education (RE)[1], provides a valuable lens for understanding societal developments and transformations. As education systems respond to processes such as urbanization, globalization, and the spread of Western pedagogical models, the teaching of religion has undergone significant changes. These shifts reveal how societies negotiate religious diversity, secularism, and cultural identity in public life (Tayob, 2018). Religions remain central to meaning and identity, yet in education their role is increasingly shaped by institutional frameworks and pedagogical aims. In South Africa and Sweden, these dynamics are visible: Sweden's secular, knowledge-based RE contrasts with post-apartheid South Africa's focus on reconciling religious freedom with nation-building, reflecting broader societal negotiations around religion, tradition, and modernity (Ackah, 2022).

This study aims to conduct a systematic review of research to analyse how Religious Education (RE) has been conceptualised and researched in South Africa and Sweden between 1994 and 2024, and to explore how the two research landscapes illuminate one another when viewed through a comparative–interpretive lens

Sweden and South Africa have radically different historical and social contexts, and it could be questioned whether these two different national contexts can be compared at all. However, we argue that comparing Sweden and South Africa offers key insights into how social systems shape education, with RE serving as a lens to explore approaches to religion, ethics, norms, and values. It illuminates how identities are formed, moral principles applied, and how religious norms and values influence humans both locally and globally.

The article begins with a brief overview of the historical development of religion in schools in South Africa and Sweden, followed by a presentation of the current structure of RE in both countries. It then outlines the methodological design, including the systematic review process and the comparative–interpretive analytical approach. The results section presents the main themes identified in the research from each context, and the article concludes with an integrated analysis and discussion that examines how these research landscapes illuminate one another.

RE in South Africa and Sweden

The following section presents the development of RE in the public-school systems of South Africa and Sweden. It also explores how this subject is currently structured in

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[1] In this article, we use the abbreviation RE to refer to teaching about religion in the public school systems in Sweden and South Africa. In South Africa, teaching about religion is part of the subjects *Life Skills* and *Life Orientation*. In Sweden, it is taught in a school subject called *Religionskunskap*, which we have chosen to translate as RE, following the common practice in international publications.

the curriculum, referring to it as Life Skills (Grades R–6) or Life Orientation (Grades 7–12) in South Africa and RE in Sweden (Grades 1–12).

Development of Christian National Education into Life Skills and Life Orientation in South Africa

Religious diversity has long characterised South African society, although under colonial and apartheid rule, religious freedom and pluralism were unevenly upheld (Coertzen, 2014). With the National Party's rise to power in 1948, the government formalised Christian National Education (CNE) in 1967. CNE promoted a Calvinist Protestant worldview and served as an ideological tool for legitimising apartheid by privileging Christian doctrine among white learners while marginalising other cultures and religions (van Eeden & Vermeulen, 2005; Lavin, 1965). Bible education was compulsory in most public schools, and parents opposing CNE had limited possibilities to express alternative religious or cultural identities. Although independent schools were permitted, they were required to comply with apartheid's racial segregation policies, and even in segregated systems, provisions for Hindu and Muslim students varied considerably (Nthontho, 2018).

Following democratization in 1994, policymakers sought to dismantle the confessional legacy in public education. Emphasising equality among religions and the need to cultivate respect for diversity, the government introduced the National Policy on Religion and Education (2003), (Potgieter, 2011). The policy replaced religious education with religion education to signal a non-confessional, academic and inclusive approach aligned with constitutional principles of freedom of religion, equality and non-discrimination (Republic of South Africa, 1996; Chidester, 2006a, 2006b). South Africa officially adopted a cooperative model of religion–state relations, affirming that it has no state religion while permitting fair religious observances in schools on the condition that they were conducted in an equitable manner, recognizing the country's religious diversity. However, attendance to these observances is voluntary and free from obligation (Tayob, 2017; Van der Walt, 2011). Religious education was integrated into Life Skills (Grades R–6) and Life Orientation (Grades 7–12) to promote unity in diversity and mutual respect (Nthontho & Nieuwenhuis, 2015).

However, research indicates ongoing challenges in implementing multireligious education as intended. Many schools continue to draw on past practices rather than fully adopting the policy's pluralistic aims (Nthontho & Nieuwenhuis, 2015). Christian school ethos remains common, and confessional or sectarian instruction persists in some contexts (Tayob, 2017; Van der Walt, 2011). The transition toward inclusive religion education has therefore been uneven and appears as a complex and sensitive issue (Jacobs, 2012; Jarvis, 2021; Nthontho, 2018, 2024).

RE in contemporary South Africa

In South Africa, religion is taught in Life Skills (Grades R–6) and Life Orientation (Grades 7–12), both of which aim to support learners' holistic development. Life Skills addresses personal, social and physical development, including health, social

responsibility and creative arts (Department of Basic Education, 2011a). Life
Orientation builds on these foundations by promoting self-awareness, social
engagement and responsible citizenship. It includes physical education, career
development and appreciation of cultural and religious diversity (Department of Basic
Education, 2011b, 2011c).

Religion-related content is integrated across phases in the curriculum. In the
Foundation Phase (Grades R–3), learners are introduced to diversity, including religious
diversity, through activities that encourage respect for different beliefs. In the
Intermediate Phase (Grades 4–6), they explore various religions, learning about
symbols, festivals and the roles religious traditions play in communities (Department of
Basic Education, 2011a). In the Senior Phase (Grades 7–9), the curriculum examines
world religions, their teachings and social significance, inviting learners to reflect on
their own and others' beliefs through topics such as diversity, values, ethics and
personal reflection (Department of Basic Education, 2011b). Additionally, students
interested in a more in-depth exploration of religious studies could choose to specialize
in this area from Grades 10 to 12 where historical development, sacred texts and core
teachings of major world religions and the role of religion in public life are explored.
Learners also develop research skills, engaging with concepts such as objectivity,
subjectivity and neutrality (Department of Basic Education, 2011c). Across all phases,
the curriculum aims to promote an inclusive understanding of religion and its
significance for individuals and society, contributing to personal development, social
cohesion and democratic citizenship.

Development of RE in Sweden

Sweden has historically been a Christian nation with a Lutheran State Church, but
religious freedom expanded during the 19th century and became a constitutional right
in 1951. Freedom of religion guarantees both the right to practise a religion and the right
not to belong to a religious community, aligning Sweden with §9 of the European
Convention on Human Rights (1950). Contemporary Sweden is frequently described as
both highly secularised and increasingly multi-religious (Nordin, 2017), and RE in
public schools is therefore mandated to be non-confessional and non-denominational.
According to the Education Act (SFS 2010:800) and the national curricula (Swedish
National Agency for Education 2011, 2022), schools must also promote democratic
values and contribute to a shared cultural heritage.

The origins of Swedish RE lie in Christian confessional instruction. This became
increasingly contested during the 20th century. Free-church movements criticised its
ties to the state church, while the labour movement viewed school-based religious
instruction as a conservative tool for shaping citizenship. This pressure prompted the
state to reduce confessional elements and foreground a universal human ethic to
preserve the integrity of public education (Almén, 2000; Hellström, 2025). Post–World
War II reforms aimed to shift Swedish schooling from Christian and patriotic values to
democratic principles. However, Christian traditions continued to influence education,
being adapted to fit welfare-state ideals (Hellström, 2025). By the 1950s, public debates

about religion intensified, leading to the introduction of a nine-year compulsory school in 1962, which established an objectivity requirement for religious education. This change marked a transition from confessional to non-confessional instruction, incorporating multiple religions and worldviews to reflect Sweden's pluralistic and secular society.

RE in contemporary Sweden

In Sweden, Religious Education [*Religionskunskap*] is a compulsory subject in all schools, aiming to provide a broad understanding of religions and worldviews, foster respect for diversity, and encourage critical reflection on ethical questions. It is non-denominational and aligns with Sweden's secular framework. The national curricula promote democratic values and human rights while acknowledging the significance of Christian heritage and diverse worldviews.

Content progresses across school levels. In Grades 1–3, students explore moral issues, local Christian traditions, and religious stories from cultures like Norse mythology, Christianity, Islam, and Judaism. In Grades 4–6, the focus shifts to religions, worldviews, ethics, and life questions, introducing world religions, secular perspectives, and discussions on secularization and values. In Grades 7–9, students focus on comparative studies of world religions, examining interpretations, historical and contemporary roles, and issues such as freedom of religion, gender roles, sexuality, and ethics. In upper secondary school (ages 16–19), compulsory RE covers world religions, ethics, and contemporary issues, highlighting diversity, intersectionality, and the relationship between religion and science, while analysing intersections with socio-economic, ethnic, and sexual identities. Overall, Swedish RE aims to foster understanding, tolerance and critical thinking about religion and ethics, enabling students to navigate a multicultural and democratic society.

Method

Systematic review

This study employed a systematic and comparative review of research on Religious Education (RE) in South Africa and Sweden from 1994 to 2024. Two searches were conducted in EBSCOhost databases (*ERIC, APA PsycArticles, APA PsycInfo, Sociology Source Ultimate and Academic Search Premier*) using the keywords (Religious Education OR Religion Education) AND (school OR classroom OR elementary OR middle school OR high school OR K–12) combined with either (South Africa)* or (Sweden OR Swedish). Searches were limited to peer-reviewed English-language journal articles published between January 1, 1994, and December 31, 2024. The time span was selected because 1994 marked both South Africa's first democratic elections and the introduction of Sweden's new national curricula (Lpo 94/Lpf 94), which reshaped RE in both countries.

The search yielded 283 articles on South Africa and 360 on Sweden, excluding those focused on religion from a sociological perspective or on confessional instruction. After abstract screening, 31 studies relevant to public school RE remained for South Africa and 46 for Sweden. These articles were read and coded based on thematic content and educational aims, with categories emerging inductively, including pluralism, religious literacy, ethics, existential questions, and teacher professionalism, while also reflecting each country's curricular context.

A limitation of the systematic review method used here is that it excludes publications in languages other than English and largely omits books and book chapters, while the selected databases do not cover all relevant journals, meaning that some significant contributions to the field fall outside the analysed material.

Analysis

The analysis had two stages. First, South African and Swedish articles were examined separately to identify key themes and debates, creating distinct national research profiles. In the second stage, these profiles were compared through a dialogue to highlight differences and similarities. This approach drew on Niemi's (2020, 2021) concept of mirroring and on Bråten's (2013, 2014) work on comparative frameworks in international RE. Mirroring, as a sensitising concept, guided the analysis by illuminating contrasts between the two contexts and revealing underlying assumptions and culturally embedded meanings. Bråten's focus on how educational concepts vary across contexts underscored that terms in the articles might have different meanings in Sweden and South Africa. This comparative-interpretive approach enabled a relational analysis of the two contexts, in which each informed an understanding of the other. Sweden's secular view of RE emphasized the relational and justice aspects of South African RE, while South Africa's communal framing highlighted the cultural assumptions in Sweden regarding neutrality and meaning-making. Consequently, the analysis shows how educational ideas evolve and function differently across contexts. Throughout the process, evaluative comparisons were avoided to understand how historical legacies, cultural assumptions, and contemporary social challenges shape RE research in each setting. The comparative-interpretive framework emphasized contextual specificity and illustrated how central concepts are mobilized and reinterpreted in different educational landscapes.

Result - themes and content in the systematic review

The section below presents the results of the systematic review, identifying key themes across the included studies. A comparative analysis of these findings follows in the next section.

Research in both South Africa and Sweden shows that RE must navigate both complex curricular demands and shifting social conditions (Chidester, 2006a; Damons, 2016; Esau, 2021; Flensner, 2015; Flensner & Larsson, 2013; Franck, 2015; Klintborg, 2020, 2022; Krishna, 2013; Liljestrand & Olsson, 2016; Nthontho & Nieuwenhuis,

2015; Nthontho & Addai-Mununkum, 2021; Oosthuizen & Rossouw, 2008; Prinsloo, 2007). The challenges documented in each context differ due to contrasting educational traditions and societal frameworks.

In South Africa, debates focus on the aims of the subject, the teaching of religion in public schools (Stonier, 1998), and the difficulties of implementation. Barriers include limited teacher preparation, weak parental involvement, large classes, poverty, and learner misconduct (Prinsloo, 2007; Krishna, 2013; Oosthuizen & Rossouw, 2008). Scholars highlight the marginalisation of religion within Life Orientation: unclear goals and limited time lead to superficial treatment rather than genuine religious literacy (Nthontho & Addai-Mununkum, 2021). RE also remains contested, shaped by differing understandings of religion and spirituality. Teachers' own identities strongly influence their approaches (Jarvis, 2021), while many Life Orientation teachers express uncertainty about concepts like spirituality (Jacobs, 2012). Curriculum developments increasingly align RE with human rights commitments (Simmonds, 2014), emphasising diversity, equality, and democratic citizenship, but also raising tensions around gender rights, children's rights, and religious norms.

In Sweden, challenges stem more from teaching RE in a secular, post-Christian environment. Secularist norms can position religion as outdated (Flensner, 2015), and Sweden's Lutheran heritage continues to shape what counts as "religion" privileging belief and doctrine over practice (Niemi, 2018; Berglund, 2022). Research also emphasises meaning-making, truth claims, and democratic education. Klintborg (2020) argues that categories such as "religion" and "worldview" fail to capture young people's existential concerns and proposes "existential configurations" (see also Klintborg & Rothgangel, 2023). Franck (2015), in turn, highlights the need for nuanced engagement with truth claims within non-confessional RE.

Across both countries, RE is linked to democratic citizenship (Liljestrand & Olsson, 2016; Nthonto, 2024) but with different emphases: South African research foregrounds moral formation and social cohesion, while Swedish research stresses critical reflection and pluralistic dialogue. Swedish studies also identify ethnocentric tendencies in teaching materials that oversimplify traditions and reflect majority perspectives, particularly regarding Islam and Christianity (Liljestrand et al., 2024; Olsson, 2010; Otterbeck, 2005).

Diversity and pluralism

Since 1994, research in both South Africa and Sweden has examined how schools navigate increasing religious, cultural, and social diversity, though under very different conditions. In South Africa, Sturm et al. (1998) questioned why pillarization did not emerge, noting that while it can support coexistence, it may also reinforce division. In Sweden, extensive work, particularly since the 2010s, has explored how diversity is handled within a strongly secularised school culture (Alberts, 2010; Bergdahl, 2009, 2018; Berglund, 2022; von Brömssen, 2016; Fahlén, 2018; Flensner, 2015, 2018, 2020; Flensner & von der Lippe, 2019; Liedgren, 2018; Liljestrand, 2015; Liljestrand et al., 2024; Morgan, 2002; Naeslund, 2009a, 2009b; Niemi, 2018; Olsson, 2010; Osbeck &

Lied, 2011; Otterbeck, 2005; Sjöborg, 2013; Torstenson-Ed, 2006; Vikdahl &
Liljestrand, 2021).

In South Africa, studies highlight tensions around policy interpretation and practice
in diverse schools. Nthontho (2020, 2024), Tayob (2017), and von Brömssen and
Athiemoolam (2018) show how conflicts arise when school norms contradict
constitutional protections of religious freedom. Tayob (2017) documents disciplinary
actions against minority learners, such as Muslim students, while von Brömssen and
Athiemoolam (2018) describe teacher narratives that reproduce a "logic of difference"
between Christianity and Islam. Fessha and Dessalegn (2021) argue that forms of
"religious apartheid" persist because early nation-building policies marginalised
religious diversity. Gender, sexuality, and religion intersect in Life Orientation, where
comprehensive sexuality education is contested (Ubisi, 2021; Francis, 2010), and
implementation gaps affect learners with multiple minority identities, including queer
Muslim youth (Ubisi, 2021). However, de Wet et al. (2012) show that learners can
critically evaluate cultural and religious practices, indicating possibilities for inclusive
engagement.

Esau (2021) adds a decolonial perspective, arguing that RE must confront the legacy
of Christian-National Education, challenge racialised classroom cultures, and provide
experiential opportunities, such as community visits and reflective dialogue, to build
empathy, critical self-awareness, and sensitivity to subtle racism and religious bias. His
work positions decolonising RE as an ethical and relational project aimed at fostering
meaningful coexistence in a profoundly unequal society.

In Sweden, diversity is negotiated within a secular, post-Christian, and multi-
religious context. Teachers struggle to balance non-confessional RE with students'
religious expression (Fahlén, 2018; Flensner, 2018, 2020; Osbeck & Lied, 2011), and
minority youth often feel "different" in secular school settings (Kesselstrand, 2015;
Flensner, 2018; Vikdahl & Liljestrand, 2021). Sjöborg investigates how student's
religiosity shapes attitudes toward RE (2013) and concludes that the students' religiosity
had a significant effect on their attitudes towards existential issues, preferences on what
to study in RE as well as incentives for studying RE. Pedagogically, teachers employ
varied strategies: Fahlén (2018) questions how religious freedom operates in secular
schools, Liljestrand (2015) identifies universalistic and contextual approaches to
teaching, and Britton and Jørgensen (2019) show that understanding "speech genres" is
essential for productive learning during field visits.

Concept discussions in RE

Both South African and Swedish research highlight religious literacy as a central
concern in teaching within diverse societies. Other concepts, however, differ by context:
Swedish studies emphasise powerful knowledge and controversial issues, while South
African research focuses on spirituality, Ubuntu, and sensitive topics such as gender,
sexuality, religious diversity, and human rights. These patterns show shared priorities
but distinct national emphases.

Religious Literacy

In South Africa, the National Policy on Religion and Education (2003) positions Life Orientation as a vehicle for religious literacy, yet researchers argue the curriculum lacks clarity, time, and coherence. Nthontho and Addai-Mununkum (2021) criticise its superficial treatment of religion, while Orchard (2020) stresses the value of RE for promoting respect for diversity and avoiding indoctrination, despite implementation challenges.

In Sweden, religious literacy is similarly a core aim of non-confessional RE (von Brömssen, 2013). Swedish studies highlight tensions shaped by secular school norms: teachers must navigate students' rights to religious expression and avoid stereotypical representations, often limited by their own knowledge (Fahlén, 2018). Comparative work by von Brömssen et al. (2020) shows that religious literacy takes culturally specific forms across countries, with the Swedish model emphasising analytical, secular, and critically reflective approaches.

Overall, both countries prioritise religious literacy but face different obstacles: South Africa struggles with curricular marginalisation and uneven implementation, while Sweden contends with teacher competence and the negotiation of diversity in a strongly secular educational environment.

Powerful Knowledge

The concept of powerful knowledge, based on Michael Young's work and applied to RE by Franck (2023), is explored in Swedish research. It involves specialized knowledge that goes beyond students' everyday experiences by placing religious ideas within broader historical and cultural contexts. Swedish studies connect powerful knowledge to critical engagement with diverse perspectives. Liljefors Persson (2023) suggests that addressing existential questions through this knowledge supports democratic and inclusive education. Andersson et al. (2023) analysed the 2017 national RE test. They found that while some tasks reflect powerful knowledge, others focus on personal experiences, concluding that RE should prioritize insights beyond the familiar.

Controversial Issues

In Sweden, research explicitly discusses controversial issues in RE. Flensner (2020) emphasises the need for dialogic classrooms where diverse perspectives can be expressed and problematized and thus generate understanding, while upholding democratic values such as equality and human rights. Lindström and Samuelsson (2022) describe the "paradox of moral education," in which teachers must promote democratic norms while encouraging the critical examination of beliefs. Debates on "safe" versus "brave" spaces (Flensner & von der Lippe, 2019) further highlight the need for pedagogical strategies that embrace discomfort and foster reflective dialogue.

In South Africa, the term "controversial issues" is not used; research instead engages with sensitive and contested topics. Policies on RE and "comprehensive sexuality education" (CSE) remain debated (Ubisi, 2021). Although CSE is mandatory in Life

Orientation (Francis, 2010), uneven implementation generates tensions, especially for learners with intersecting minority identities, such as queer Muslim youth (Ubisi, 2021). Studies show that learners critically interrogate cultural and religious practices that affect girls, underscoring the need for a human-rights-based pedagogy (de Wet et al., 2012; Simmonds, 2014). Sensitive issues also arise in conflicts over religious observances and equality in multi-faith schools: Nthontho (2020) demonstrates how principals mediate competing rights, such as negotiating Muslim prayer spaces or Christian-majority assemblies. Although framed in terms of conflict, rights, and mediation rather than "controversial issues," South African research similarly addresses the complexities of navigating sensitive topics in diverse school contexts.

Spirituality

Spirituality is a persistent point of debate within South African Religion Education (RE) and Life Orientation. Roux (2006) shows that spirituality is conceptually contested, historically marginalised, and closely tied to questions of identity, social context, and post-apartheid curriculum reform. Teachers are confronted with diverse cultural, religious, and socio-economic realities, yet receive little guidance on what spirituality means or how it should be facilitated. Jacobs (2012) similarly reports wide variation in teachers' definitions of spirituality and confusion about its relationship to religion, with some treating it as a moral resource, others as a form of religious expression, and still others as a broader dimension of human well-being. The lack of consensus among teachers and policymakers underscores an uncertainty about the role of spirituality in education and its place in a religiously diverse society. Potgieter et al. (2009), in their examination of children's spirituality, suggest that experiences such as divine dreams can meaningfully contribute to learners' understanding of themselves and their beliefs.

Ubuntu

The concept of Ubuntu appears only in the South African research context. Ubuntu, an African philosophy emphasising humaneness, care and communal responsibility, is presented as a valuable foundation for education and moral development. Etieyibo (2017) argues for integrating Ubuntu values into school curricula, and Lebese et al. (2023) demonstrate this through a boot camp promoting self-respect and harmonious living among high school learners. Several scholars highlight Ubuntu's relevance for addressing social and ethical challenges: Horsthemke (2009) links rising school violence to a decline in moral values and calls for education grounded in moral reasoning and Ubuntu principles, while Waghid (2014) proposes combining Ubuntu with scientific perspectives to support justice and human rights. Ogunniyi (2011) likewise advocates for including diverse worldviews in education, aligning with Ubuntu's emphasis on relationality. Together, these studies suggest that Ubuntu-informed approaches can play a significant role in addressing moral and ethical issues in South African schools.

Ethics and Existential Questions

Research on ethics and existential questions is far more developed in Sweden than in South Africa, reflecting different curricular traditions. In Sweden, extensive studies examine how ethical competence is conceptualised and taught in RE (Franck, 2020; Lilja, 2020; Lilja et al., 2023; Lyngfelt et al., 2023; Löfstedt & Sjöborg, 2018; Samuelsson & Lindström, 2020). Research highlights teachers' understandings of ethical competence (Lilja, 2020), the role of fiction in fostering empathy (Lyngfelt et al., 2023), ethics as key to intercultural understanding (Franck, 2020), and narrative approaches as "powerful knowledge" (Osbeck, 2020). The Swedish "value foundation" reinforces these expectations, requiring teachers to promote democratic values and equality, often producing tensions in practice (Lindström & Samuelsson, 2022).

Existential questions also have a long tradition in Swedish RE, introduced in 1969 (Sporre, 2022, 2023). Early work focused on children's thinking (Hartman, 1986), while recent studies examine meaning-making among young people (Klintborg, 2022; Osbeck et al., 2024; Sporre, 2023; Torstensson-Ed, 2006). Although later reforms grouped life questions under "ethics and existential questions," teachers often prioritise factual content and avoid existential questions or keep them superficial because they fear controversy or lack strategies for inclusive dialogue (Löfstedt & Sjöborg, 2018).

In South Africa, research on ethics and existential questions is less extensive and appears mainly in Life Skills and Life Orientation. Ethical and existential themes are often tied to social and moral challenges rather than treated as a separate RE domain. Horsthemke (2009) critiques traditional moral resources—including religious teachings and Ubuntu—as inadequate responses to school violence and calls for broader forms of moral reasoning. Studies show that learners critically examine cultural and religious practices that affect gender equality and community well-being (de Wet et al., 2012), supporting Simmonds' (2014) argument for rights-oriented, inclusive approaches. Ubuntu remains a distinctive ethical framework: Waghid (2014) presents it as nurturing compassion and responsibility, while Nthontho (2020) shows how dignity and recognition shape conflict mediation in multifaith schools. Existential concerns surface indirectly in discussions of children's spirituality (Potgieter et al., 2009) and issues of violence and vulnerability (Horsthemke, 2009), reflecting a relational, context-driven approach.

Overall, Sweden develops ethics and existential questions as explicit, systematic components of RE. In contrast, South African research addresses them more diffusely through broader social, moral, and relational concerns shaped by the country's history and inequalities.

Analysis and discussion

This article has examined how RE has been conceptualised and researched in South Africa and Sweden between 1994 and 2024. By analysing 77 articles and interpreting their themes in relation to national historical trajectories, curricular frameworks and school-level practices, the study reveals how RE research reflects, and responds to,

different societal conditions. Placing the two research landscapes in dialogue highlights how seemingly similar concepts, such as pluralism, religious literacy, ethics and existential questions, take on distinct meanings and functions in each context. Through this comparative-interpretive approach, each country becomes a lens through which to view the assumptions, priorities and conceptual tendencies of the other.

National Contexts as Frames for Conceptualisation

In both national contexts, understandings of RE cannot be separated from their historical foundations. In South Africa, contemporary RE is the outcome of a deliberate break from Christian National Education and apartheid's segregated and exclusionary schooling structures (Van der Walt, 2011; Serfontein, 2014; Stonier, 1998). The National Policy on Religion and Education (2003) repositioned RE as multifaith and non-discriminatory, linking it closely to human rights, democratic participation and reconciliation (Simmonds, 2014; Waghid, 2014). However, research demonstrates that this shift is unevenly implemented. Many schools continue to struggle with religious dominance, inadequate teacher preparation, and the legacy of racialised inequalities (Krishna, 2013; Jarvis, 2021; Tayob, 2017). Recent studies also highlight attempts to incorporate decolonial thinking and African epistemologies such as Ubuntu, signalling a move toward a philosophical and ethical worldview rooted in many Bantu-speaking cultures of Southern Africa (Esau, 2021; Naidoo, 2024).

In Sweden, RE has gradually moved from confessional Lutheran teaching toward a secular, non-confessional subject with an explicit focus on analytical comparison, ethics and understanding of diversity (Almén, 2000; Tomasson, 2002). Despite this shift, research shows that Lutheran heritage still implicitly shapes how religion is conceptualised, often privileging beliefs and doctrines and framing religion as a worldview rather than a lived practice (Niemi, 2018; Berglund, 2022; Franck, 2023). The heightened secularisation of Swedish society further influences RE practice, often positioning religion as unfamiliar or even outdated (Flensner, 2015; Vikdahl & Liljestrand, 2021). This leads to ongoing debates about neutrality, representation and the place of existential meaning-making in an increasingly plural society.

These national trajectories operate within shared global pressures, i.e., migration, secularisation, democratic challenges, and religious diversification. Yet, the way these supranational processes are interpreted differs at the national and school levels. As a result, similar concepts in RE research do not necessarily carry the same meaning and are not used to solve the same educational problems.

Shared themes—but divergent conceptual meanings

Across both countries, research on teaching about religions and worldviews in school engages with a recurring set of themes: diversity, pluralism, ethics, existential questions, and religious literacy, but the analysis reveals that these shared concepts carry distinct meanings shaped by their respective socio-historical contexts. While the themes overlap, the conceptual landscapes in which they operate differ markedly, underscoring the need to understand RE research as culturally and politically situated.

Pluralism and diversity

Research in both Sweden and South Africa demonstrates that pluralism is a central concern in RE. However, the concept takes shape in markedly different ways across national histories and educational contexts. In the Swedish context, pluralism is commonly approached through the lens of secular norms and minority representation. Studies highlight how teachers navigate implicit secular assumptions while upholding the non-confessional character of the subject, showing that "neutrality" often reflects culturally embedded understandings of religion rooted in Lutheran traditions of belief and individual conviction (Berglund, 2022; Torstenson-Ed, 2006). Recent research also identifies a deeper tension: the coexistence of an official self-image of Sweden as secular and multireligious, and an enduring idea of the nation as ethnically and linguistically homogenous. Although demographic realities challenge this narrative (roughly one-third of the population is either born abroad or has two foreign-born parents), it still influences classroom expectations and constructions of "normality." Scholars note that these assumptions shape how "Swedishness" is implicitly defined, whose perspectives are centred, and how pluralism is negotiated in practice (von Brömssen, 2021; Flensner, 2015). In Sweden, therefore, pluralism is treated both as an epistemic issue of how to teach religion in a secular context and as a cultural-political concern tied to questions of identity, migration and belonging.

In South Africa, pluralism is conceptualised within a different historical and social frame. Research emphasises that diversity cannot be separated from the legacies of apartheid, ongoing racialised inequalities, and the country's linguistic and cultural heterogeneity (Nthontho & Nieuwenhuis, 2015; Damons, 2016). Rather than revolving around secular norms, the challenges relate to balancing dominant religious traditions with the rights and visibility of minority groups in contexts marked by structural inequalities. Pluralism in South African RE is closely linked to national goals of reconciliation, social cohesion and democratic transformation. As several studies show, RE is positioned within a broader moral and political project aimed at redressing historical injustices and nurturing respectful coexistence in schools characterised by profound cultural and socio-economic diversity (Simmonds, 2014; Waghid, 2014).

Taken together, the two research landscapes reveal that pluralism is not a uniform concept: in Sweden, it is shaped by tensions between secularism, multireligiosity, and narratives of homogeneity, whereas in South Africa, it is defined through the imperatives of historical redress, democratic inclusion, and cultural heterogeneity. Through comparison, each context sheds light on implicit assumptions in the other, showing how pluralism is always embedded within specific national conditions and educational aims.

Religious literacy

Religious literacy appears as a key concept in both South African and Swedish RE research, yet the two contexts frame and operationalise it in distinct ways, shaped by their different historical legacies, curricular structures, and educational priorities. The

comparison shows that while the same term is used, it carries different meanings and fulfils different pedagogical functions.

In South Africa, religious literacy is integral to the democratic goals of post-apartheid education, as outlined in the National Policy on Religion and Education (2003). This policy promotes reconciliation, respect for diversity, and social cohesion in a society with a history of inequality. Research highlights the importance of dispositions like tolerance and human rights awareness over detailed knowledge, but implementing these values in Life Skills and Life Orientation proves challenging. Issues such as lack of conceptual clarity, inadequate preparation, and insufficient teacher training contribute to a superficial understanding of religion. Orchard (2020) notes the difficulty of balancing respect for diverse views without confessional biases, emphasizing the complexities of fostering religious literacy in classrooms. Overall, South African research positions religious literacy as a crucial ethical competency for democratic change.

In Swedish research, religious literacy is viewed as an analytical, knowledge-based competence that involves interpreting religious truth claims (Franck, 2015) and understanding religion in a secularised society (Flensner, 2015). It also includes engaging with existential questions for meaning-making (Klintborg, 2018, 2020, 2022; Klintborg & Rothgangel, 2023). Studies show that secular norms influence teachers' and students' views on religion, often marginalising it in discussions and prioritising belief over ritual in religious education (Niemi, 2018). Furthermore, students' religiosity affects their participation in pluralistic dialogue (Sjöborg, 2013), while teachers navigate neutrality and religious freedom in a secular context (Fahlén, 2018).

A comparative reading shows that South African religious literacy emphasises coexistence, democratic responsibility and ethical relations, whereas Swedish religious literacy emphasises analytical knowledge, critical interpretation and secular reflexivity. Both contexts aim to prepare students for a diverse society, but they do so through different pedagogical logics rooted in their national histories. The comparison of the two research traditions, therefore, reveals that "religious literacy" is not a universal concept but one that adapts to local conditions, embodying different epistemic assumptions and educational aims depending on the context in which it is used (cf. Zajda & Rust, 2021).

Controversial issues

In Swedish RE research, "controversial issues" is an established analytical concept used to describe topics that evoke emotional, moral, or worldview-based tension in the classroom. Scholars such as Flensner (2020). Flensner and von der Lippe (2019) and Lindström & Samuelsson (2022) highlight that teachers must make multiple perspectives visible while safeguarding freedom of expression and religion yet simultaneously uphold democratic values such as equality and human rights. This balancing act positions controversial issues as a distinctly pedagogical challenge that requires careful structuring of classroom dialogue.

South African RE research does not use the term controversial issues, but it engages
deeply with topics that function as such in practice—gender inequality, sexuality
education, religious diversity, and conflicts over religious observances (Francis, 2010;
de Wet et al., 2012; Ubisi, 2021; Simmonds, 2014). These issues are addressed not
primarily as didactic challenges but as matters embedded in broader struggles over
identity, inequality, and constitutional rights. Nthontho's (2020) work on transformative
mediation in multi-faith schools illustrates how principals navigate conflicts that arise
at the intersection of religious freedom, equality, and school governance.

In a comparative perspective, Swedish RE research conceptualises controversial
issues mainly as pedagogical challenges, whereas South African research frames them
as contextual and justice-related challenges, rooted in the lived realities of inequality,
identity, and rights. Together, these perspectives show that what counts as
"controversial" is shaped by national histories and educational priorities, leading to
different but complementary understandings of how RE can support learners in
navigating complex social and moral questions.

Ethics and existential questions

Ethics and existential questions constitute important themes in RE research in both
South Africa and Sweden, but they are conceptualised and enacted in markedly different
ways. A comparative reading shows how each tradition reflects broader societal
conditions, post-apartheid reconstruction in South Africa and secular individualism in
Sweden, resulting in distinct understandings of what ethical and existential learning
entails.

As already stressed, in South Africa, ethical dimensions of RE are closely tied to
democratic citizenship, social justice and post-apartheid transformation. RE is expected
to contribute to reconciliation, challenge discriminatory practices and cultivate respect
across religious and cultural boundaries. Studies show that learners use Life Orientation
to reflect critically on cultural and religious practices, particularly those that affect
gender equality, thereby demonstrating how ethical discernment becomes part of
broader democratic learning (de Wet et al., 2012). This aligns with Simmonds' (2014)
argument that RE should support inclusive practices that address historical injustices. A
distinctive feature of the South African discussion is the emphasis on Ubuntu, an ethical
orientation grounded in relationality, dignity and interdependence. Waghid (2014)
highlights Ubuntu's potential to guide moral education, while Nthontho (2020) shows
how interpersonal vulnerability and recognition of others' dignity shape conflict
mediation in multifaith schools. Existential questions appear in South African
research—such as in studies on children's spirituality (Potgieter et al., 2009) or concerns
about violence and moral reasoning (Horsthemke, 2009)—but they are typically
embedded within broader themes of community, social cohesion and collective
wellbeing rather than treated as a distinct pedagogical domain.

In Sweden, ethics and existential questions are among the most conceptually
developed areas of RE research. Within a secular educational framework, these issues
are approached as matters of individual meaning-making, self-understanding and

critical reflection. Several scholars explore how existential questions about identity, purpose, relationships, and mortality enhance students' engagement with religions and worldviews. Klintborg (2018, 2020, 2022) and Klintborg and Rothgangel (2023) introduce "existential configurations" to analyze students' integration of personal questions with religious and philosophical perspectives. Franck (2015) emphasizes that addressing truth claims in a pluralistic classroom fosters ethical awareness, while Bergdahl (2009, 2018) advocates for relational and dialogical approaches that acknowledge shared vulnerability. Swedish research highlights ethical tensions from secular norms, with religious students often marginalized in environments where religion is viewed as outdated (Flensner, 2018), and teachers balancing neutrality and inclusivity expectations (Naeslund, 2009a, 2009b; Lindström & Samuelsson, 2022a, 2022b).

Comparatively, the contrasts are evident. In South Africa, ethics is framed in communal and relational terms, grounded in Ubuntu and linked to the national project of democratic renewal and social cohesion. Existential questions are less explicit and often intertwined with moral and social concerns. In Sweden, ethics and existential questions are conceptualised in individual, reflective, and analytical terms, tied to secular values of autonomy, critical thinking, and personal meaning-making, and are central domains of RE research. Despite these differences, both contexts emphasise the importance of ethical and existential dimensions in preparing students for life in plural societies. The comparison shows that similar themes – for example, ethics, meaning-making, responsibility - are shaped by different societal conditions, underscoring the need for context-sensitive understandings of these key concepts within RE.

Mutual illumination between South Africa and Sweden

The comparative perspective in this study is informed by Niemi's (2020, 2021) idea of mirroring and by Bråten's (2013, 2014) insights on how concepts in RE shift across global and national contexts. Rather than seeking symmetry between the Swedish and South African research landscapes, mirroring encourages an interpretive stance where contrasts become analytical resources. In this way, comparison does not simply identify differences but uses them to make visible the assumptions, priorities and conceptual habits that structure each national tradition. Drawing on Bråten (2013, 2014), our work highlights that concepts such as "religion," "pluralism," and "religious literacy" are not universal; but always shaped by the cultural and historical frameworks in which they operate. Applying this insight here makes it possible to see how Swedish RE research, grounded in a secular-liberal educational tradition, tends to emphasise analytical knowledge and critical interpretation, while South African research foregrounds ethical relations, social cohesion and democratic reconstruction. These distinctions reflect broader societal narratives, for example, post-secular debates in Sweden and postcolonial nation-building in South Africa, rather than mere curricular differences.

Using a comparative approach thus clarifies how each national research tradition illuminates the other's blind spots. Swedish claims to neutrality appear differently when viewed against South Africa's focus on dignity and inclusion. At the same time, South

African aspirations for pluralism become more visible when contrasted with Swedish concerns about secular norms and representation. In this sense, comparison becomes a means of exposing the culturally situated nature of RE and deepening understanding of how educational concepts function within different historical and epistemic landscapes (Zajda & Rust, 2021).

Sweden as a mirror for South Africa

Using the Swedish research landscape as a mirror for the South African material helps to illuminate how different structural and conceptual conditions shape what RE becomes in each context. Swedish RE, established as a distinct and analytically oriented school subject, places strong emphasis on interpretive knowledge, critical engagement and discussions about neutrality and secular norms (Franck, 2015; Flensner, 2015; Niemi, 2018). Viewing South African RE through this lens highlights how its location within Life Orientation and Life Skills positions religion within a broader curriculum focused on holistic development, democratic participation and learner wellbeing. Rather than signalling superficiality, this underscores that South African RE is guided by ethical, relational and justice-oriented aims linked to national reconstruction (Prinsloo, 2007; Orchard, 2020; Simmonds, 2014).

The contrast also draws attention to the role of curricular structure. Swedish RE research, supported by subject-specific content, explores how teachers and students interpret religious ideas, negotiate truth claims, and navigate plurality (Osbeck et al, 2024; Franck, 2015; Berglund, 2022). When used as a mirror, this highlights the challenges faced by South African teachers who must balance a wide range of Life Orientation requirements, while also addressing religious diversity (Nthontho & Addai-Mununkum, 2021). This difference reflects divergent curricular purposes rather than differences in quality: Swedish RE is shaped by disciplinary traditions, while broader social and educational imperatives shape South African RE.

Swedish discussions of secular normativity (von Brömssen, 2016; Flensner, 2015, 2018) also offer a valuable contrast to South African debates. In Sweden, neutrality is negotiated within a highly secular public culture, whereas in South Africa, it concerns balancing diverse religious identities in contexts where Christianity often remains influential despite pluralistic policy commitments (Krishna, 2013). The comparison makes visible that "neutrality" is not a universal concept but one that operates differently depending on societal histories and power relations.

Finally, Swedish research on existential questions and personal meaning-making (Klintborg, 2018, 2020) draws attention to an area that appears less explicitly in South African RE scholarship, where existential concerns are more often embedded in discussions of dignity, relational ethics and social responsibility (Waghid, 2014). This again reflects different educational mandates: Sweden's emphasis on individual meaning-making arises within a secular framework, while South Africa's focus on relational ethics is tied to collective democratic renewal.

South Africa as a Mirror for Sweden

Using the South African research landscape as a mirror for the Swedish material highlights dimensions that are less visible in Sweden's largely secular, cognitively oriented RE tradition. South African scholarship foregrounds relational ethics, human dignity and the social conditions shaping learners' lives (Waghid, 2014; Nthontho, 2020). When reflecting onto the Swedish context, this emphasis reveals how Swedish RE tends to conceptualise religion primarily as belief, interpretation and individual meaning-making (Klintborg, 2018; Franck, 2015). The comparison underscores that collective, embodied, and community-based aspects of religion, obvious in South African literature, receive less attention in Sweden, a tendency that Niemi (2018) links to historically Lutheran understandings of religion as doctrine rather than lived practice.

South African research also addresses inequality, representation, and identity in more explicit and sustained ways, shaped by the country's multilingual and multicultural realities (Esau, 2021; Simmonds, 2014). Studies of how teachers negotiate religious and cultural diversity in contexts of socio-economic deprivation and entrenched injustices (de Wet et al., 2012; Tayob, 2018) foreground questions of power, marginalisation, and human rights. By contrast, Swedish RE research, despite operating within one of Europe's most segregated school systems (Fjellman & Hansen, 2024), rarely engages structural inequality or social justice with the same intensity. Where Swedish work does consider segregation, it tends to frame it through concepts such as ethnicity, cultural diversity, or religious pluralism rather than through analyses of race, class, or systemic injustice. Through the South African mirror, such dimensions emerge as areas where Swedish RE research is only beginning to expand, suggesting that broader societal narratives continue to shape what counts as central or peripheral within national research agendas.

The South African emphasis on Ubuntu and relationality similarly clarifies the normative foundations of Swedish RE. Whereas South African scholarship frames ethical engagement in communal and interdependent terms, Swedish research tends to ground ethics in autonomy, critical reasoning and individual responsibility (Bergdahl, 2009; Liljestrand, 2015; Lilja, 2020). The South African debate about spirituality in relation to RE is also interesting, as the systematic review identified no studies on this topic. In the Swedish context, RE is framed in secular, worldview-inclusive terms, and spirituality is neither theorised nor contested as a curricular concept. The South African discourse, highlighting tensions between religion, spirituality, diversity, and social context, thus offers an illuminating counterpoint to a Swedish research landscape in which spirituality remains largely invisible.

Finally, South Africa's focus on lived experience and collective wellbeing casts Swedish discussions of existential questions in a new light. While existential meaning-making is theorised in Swedish RE (Klintborg & Rothgangel, 2023), it is often framed as a personal psychological or philosophical issue. In the South African research material, existential concerns tend to be embedded in questions of community and social justice. Seen through this mirror, the Swedish approach appears more individualised, reflecting the country's broader educational and cultural orientation.

Conclusion

This study set out to analyse how Religious Education has been conceptualised and researched in South Africa and Sweden between 1994 and 2024, and to explore what can be learned when these research traditions are placed in comparative dialogue. By reviewing the literature from both countries and interpreting it through a comparative–interpretive lens, the study demonstrates that shared concepts such as pluralism, religious literacy, ethics, and existential questions take on different meanings and functions depending on national histories, curricular structures, and societal conditions.

The comparison shows that South African RE research is shaped by the country's post-apartheid transformation, where RE, primarily situated within Life Orientation and Life Skills, contributes to broader aims of social cohesion, democratic participation and the cultivation of relational ethics. Concepts such as dignity, mutual recognition and Ubuntu play a central role in framing RE as part of the broader project of rebuilding a just and inclusive society. At the same time, studies highlight the practical and structural constraints under which teachers work, including limited time, curriculum ambiguity and uneven implementation.

In Sweden, RE research reflects a long-standing commitment to non-confessional, analytical and interpretive approaches within a secular-democratic educational tradition. Research foregrounds critical engagement with religion, existential meaning-making and analytical competencies needed to navigate pluralism. However, the comparison also reveals that Swedish RE operates within cultural assumptions shaped by Lutheran heritage, secular norms and persistent narratives of national homogeneity. These assumptions frame the ways neutrality, diversity and representation are understood and enacted in classrooms.

Placing the two national contexts in dialogue shows that RE purposes and practices are deeply context dependent. The mirroring approach used in this study makes visible how each national research tradition highlights certain aspects of RE while rendering others less prominent. Through this reciprocal illumination, the comparison demonstrates how concepts travel and transform across contexts, echoing Bråten's insight that educational ideas operate differently across supranational, national and subnational layers (Bråten, 2013, 2014).

By showing how contextual conditions shape RE, this study contributes to broader international discussions about the role of RE in culturally and religiously diverse societies. The findings point to the value of comparative work that does not seek harmonisation but instead attends to difference as a source of insight. It also suggests productive avenues for future research, including closer attention to how religion intersects with identity and inequality, how students engage with existential questions across cultural settings, and how pluralism and religious literacy can be supported in ways that respond to context-specific democratic challenges. In bringing the South African and Swedish research landscapes into conversation, the study underscores that RE is a dynamic field shaped by history, values and societal aspirations. Understanding these contextual dynamics, and the contrasts that reveal them, is essential for developing RE that is both locally attuned and internationally informed.

Acknowledgements

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