

READY - Religious Education and Diversity

Sharing experiences of, and approaches to,
teacher education in the context of
"Education and Training 2020" (ET 2020)



READY
RELIGIOUS EDUCATION AND DIVERSITY



RE teacher students from Tübingen and Karlstad discuss the issue of neutrality in Religious Education

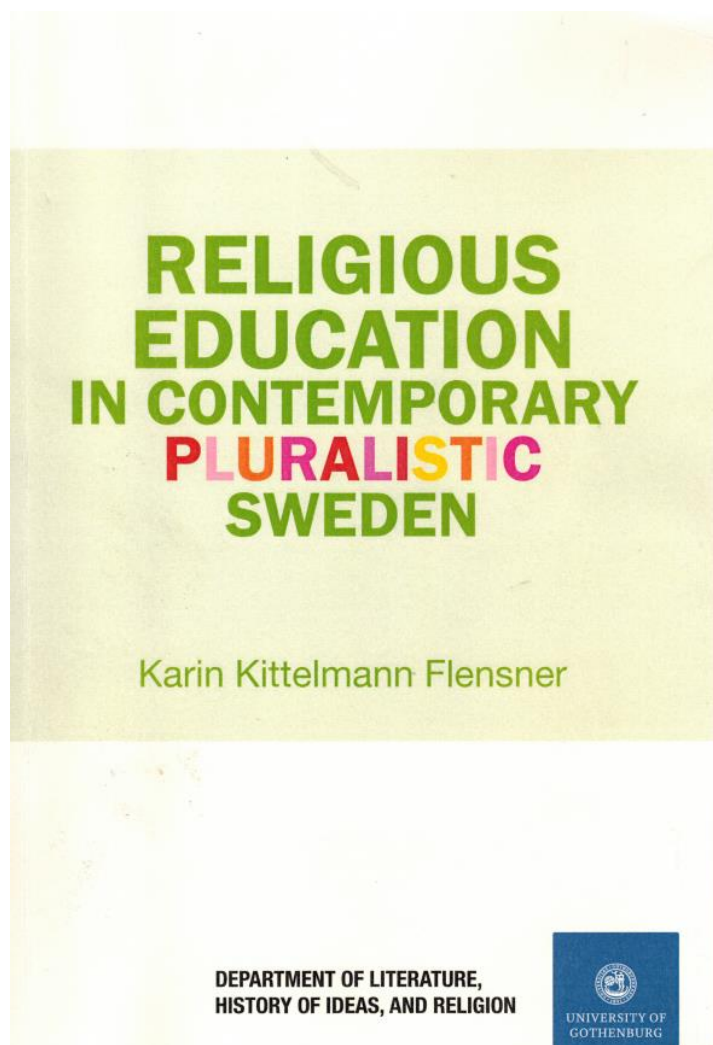
03-02-2017

1. Video message from Tübingen ...



https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=84fRzpOmdnM&list=PLtkwwpjK_5QUyMagLNBc5AVPmo4ZyvDOh&index=12

2. Karin Kittelmann Flessner's Dissertation



<https://gupea.ub.gu.se/handle/2077/40808>

3. RE teacher students of Tübingen University write a letter to RE teacher students at Karlstad University

We, roughly 40 students of the protestant theology faculty of the University of Tuebingen (www.uni-tuebingen.de/en/faculties/protestant-theology/news/news.html), are attending a course on “Religion and Worldviews- New challenges for Religious Education” conducted by Professor Friedrich Schweitzer and Professor Peter Kliemann this semester.

Last session, we took a closer look at the new thesis by Karin Kittelmann Flensner, who some of you might actually know:

„Religious Education in Contemporary Pluralistic Sweden“
<https://gupea.ub.gu.se/handle/2077/40808>

In the course of our discussion, we came across some interesting observations that we would like to share with you.

At first, the idea of approaching religious issues and issues on different worldviews from a neutral perspective seemed very appealing to us. Yet, our doubts about the practicability of this neutral approach got bigger and bigger the longer and the more intense we dealt with the results of Ms. Kittelmann Flensner’s work. To illustrate what we mean by that, we would like to take a visual image at hand.

Let’s imagine we all find ourselves in an “ocean of worldviews”. Therefore, the main goal of Religious Education should probably be to protect the “newcomers in the water” from drowning. There are various different ways to achieve this goal:

First of all, there is the plain possibility to push the unexperienced non-swimmers into the water and tell them: “Watch out and be careful not to drown!” In this case, the pupils would be free to choose their own stroke. The “newcomer” might be able to learn how to swim by watching the other swimmers in the ocean. In doing so, they are free to move as pleased.

We felt that this type of swimming practice can be compared to the concept of neutrality in religious schooling. In this case, “I am neutral” would mean that “I am trying to make it on my own in the ocean of worldviews.” “I am neutral” would also mean that “I am alone in trying to keep my head over water without being constantly overrun by the challenges of my pluralistic environment.” “I am neutral” would mean that “I am forced to try to swim, but I am responsible for learning to swim on my own by looking at how the others swim.”

While dealing with the study, we had the impression that the label of “neutrality” is rather problematic. Both, pupils and teachers seemed to be pretty convinced. However, their statements on different religions, principles for coexistence and social issues seemed to contradict this guideline to some extent. We found the high expectations on an objective and neutral conveying of religious issues not really satisfiable. In our opinion, the recorded answers from the pupils only remained on the surface without getting deeper into the subject matter. For what it’s worth, we even thought that some answers proofed a deep wariness, whereas other answers might even showed intolerance towards “the believers” of any religion.

There was one intruding question for us related to this context: Is it even possible to have something like a “neutral” conveying of religious world views? Or don't we have to assume that a “neutral” point of view also has a certain stance and thus cannot satisfy the claim of being “neutral”?

Let's come back to the image of “the ocean of worldviews”: Another way of keeping “the new swimmers” from drowning is to provide a teacher in support of showing them the different ways of swimming. This solution could be compared to the confessionally affiliated Religious Education. Each and every way of swimming, whether breaststroke, front crawl, dolphin stroke or butterfly stroke, could be linked to one confessional tie of Religious Education. Depending on the denomination, the stroke differs but the goal remains the same: Keeping your head above water and avoiding to drown.

Maybe it is due to the fact that we lean towards confessionally affiliated Religious Education, but we found it really helpful to have a clear program with our label of the “Protestant Religious Education”. One can use this program to work with. One can come to grips with this in a constructive and critical way and may come to a completely different result. This way of approaching Religious Education seemed to most of us more honest, more understandable and more accessible.

Obviously, there are various different ways to swim in the “ocean of worldviews”. However, in our opinion there are unanswered question we would like to ask you: How is it possible for Religious Education not to cease at the precept of neutrality; how is it possible not to abandon the pupils while they are learning to swim, but to contribute to the pupil's examination of religious issues, to help them finding their own answers and to encourage the development of tolerant beliefs?

We really would appreciate to get in contact with you concerning these questions. Our Semester is nearly over and after the semester break we all will attend different seminars. Yet, those of us who are really interested could easily keep contact via digital platforms and structures such as the Ready-Project outside of the usual seminar at University.

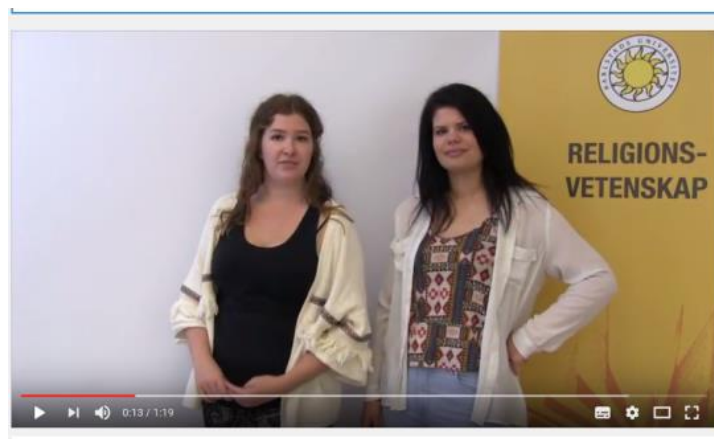
Please send your answer to our Professor, Mr. Kliemann. He will then pass it on to us. We are looking forward to hearing from you.

kliemann@semgym.uni-tuebingen.de

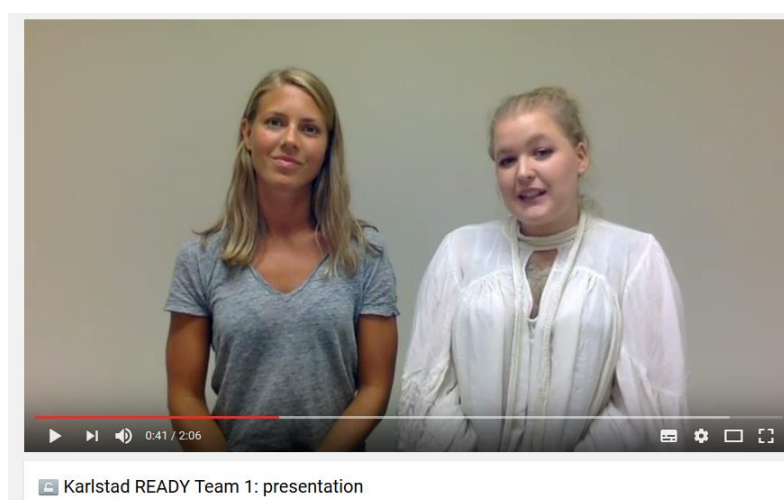
Elisabeth Lebherz, née Lutz

On behalf of the Seminar
Tuebingen, July 13 2016

4. Karlstad's RE teacher students answer ...



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZGSzY9tmV6s&feature=youtu.be>



Karlstad READY Team 1: presentation

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6oNsLQm6ADY&feature=player_embedded



Karlstad READY team 3: presentation, pt1

Kristian Nilsson
Abonnieren

7 Aufrufe

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0m3EKchcGcc&feature=you>

Dear Students at Tübingen,

Thank you for the questions you raised. They were thought provoking.

We, who are replying to your letters, are six students studying "Science of Religion" at Karlstad university, and a member of faculty from the same subject.

Since the subject RE in Swedish schools is non-confessional, you gave us food for thought regarding the very foundation of the subject. The question that you address; "how is it possible for RE not to cease at the precept of neutrality" concerns the core of how one views the school subject. More specifically; the purpose of it. If we start off by taking this into account, it might be a beginning of an answer.

Up until the early 20th century, Religion was one of the central school subjects in Sweden. (Indeed, one could argue that it was the very first of Swedish school subjects.) In 1919, the school subject became independent of the (then) State Church, but the content was still firmly teaching in Christianity. The big change came in the curriculum of 1962, when the topic was no longer specifically Christianity, but religion in general. However, it was unclear what the purpose of the subject really was to be. The answer that emerged, was "life questions", together with ethics and knowledge about the world religions (defined as Judaism; Christianity; Islam; Hinduism; and Buddhism). (Dalevi and Niemi, 2016, pp. 63–64; Hartman, 2000; Osbeck, 2008; Osbeck and Skeie, 2014; Skolverket, 2011.)

It might be said we are seeing something of a change in the latest curriculum, from 2011, where life questions are not as prominent but pupils are rather trained to be what might be described as junior, academic scholars. (Cf. Selander, 2011.)

When it comes to RE in our context, it should give the students the opportunities to develop: the ability to analyse religions and outlooks on life based on different interpretations and perspectives, knowledge of human identity in relation to religions and outlooks on life, knowledge of different views on the relationships between religion and science, and the ability to analyse these, the ability to use ethical concepts, theories and models and the ability to examine and analyse ethical issues in relation to Christianity, other religions and outlooks on life. (Skolverket, 2011.) This means that the aim of RE says that the "Teaching should take as its starting point a view of society characterised by openness regarding lifestyle, outlooks on life, differences between people, and also give students the opportunity to develop a preparedness for understanding and living in a society characterised by diversity." (Skolverket, 2011.)

As the curriculum states we have to teach from an objective point of view. To answer your question about neutrality we have to look at the fundamentals of being human. Is it possible for a human being to be neutral. We believe that humans will always be somewhat subjective, if not with words, then with body language or facial expressions. So the simple answer to your question might be no, there is no such thing as being "neutral". The Swedish school and society does have Christian values and we are expected to incorporate those in our education. Keeping this in mind our education is not strictly neutral. Though the claim that the pupils will "drown" if not shown the ways of the various religions is something we have different feelings about. Even though we might not be completely objective or neutral in our education we give pupilstools to make their own choices. We teach students about various religions and life views to give them a pallet to choose from or make of what they want. It is more about giving the pupils the freedom to believe what they want. Our job is to give them the knowledge of other religions and life views, so that they would not, in your words, drown. Furthermore, this is also seen in the academic disciplines which calls for a scientific approach. The question about neutrality can also be a philosophical one. One could argue that any content is based on selection, which includes the academic traditions. In the field sociology of knowledge this is put in some light (cf. Weber, in Boglind, Eliaeson & Månson, 2014; Foucault, 1987). However, one attempt to ensure neutrality is to show many perspectives put from many different positions. Swedish Religious Education contains

philosophical-, psychological- and scientific perspectives and analyses.
It might be of interest for you to look at the official description of the school-subject; it's character and aim: "Religion" (Skolverket, 2012); available online in English!

List of references

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(First published as a conference paper at 'Shifting Borders in Religious Education'. 13th Nordic Conference on Religious Education, 15-18 June 2015, at the University of Tartu, Estonia.)

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5. Letter Nr. 2 from Tübingen to Karlstad

Dear Students of the University of Karlstad,

First of all, we wanted to get two things off our chests:

1. THANK YOU SO MUCH for your answer! Your letter was really interesting to read and very helpful to us. Thanks for being undeterred by our last letter, which was provoking indeed.
2. We are sorry for this late answer. With the new semester starting and the usual every day University things on our mind, it was hard to find the time to write back to you. Hopefully, you are still happy to hear from us and to read another letter from Germany.

Reading your letter and gaining a new perspective really helped us developing a new and different view on Religious Education. The provoking questions from our last letter did probably already show that our way of approaching Religious Education is different from yours. This may derive from our history as well, probably just like in Sweden. Yet, the historical development of Religious Education in Germany is different from the one in Sweden.

After World War II, and still struggling with its aftermaths, Religious Education became a so called „proper Subject“ and firmly established in §7 in the German constitution. There it says: „Without prejudice to the state’s right of supervision, religious instruction shall be given in accordance with the tenets of the religious community concerned. Teachers may not be obliged against their will to give religious instruction.“ However, not only teachers must not be obliged against their will, but also pupils “must not be obliged to any ecclesiastical act or ceremony or participation in any religious practice or usage of any religious oath” (§140 of the Basic Law for the Federal Republic of Germany). Yet the school is still responsible for any pupil who decides to deregister from Religious Education, so there are always mandatory replacement lessons for them. That means, while RE takes place, they are still supervised by teachers at school.

§140 of the Basic Law for the Federal Republic of Germany also states that there is no established church or church state in Germany.

From this time onwards, church and state are closely connected in Germany, also due to the mentioned Article in the Basic Law. Therefore, Religious Education is a “mutual/ joint responsibility” of the state and church. On the one side, Religious Education is under governmental control; on the other side, the religious associations are responsible for its contents. These contents are neither neutral nor objective, yet they must not restrict personal unfolding of freedom in any unlawful way. At this point, the rough insight into German historical and juridical foundations should be enough. We assume this information might be helpful in understanding our way of approaching Religious Education.

Our two different approaches on Religious Education are similar in the way how they try to look at it from a social perspective. Besides, both approaches focus especially on the adjustments of the students to a pluralistic society. In protestant Religious Education, special focus lays on the individual pupil. This perspective on the individual makes it especially important for us as future teachers to grant enough space and time during our lessons to be able to react properly to personal questions and individual needs of the pupils apart from the mandatory content of the curriculum. Often, these questions can be considered as so called “life questions” mentioned in your Curriculum from 1962. In many cases, Religious Education is one of the few opportunities for students to ask these questions in school.

In our practical semesters, we experienced that especially teachers of Religious Education are not only teachers of their very own subject, but more often also personal contact persons for everyone involved in the school context. Pupils, colleagues, but also parents approached the RE teacher we joined in these practical weeks. Is this similar in Sweden? Do RE teachers occupy special roles in the school routine there, too? It is important for us, probably just like for you, to have time and space for the personal development of the pupils during the lessons. However, we see this development slightly different. We will try to explain it with the term of “personal development“: A holistic development that goes beyond only cognitive approaches forms the center of it. That is why we sometimes sing songs

from a hymn book together, have moments of silence, discuss conflicts and problems of the class or even pray with the pupils.

Maybe you want to hear more about the design and organization of the RE we pursue. Or maybe you are interested in the ideals we follow and which goals we would like to achieve. We would be very happy to answer your questions. Maybe your questions may serve as “mental food” and will bring us to think about our fundamental principles of Religious Education.

While reading your letter, we came up with a few further questions. The answers to these questions may help us understand the concept of Swedish Religious Education.

First of all, we were wondering at what age you start teaching Religious Education. In our region of Germany, we start teaching Religious Education from class one onwards. Is this the same in Sweden? Especially primary school teachers and pastors, who often teach Religious Education at primary school, are confronted with difficult tasks. At our secondary schools starting with grade 5 (there are different types of higher education in Southern Germany, though – yes, quite complex), the teachers must adapt the contents to the actual grade. RE lessons in grade 5 obviously look different than in grade 11. Are you facing the same problems?

We do have another question concerning your studies. The following passage is from your last letter: „We teach students about various religions and life views to give them a pallet to choose from or make of what they want. It is more about giving the pupils the freedom to believe what they want. Our job is to give them the knowledge of other religions and life views.”

We would like to ask you how you get to know so much about different religions and world views? What does your seminars at University look like, what is taught there and who teaches you? We would be really happy if our conversation, despite the little delay on our part, continued. We are looking forward to hearing from you and would also like to encourage you again to send us your questions. We are happy to answer them.
Best wishes from wintery Germany.

The students of the University of Tuebingen 09-01-2017

6. Der Briefwechsel im weiteren Kontext des READY-Projekts

Heinz Ivkovits: *Now tell us please what you believe*. Do RE teachers have to be religious or believers? A debate in the context of the project READY. Vienna 9/2016.

In German: "Jetzt sagen Sie doch endlich, was Sie selber glauben" oder "Müssen Religionslehrer religiös sein? Eine Fragestellung im Kontext des Projektes READY. Wien 9/2016.

>> www.readyproject.eu >> resources

