



**International Study Week  
of the READY – Project  
at the University of Karlstad**

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My name is Jane Savill and I am a lecturer at UCL Institute of Education in London. My specialist subject is Religious Education (RE) and with my colleagues Alexis Stones and Dr Jo Pearce I work with student teachers who are training to be secondary teachers of Religious Education. In recent years the Government has introduced a number of different routes to enable students to gain qualified teacher status. The majority of the student teachers whom we work with however, undertake a one-year programme following their degree called "Post Graduate Certificate of Education' (PGCE).

When visiting Sweden, I noticed a number of similarities as well as some differences between our training programmes and the school religious education curriculum.

I travelled to the small airport at Karlstad from Stockholm, arriving late into the evening with the sun still visible in the sky. The air was crisp and clean and it was quiet – very different from the busy, noisy and crowded Heathrow airport that I had left a few hours earlier.

During the week, I had the opportunity to learn about religious education in Sweden through meetings, observations of RE lessons in schools, visits to different places of worship and conversations with people from both religious and non-religious backgrounds.

On the first day we were introduced to the education system in Sweden. In the last seventy years the term 'Democracy' has been a key word used, especially when referring to morals and values. There have been discussions taking place about how good multi-cultural schools can be developed, because in the past schools have been 'mono-cultural'. The National School Board is in the process of developing advice for school teachers (in all subjects), providing guidelines for teaching and assessing immigrant children who are entering the Swedish school system. A key word in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is 'inclusion' – ensuring schools are places where all children are given the opportunity to succeed. Another similarity to the English education system is that the schools were first developed by the Church. Although there was a time when church schools were not allowed, this situation was revoked in 1971 and there are 79 church schools in Sweden as well as a Jewish School in Stockholm and some Muslim Schools.

I had the opportunity of visiting a number of RE lessons in different schools during my visit to Karlstad. One such lesson engaged students considering the importance of the Bible

for Christians. They were asked to reflect upon what the Bible says about the role of men, women, the family and issues such as gay rights. The teacher showed a video clip of 'The Purity Ball' movement in the USA which enabled students to develop their discussions about the role of men and women and whether the Biblical texts supported this movement. A second film clip of the Pope's visit to Sweden when he was asked about the role of women in the Church and whether he foresaw women being welcomed into the Priesthood was a further opportunity for students to reflect upon the role of women in Christianity. The RE teacher wanted to challenge her students to consider how different Christian denominations interpret and apply Biblical text in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

The lesson was engaging and similar in its approach to an English RE lesson. What was especially thought-provoking was the opportunity for students to engage with diversity within the Christian faith. The chance to reflect on different Bible passages and how they are understood in different ways for example by the Catholic Church and an evangelical wing of Christianity.

Another lesson I was privileged to observe was a lesson when students had been given the opportunity to research different religions and lifestyles and what it means to be a follower. Students were able to present their presentation in any way they chose. They had chosen diverse subjects to research and presented them in a variety of different ways. They included:

An interview with a young woman whose parents were both practising Muslims but she herself had chosen not to follow the faith.

A podcast on the beliefs and practices about Scientology.

A short film in which a student spoke about her family background and interviewed her mother and grandmother about their upbringing in Russia. They came from the Tatar tradition – a Turkish speaking group of people in Russia. How had their move to Sweden affected their lifestyle?

A poster showing how the religion of Islam is made up of different denominations and cannot be seen as one set of beliefs. The main differences between the Sunni and Shia groups were highlighted.

A presentation following an interview with members of the movement of Plymouth Brethren. What does it mean to be members of this evangelical Christian tradition living in Sweden in 2017?

These different presentations were well researched and gave the audience lots of food for thought and stimulated some interesting questions from other students.

My observation of these lessons confirmed that the subject of religious education is taken seriously in schools and that students are given the opportunity to engage with diverse and different religions and life-styles. A religion i.e. Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, etc, cannot be summed up as one set of beliefs and practices. Within each religion there are different schools of thought and branches and thus when studying religion students need to talk about Buddhists rather than Buddhism, Christians rather than Christianity, Muslims rather than Islam.

Students were being prepared for the multi-cultural world in which we live. Through the work they completed in the classroom and their personal research they were engaging with different religious and cultural practices and developing religious literacy in order that they would be able to meet with people from different backgrounds as individuals and not label them because of their beliefs.

Within the city of Karlstad diversity – certainly within Christianity – was in evidence. I attended an evening mass at the Catholic Church. The church was impressive – a former Baptist Church – where the images, statues and artefacts are now distinctly Catholic. The short service took place in a small side chapel and although the mass was celebrated in Swedish it was easy to follow the liturgy – the same the world over. Along with members of the READY project there were just four worshippers who attended the service.

A trip to 'Korskyrkan' an evangelical church in Karlstad who openly state that the focus of the church is on Jesus, the Bible and Christian fellowship was a very different experience. The church is keen to welcome people to its Sunday service and be seen as a place where people can meet and share their Christian life together. The church opened in 1938 and today has 300 members. Its ambition – to reach out to people who do not know Jesus is explicit and the church community offer a variety of activities where they welcome people through their doors, for example hosting a café, a creche, a music group, etc.

A third Christian place of worship I had the opportunity of visiting was the Cathedral in Karlstad. Belonging to the Church of Sweden this was a very grand building dating back to 1730 it is the main church of the Karlstad Diocese. Although affected by fire, the present church building has been in place for over 150 years and the gilded pulpit dates back to the 1790s.

All three Christian Churches which we visited in Karlstad are evidence that a diverse group of Christians live in the city. In the lessons I observed it was encouraging to see that students are engaging with this diversity and that their understanding of the Christian and other faiths is being enhanced through the topics which they are studying in RE.

About 7km from the centre of Karlstad we visited a mosque. The building is in an area called Kronoparken which has been developed since the early 1970s. It is also where Karlstad university is based. The Muslim community which exist in Karlstad has been growing steadily in recent years and have out-grown their present building. However, members of the mosque are keen to be seen as part of the local community and maintain good relationships with their neighbours. Any new building will be built to 'fit in' with the landscape. The Muslim community wish to 'walk alongside' their Swedish neighbours, not set themselves on the outside.

Our host at the mosque came to Sweden from Iraq nineteen years ago and the mosque is now the place of worship of Muslims from many different nationalities. Services are conducted in Arabic and Swedish. Although it was evident that members of the mosque are keen to fit in and be seen as part of the Swedish community – even though the vast majority of the Muslims who worship there are immigrants – they still face a number of challenges.

My week in Karlstad was illuminating. I had not anticipated that there would be so many similarities between the Swedish and English approach to teaching religious education. The learning and teaching which I observed was not dissimilar to what might be seen in an English classroom. The teachers and students with whom I spoke expressed the same points of view about the subject of RE – it is a subject which can be 'Really Exciting', it is a subject which enables students to ask the Big Questions about life and death, because of the influence that religion and culture has on individuals it is the most important subject on the school curriculum. However, some of the same challenges regarding RE are also faced in Swedish schools - the status of the subject, the amount of time allocated to the subject within the curriculum as a whole, the number of specialist teachers to ensure a high quality religious education.

I would like to thank our hosts Kristian and Kerstin for giving us the chance to experience a wonderful week of religion and religious education in the beautiful city of Karlstad.