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Qualifying skills and reflection of theory and practice in teacher education

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Qualifying skills and reflection of theory and practice in teacher education.

*How teacher students can combine general pedagogy, didactics and content knowledge through a four-fold model for religious competence.*

Religion is a vast phenomenon, consequently the core elements in formal religious education are equally difficult to limit. Even though a national curriculum narrows down the scope of content to a certain extent. It is apparent how RE incorporates a whole range of methods and approaches. This paper proposal departs from another perspective, namely the question of competence. One of the results of an action research project: ‘Educating (Bildung) towards religious competence’ is a fourfold model for developing analytical approaches to RE didactics based on the concept of competence/authoritativeness. With this model it is possible to connect knowledge of RE with general pedagogical reflection and school practice. We would like to discuss possible application of results from the action research project to strengthen the connection between RE research and teaching. For example, by experimenting with learning research in teacher education. The aim is to connect practical teaching experience with theoretical reflection, both knowledge of didactics and religious content knowledge. In recent times the ideal of formation for RE has understandably focused on competences for diversity and inter-religious understanding. The four-fold model for religious competence is our attempt to widen the scope and perspective of formation in schools.

The fourfold model is one of the outcomes of an action research project 2017-2019: Educating (Bildung) towards religious competence. The aim of the model is to work as a catalyst for reflection and dialogue of RE. In the field of teacher education, the problem of theory and practice is a difficult and constitutive one. The aim has not been to untie the knot of this constitutive problem nor to choose practice as more excellent in understanding teacher education than theory. Rather we had discovered a need in teacher training for the sort of pedagogical research that must make the effort to ask how pedagogical problems of thinking and action confront theory and practice? What kind of worries and reflections do we get in a theory which is enlightened by practice, oriented to reflect practice in a critical manner and vice versa to proof and correct the theory with experience from practice (Benner 1980, 485). The project had the aim to examine in a developmental approach formal religious education in school and church. We choose to design the project as an action research, as it opened the possibility to work in relationship with the practitioners. We are far from alone to register a need to bring scholars of teacher training and teachers to make research projects in the context of teaching to get more knowledge and qualified material for the study in teacher education (Jackson, 2009; Skeie, 2013; Johannesen, 2015; Haakdal, 2015). Keeping pedagogical theory and practice apart is in many ways a comfortable division (Benner 1980). The risk is however that the pedagogical theory ignores the complexity of thinking and acting.

We wanted to cooperate with experienced practitioners among teachers and vicars to follow what they would suggest as content, scope or theme in teaching? How they would go about the task, discuss, develop, complete and reflect upon, what they set out to do? Furthermore, we wanted to place this RE action research project within a framework of general pedagogy. Thus, the heading: Educating towards religious competence.

We will outline the paper as follow in four steps. First (1) define education as a specific kind of practice and (2) the need of educating towards religious competence. Then (3) we will describe the analytical models which we applied to the empirical material, with emphasis on the fourfold model. Subsequently (4) we will unfold the early start of using the fourfold model as a tool to reflect in preparing the students for their internship.
1) Education as a specific kind of practice

Religious education is a specific subject in formal education, but it does not subscribe to any special kind of pedagogy or separate field of teaching. Due to freedom of religion there may be specific regulations, as the possibility of exemption in Denmark. However, RE belongs as any other subject to the problems of pedagogical thinking and action, and along with the education as whole it must contribute to this endeavor. According to Dietrich Benner (1941-) (Benner 1980) the phenomenon of practice is a distinctive characteristic of the human being and does not cover activities of other creatures, it be animals, plants or even God. To practice something requires a double criterion, first practice means to do something willfully with a purpose and second that a practice is always also a substantial answer to a need, which is necessary for any human being. To be incomplete is significant for a human being, just as practice is a substantial and distinctive characteristic of humanity. Human incompleteness and the sheer need of learning interact with each other. Education is one sphere of practice, of which the others are: work, politics, ethics, art and religion. Education represents a sphere of practice which easily fulfills the double criteria. A human being is willing to learn and needs education. Education is an answer to this need, but teaching does neither repair nor remove the need once and for all. On the other hand, the aim of the teacher is to watch out for the moment when the pupil can take over and the teacher become redundant. The aim of preparation and teaching is the competence and authoritativeness of the learner. Gert Biesta emphasizes the three parts of any pedagogical endeavor, qualification, socialization, subjectification. It is important both to have and to handle knowledge and skills, to be able to interact with others, and to make up your own mind (Biesta, 2014).

2) The need of educating towards religious competence

In the secular age of modern society, the spheres of human practice are both differentiated and equal. We have been curious to investigate and show the content and aims of formal teaching of religion both RE at school and preparation for confirmation at church from the examples collected from a practical level. What is good teaching from the point of view of the teachers and vicars. What do they set out to do, and what kind of content knowledge do they choose and what are the arguments of the pedagogical thinking and action in connection with the progression of the task and in the discussion with colleagues? We found this scope valuable to qualify the interest of educating towards religious competence or authoritativeness. By this we do not aim at the authority of a church or other religious institution. The project connects to a pedagogically reflected demand of competence within the religious field. What is enough knowledge, skills and experience with religious questions, themes and practice to understand, interact and participate in society. These questions have been raised with several arguments. Philosopher Jørgen Huggler, Danish School of Pedagogy (DPU), argues for the ability for student to reflect distinctively between faith and knowledge, and furthermore distinguish between good life, ethics and knowledge. As religion makes God a possible reference of meaning and existence, and not an actual positive fact, it must be unfolded in different interpretations (Huggler 2008). Jens Erik Kristensen, DPU, suggest that students learn to handle a competence of difference to interact in a society with religious diversity (Kristensen 2008) Alexander von Oettingen, University College UC Syd outlines three principles for the didactics of religious education (Bildung) a) A non-proclaiming teaching widen the scope of understanding and differentiates between factuality and personal confession; b) teach to identify and criticize religious fanaticism/enthusiasm; c) as religion is a public form of communication and a lived practice the students should be introduced to what is specific about religion and to reflect the difference between religion as personal and as public convention (Oettingen 2011). Dietrich Benner define religious competence in three steps a) knowledge of religion; b) competence of interpretation; c) competence of participation (Benner 2014). At the outset we choose to set the action research with in a framework of an articulation of religious competence, thus defining the competence 1) Independently take position; 2) language for existential limit situation / condition; 3) competence of interpretation, 4) competence of diversity.
3) The project with emphasis of the fourfold model

The project took place during the autumn 2017 – spring 2018. Two groups, 4 teachers from four different public schools (folkeskole) and 4 vicars from various congregations of the folk church (folkekirke). Each professional group had regional and residential meetings, one in the beginning and one during the project. At the end both professions met and discussed the outcome. The empirical material contain observations in class, notes with reflections from meetings and all participants identified a teaching problem and reflected the processes of dealing with the task. Through reading and analysis of the material, we became still more observant of how the action research project opened a genuine possibility to establish among the student teachers an educational dialogue and reflection on didactics of RE. First, we analyzed the eight teaching projects with Frede V. Nielsen’s (1942-2013) basic forms of didactics and learning.

BASIC FORMS OF DIDACTIC:

BASIC FORMS OF LEARNING:

Subsequently we developed a model of the basic content of religious authoritative to complement the communication on didactic and learning with the content knowledge of RE towards authoritative.

The aim of the three models in combination is to encourage and help the students to engage in developing a complex language of didactic, learning and content knowledge of RE, and to be aware of the different forms in combination when planning and evaluating methods, themes and the task of teaching. We find that the model is useful in planning the curriculum for a lengthy period, for example of a school term. If a student teacher were to place the different themes and methods in the four different squares, it could open for an awareness of planning a variety of themes and to consider how to let the pupils work with the different sides to the phenomenon of religious thinking and acting.

3) The fourfold model as tool to reflect in preparing the students for their internship.

During autumn 2018 we had the opportunity to apply the model as tool to reflect the processes of planning and evaluation of the lessons of RE. The models of the basic forms of didactic and learning according to Frede V. Nielsen, make the student teachers aware of the planning with variation in both contend and method, to challenge the social and cognitive dynamics and to consider both existential and social conditions and questions. Introduced to the fourfold model of educating student to be competent in religious matter, the comment of one student was to characterize the fourfold model as the model of everything. A critical and important comment, as a model of everything is just as much in danger of being comprehensively diffuse to the extent of dealing with nothing as much as everything. However, the model did support the students in reflecting which sort of competences they were engaging the pupils, and how they with other themes and methods could complement their teaching in RE.
References
Johannesen 2015

1. Self-determination: How does the teaching contribute to self-determination and an ability to take part in community as an independent individual?
2. Awareness and reflection on boundary situations: How do teaching contribute to investigate, answer and reflect boundary situations?
3. Competence of interpretation: How do teaching contribute to develop religious literacy and differentiated ability to interpret personally and to adequate concepts
4. Competence of difference: How do teaching contribute to develop a conscious reflection of difference, an ability to communicate about and handle diversity of different religions, both between religions and within them and with other rational systems.