

Danish University Colleges

Educating towards religious competence an action project on RE didactics in school and church.

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Publication date:
2019

Document Version
Other version

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for pulished version (APA):

Andersen, K. M., Sigurdsson, L., Hoffmeyer, E. Z., Bjarnemar, J., Madsen, J. V., Lund, I., Arendt, A.-S., & Knudsen, J. (2019). *Educating towards religious competence: an action project on RE didactics in school and church.* 1-8. Paper presented at Nordic Conference of Religious Education, Trondheim, Norway.
https://harvester-2-eu.services.rm.elsevier.com/ws/274a6e38-e6c9-11ea-adc1-0242ac120007/kp/ws/files/69639159/NCRE_2019_Educating_towards_religious_competence_symposion_3.pdf

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NCRE 2019 Symposium (double time slot)

Educating towards religious competence – an action research project on RE didactics in school and church

The presentation will be in Danish/ Scandinavian

Participants

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Presentation and discussion of a didactic action research project involving 4 teachers, 4 priests and 2 researchers from two different areas of Denmark.

The aim of this project was to compare and address current challenges and develop new didactic approaches, for the teaching of RE in schools and the preparation for confirmation in church. The overall theme is 'Educating towards religious competence', and one results of our collaboration is a fourfold model for RE didactics based on the concept of competence. The research took place in two different groups, one for teachers and one for priests, thus respecting the different aims and frames of school and church, but also taking the opportunity to compare the two different settings from the perspective of practice. A meeting between the two groups in the last phase opened up new reflections on the differences and similarities of the two teaching environments.

The methodology is a combination of action research, didactic theory and philosophy of education. The open approach of action research means that each participant has chosen and developed their own project in a shared process of investigation. Mutual and equal collaboration is the organizing principle in the research process as well as the presentation. We will present six of the eight projects and some of the broader analytical perspectives and questions that the collaboration has generated.

The **outline of the paper** is the following: 1. A short introduction to religious education and didactic research in RE in Denmark, 2. Presentation of the fourfold model that was generated through the project: Educating towards religious competence, 3. The methodology: action research, 4: A brief introduction to the six projects, that we will present and discuss at the symposium.

Religion and religious education in Denmark

RE as a subject in public schools in Denmark changed in 1975 from bringing up the children within a confessional framework towards a non-confessional subject focused on knowledge about Christianity and

other religious worldviews.¹ For the majority of children in Denmark the formal religious education takes place in school (82% attend the public school, *Folkeskolen*) and some children attend religious education in a church or other confessional institution as well. According to statistics 71% of Danish youth celebrated the rite of confirmation in the Lutheran church (*Folkekirken*) in 2015. The Danish constitution guarantees freedom of religion, but the Lutheran Church has a position of priority in the constitution as well as a history of close connection to the school. The change of the aims and content of RE in 1975 also marked a secularization of the school through changes of the general aims of the school towards a strong emphasis on democratic formation based on intellectual freedom, equality and democracy.²

As the other Nordic countries, Denmark has experienced increasing cultural and religious diversity from the 1960's and onward, but the country also has a longer history of religious diversity such as the first formal recognition of The Mosaic, Catholic, and Reformed congregations dating back to 1682 granting permission for services in private homes (Andersen and Liengaard, 2007). The religious map of Denmark is a complex pattern of diversity, individualization, and high level of formal membership of the Evangelical-Lutheran Church – with 74,7 % of the population as registered members in 2019. In surveys, less than a fifth of Danes see themselves as 'very religious', but only some 7% define themselves as atheists. Some scholars have used the label 'belonging without believing' to illustrate how members use the Church for life-cycle rituals, family traditions and identify with Christianity as a cultural norm (Raun Iversen, 2007). Islam is the largest non-Christian religion in Denmark today with approximately 300.000 Muslim citizens, but this estimate is uncertain, as there is no formal registration of religious affiliation (Kühle & Vejrup, 2017), and Islam is characterized by inner diversity. The impact of individualization, plurality and a move towards more public focus on religion³ combines with a flexible form of secularism and patterns of looser as well as stricter interpretations of religion (Sigurdsson, 2007). The complex picture is part of the conditions of practicing RE in Denmark in the sense that neither teachers nor priest can take anything for granted, when it comes to religious practice, identity or knowledge of children and young people. Public debates and the image of religion conveyed by the media is another factor in the preconception of religion.

Didactic literature for RE in Denmark tend to distinguish the two kinds of formal religious education (church and school) by the distinction of *preaching/ not preaching* or *confessional/ non-confessional*. In the project at hand, we attempt to investigate these basic assumptions from a didactic angle and the actual teaching. The Evangelical-Lutheran Church and the public school are different institutions with distinctive aims, but historically both are rooted in a similar cultural and political frame. The meeting between vicars and teachers in the project gave us the possibility to discuss the distinctions from the perspective of practical

¹ As in the other Nordic countries, we find an ongoing debate concerning religious education in Denmark. The teaching of religion is included as an independent subject in the curriculum of the primary and lower secondary school, named Christianity Studies (*kristendomskundskab*). On high school level, the name is Religious Studies (see also Andersen, 2015; Buckhardt, 2014 and 2016; Skeie, 2017). On the primary and secondary level, there is a possibility of exemption from the subject as a whole, although the subject is mandatory, non-confessional and knowledge based. A condition for exemption is a meeting between parents and the head of the school. There is no exact statistic for exemption on a national scale, but the estimation is that less than 2% of pupils make use of the possibility. Formal aims include other religions at secondary level, but teachers may choose to include comparative perspectives also at primary level.

² See also the 2018 version of the formal aims of the school (Folkeskolens formal) at <http://eng.uvm.dk/primary-and-lower-secondary-education/the-folkeskole/the-aims-of-the-folkeskole>

³ Recent legislation specifying demands on religious preachers and banning full-face cover in the broader public space may indicate a move towards a stricter variation of secularism. For a critical evaluation of recent legislation, see: <https://menneskeret.dk/nyheder/status-2017-flere-forbud-mindre-frihed>

didactics. Using the concept of religious competence or authoritativeness in both learning environments, the participating teachers and priests have experimented with didactic methodologies aiming at the active involvement of learners and variation between different learning activities. In the analysis of all eight projects, we apply the fourfold model of educating towards religious competence in order to discover both similarities and differences between the two learning environments, as well as the way the practitioners understand their role in relation to normativity (cf. Bakker, 2017). Through this approach, we realize how teachers interpret and meet ideals of neutrality and objectivity in the school subject in different ways (cf. Franken and Loobuyck, 2017).

Research on religious education in Denmark has been more sparse than in other Nordic countries, but a number of researchers have defended Ph.D. dissertations based on research within the broad area of RE. These include studies of *Identity Politics in the Classroom* (Buchardt, 2008), *Religion and the State of Denmark, State Religious Politics in the Elementary School System from 1721 to 1975* (Reeh, 2016), *Christianity in the Subject of Religion in the Public School* (Kjeldsen, 2016), *Education of Life itself? A Critique of Lebensphilosophie and its pedagogization* (Böwadt, 2007), and *Philosophy with Children. Theoretical Foundation and RE didactic Potential* (Vestergaard, 2010). Recently, Kirsten M Andersen and Keld Skovmand have placed the didactics of religion in the broader field of educational philosophy through discussions on secularization and the role of narrativity (Andersen, 2015) and the integration between didactics and subject didactics with religious education as case (Skovmand, 2018). Both of these two foundational reflections on RE didactics refer to the concept of competence as a central category in pedagogical philosophy and theories of formation (*bildung*). The framework we have chosen for this action research project is an attempt to combine the community of practice with investigation and unfoldment of the idea of educating for religious competence. The concept of competence is discussed by the German philosopher of education, Dietrich Benner (Skovmand, 2018: 101, Benner & Brüggem, 2011), as well as in the later works by Wolfgang Klafki (Skovmand, 2018: 100, Klafki, 1996). In the paper presentation by Andersen and Sigurdsson at this 2019 NCRE conference, we contextualize the concept more thoroughly within the broader philosophy of education.

Some may find the combination of 'religious' and 'competence/ authoritativeness' strange or provocative. Even more so when we apply it as a framework for investigation in both institutions. We could of course modify it to 'competence in religion' or 'religious literacy', and both are certainly aspects of 'education toward religious competency', but we suggest that 'religious competence' may open broader perspectives on the questions concerning formation in the area of religion. Some of the basic questions in our project are: What sort of religious competence is developed through religious education – and what are the didactic perspectives in the combination of 'religious' and 'competence/ authoritativeness'?⁴

In line with this recent research, our aim has been to investigate, discuss and develop religious education in relation to the broader problems of pedagogical thinking and action within the different spheres of human practice that Dietrich Benner has introduced (Benner, 1980). In Benner's view, education is one of six spheres of practice, including also work, politics, ethics, art and religion. In a society marked by differentiation, we need a general theory of education that includes all of these different spheres, and

⁴ Competence (or authoritativeness) is a translation of the Danish *myndighed* (German. Mündigkeit), rooted in Kantian philosophy of education. We find it difficult to find an adequate English translation.

Benner argues that a pedagogical theory for religious education should take two assumptions as a starting point:

First, that religious meaning cannot have special priority over other dimensions of meaning such as political, ethical, esthetic or economic.

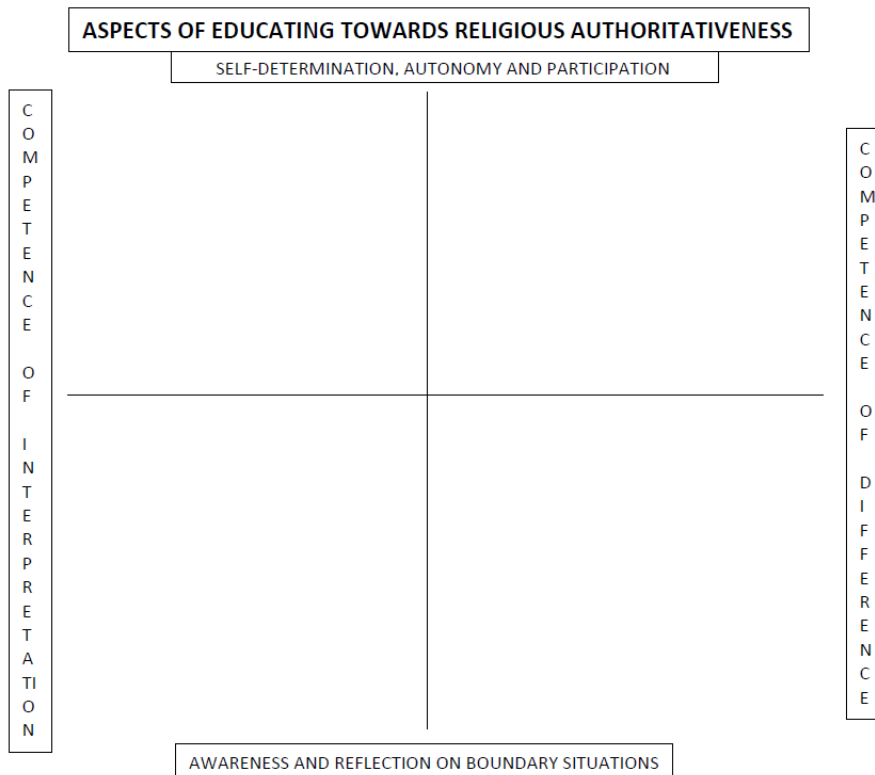
Second, that a religious horizon of meaning is essential to understand human existence and co-existence (Benner, 2005: 84).

Religious education takes place in a framework of secularization, individualization and diversification through globalization and hybridization of religious ideas and expressions. Benner argues that in the sphere of religion we are facing a broken transmission, as we can no longer assume that religion is an active form of practice that will be passed on from one generation to the next (Benner, 2005: 138). A basic condition of religious education - in both school and church - is thus that we cannot assume that children have a practical and lived experience with faith and religion. The challenge of "teaching religion without a living faith" may be comparable to "teaching swimming without water" (von Oettingen, 2014: 172). Therefore we face the didactic challenge of how we may best introduce and represent a subject matter for which the learners may have no, very weak or differentiated experience and comprehension? One of the participating teachers, Eva Zerman Hoffmeyer, described this challenge at the first seminars for teachers:

"Few of my pupils are religious. Their relation to religion is more of a cultural matter... The personal meetings with representatives of the different religions have had a major impact. Religion is something strange to them. It is a distance relation. They know religion from movies or something they heard."

The variation of experience /no experience in relation to faith and religion was one of the factors that led us to the fourfold model of education for religious competence, as we see a need to expand the didactic reflection to include broader aspects than conditions of religious plurality and the need for co-existence. Whereas we find both of these important, the model is an attempt to draw up a broader field of the formation in RE. Some of our ideas seem to be in line with recent reflections on the purpose and foundations of RE expressed by Biesta and Hannam. They propose "religious education (RE) should be considered first of all in terms of what it means to live with a religious or non-religious orientation, conceived in existential terms rather than in terms of beliefs or practices or objectified world views." (Biesta & Hannam, 2019). Before we continue to the methodological framework of action research, we will introduce the model of 'Educating towards religious competence'.

The model consist of four different aspects, and we express each of these through some key words and a didactic question. The idea is not that every lesson should include all four aspects, but more that the teacher (or priest) may use the model to analyze a whole lesson plan and to make conscious didactic choices.



The top point of the model is the aspect of **autonomy and participation**.

This aspect is related to human freedom and the conditions of modernity: that maturity is the ‘courage to use one’s own reason’ – also in relation to religion. Politically this aspect finds expression through the principle of religious freedom. The German philosopher of education, Dietrich Benner, has stressed that in modernity man is open both in his own existence and in co-existence. This conditional openness indicates a change in the process of formation to “express the search for meaning rather than the confirmation of an established norm” (von Oettingen, 2007, Benner, 2005).

Didactic question: How does the teaching and activities enhance development of self-determination, responsibility and the ability to participate in communities as an independent individual?

The bottom point of the vertical line is **the awareness of and reflection on “boundary situations”**. This is a term coined by Karl Jaspers, which Hannah Arendt explains in her late work on thinking as characteristic for the general, unchanging human condition – “That I cannot live without struggling and suffering; that I cannot avoid guilt; that I must die.” (Arendt, 1978: 192 *The Life of the Mind*). Arendt connects the limit situations to “the simple fact that life itself, limited by birth and death is a boundary affair in that my worldly existence always forces me to take account of a past when I was not yet, and a future when I shall be no more.” The line autonomy – boundary situations thus indicates that religious ideas and practices can encompass, symbolize and reflect on the limits of human power/ self-determination.⁵

⁵ We suggest this to be in line with the ‘decentered’ conceptions of the human being that Biesta and Hannam propose. In contrast to a focus on the ability to ‘make sense’ and ‘give meaning’, they promote the concept of ‘relevation’, where “something is actually given to them (human beings) that radically breaks through such meaning-making.” (Biesta & Hannam, 2019: 59).

Didactic question: How does the teaching and activities contribute to investigation of and reflection on human boundary situations?

At the horizontal line, we connect **the competence of interpretation** to the competence of difference. The competence of interpretation is central to religious education and we related it partly to the development of religious literacy (Breidlid, 2017), and partly to a broad definition of texts (including images, building, rituals, and symbols). The competence of interpretation includes both the history of religions and lived religion.

At the other end of the horizontal line, we place **the competence of difference**. The practice of dialogue and the implementation of a dialogical methodology can enhance the ability to investigate and understand difference between religions, between religion and non-religion and between different interpretations of each (Kristensen, 2008), and thus become able engage in communities of difference (Iversen, 2017).

Didactic question: How does the teaching and activities contribute to the development of a self-conscious reflection on differences? This includes being able to communicate about and handle differences between religions, within religions and between religion and other systems/ forms of reason.

Action research

In teacher education, we need to bridge theory and research with the practical experiences of teaching in primary and secondary school. In the recent decade, we find a turn towards more dialogue with the field of praxis in RE research expressed through the application of action research (Jackson, 2009; Skeie, 2010; Johannesen, 2015; Haakedal, 2015). We place this project within this 'turn towards praxis' and share the vision of a closer connection and communication between researchers/ teacher educators and practicing teachers. In line with this, we decided to engage in a community of praxis and use the framework of action research, but in a combination with relevant theories from philosophy of education.

The investigation of teaching is indeed quite complicated, as teaching is a situated action with many levels of communication, and therefore difficult to analyze or measure. Teaching is an art that we cannot reduce to the analysis of curricula, lesson plans or executive orders. The Dutch professor of education, Gert Biesta sees the art of teaching as a form of virtuosity based on professional judgement and engagement with *The Beautiful Risk of Education* (Biesta, 2014). In his perspective, education comprises three different domains: Qualification, socialization and subjectification. As educators, we must consider the differences between qualification for specific professions and participation in society, the inclusion of individuals into specific social and cultural contexts, and finally how teaching can create possibilities for each person to appear as an individual subject and transcend existing sociocultural and political orders (Skovmand, 2019: 219, Biesta, 2011: 32). The domain of subjectification gives strong emphasis to the meaning of human freedom in teaching, in the sense that pupils should be stimulated to investigate and discover the world (Skovmand, 2019) and given space to choose positions that may question existing orders.

In a discussion of the role of the RE teacher, Biesta and Hannam argue, that although the work of the RE teacher indeed is "that of introducing children and young people to existing practices and traditions, the educational ambition would be for them to find meaning in such traditions and practices—and perhaps we

should say: find meaningfulness—which should be carefully distinguished from finding the meaning of such traditions and practices. The key difference is that children and young people would be left free to find such meaning(fullness), if any of course, so that, in this regard, they can appear as subjects in the educational relationship, and not as objects” (Biesta & Hannam, 2016).

In acknowledgement of the need for a closer connection between research and practice as well as an interest in the challenges from *the beautiful risk of education*, we found the action research was an appropriate methodology. The ideal in action research is a principle of equality and equal participation of researchers and practitioners with the intention of investigating the knowledge that is generated in the field of practice, sometimes expressed through the Aristotelean concept of *fronesis* – the exercise of practical wisdom (Rönnerman: 18). Instead of taking the role of the observer, analyzing from a distance, action research is based on the collaboration in a ‘community of practice’ with a dynamic interaction between theory and experience. The aim is to get as close as possible to the object of research (Tofteng & Husted: 362) - in our case the field of religious education in school and church. The initiative for the project came from the two associate professors, Kirsten M Andersen and Lakshmi Sigurdsson, and we invited the participating teachers and priests through existing networks. For this reason and because it is a small-scale project, the value lies in the quality of didactic reflection and innovation, and more general perspectives can only be tentative.

The community of practice in action research has often been a group of people that share the same field of action in their daily life, such as a school, an organization, or a local community. The current project is different in the sense that the eight practitioners do not share the same physical space in their daily work. They work in two different institutions and in eight different locations, four churches and four schools, and they practice in two different areas of Denmark. Greater Copenhagen and Southern Jutland, just as the two researching associate professors come from two different institutions. What we share is a more abstract pedagogical- didactic field of action that is the field of religious education. In order to obtain some similarities in the study the group of pupils and candidates for confirmation are in the age group 12-15 years (grades 6-8). The initial structure of the project was to work in two different groups, one for teachers and one for priests, thus respecting the different aims and frames of school and church. As we went along, all participants expressed an interest in bringing both groups together, which gave us the chance to open some cross-professional perspectives (that could be relevant for further investigation in a follow up).

The symposium will elaborate themes and questions of RE teachers and vicars:

Jesper Bjarnemar (teacher) and Jette Volck Madsen Teacher): At the boundary of evil – Reflection on learning and teaching, how to catch the interest; the role of the teacher in RE and the issue of normative professionalization

Eva Zerman Hoffmeyer (teacher) and Jakob Damm Knudsen (vicar): Didactics for the religiously unexperienced bodies? – Two institutions and similar methods and approach: investigating the phenomenon of lived religion and ideas of the good life; connecting RE to home and family.

Inge Lund (vicar) and Anna-Sofie Arendt (vicar): Church, body and life stories. The church as an asylum, as a performance free zone. Body and sex: disturbance of teenagers or a possibility to include the world and experience of the confirmands.

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