



RE teachers' ways of balancing children's existential concerns and the curriculum: mirrored through established RE approaches

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Accepted: 25 November 2024 / Published online: 6 February 2025
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Abstract

The relationship between learner and curriculum is foundational in education. In this study the purpose is to investigate how Swedish middle-school RE teachers balance children's existential concerns and the curriculum content in their teaching, as well as how they describe current curricular goals and pupils' questions, and to explore how these ways of balancing positions can be understood in light of how well-known RE approaches balance the child and the curriculum. In the analysis of the interview transcripts of the eleven middle-school teachers focussing on what the teachers express as important goals for RE, the findings were placed on a continuum between a focus on the child's experiences and on the curriculum. The result also shows that the teachers recurrently describe pupils' concerns and questions as relatively absent. The responses vary between "questions are lacking" and "questions are present", with a middle position of "some interactionally created questions are present". The child and the curriculum can never in practice be separated since they are integrated in the learning individual: in education, a particular individual is learning something specific. However, revisiting these approaches in combination with concrete examples of teachers' experiences has brought our understanding further, and has also drawn attention to the need for awareness concerning the varying character of this relationship, as a tension, one between whose poles the teaching constantly moves or as one that falls apart in two different poles that do not necessarily need to be seen in the light of each other.

Keywords Religious education · Existential concerns · Children's questions · Curriculum

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1 Introduction

The relationship between learner and curriculum is foundational for all education. Analytically, the relationship can be understood as a tension, in that, for instance, the curriculum may be emphasised at the expense of the learner. At the same time, inevitably, when learning takes place, it takes place for a specific learner, and in relation to a specific curriculum. The learner and the curriculum can never be separated in practice. They are integrated in the learning subject (Dewey, 1966).

In a school context with specific goals, a specific curriculum, and specific pupils, one of the tasks of the teacher can be understood as acting as a mediator between the position of the pupils and the position of the curriculum. In order to facilitate this meeting, it is important to know the pupils well and to understand the subject matter in multifaceted ways. It seems to be an advantage to be a teacher in a class where pupils spontaneously talk about their everyday life and ask questions in relation to the teaching, so that their understanding becomes evident and teaching can be directed towards them (e.g. Emanuelsson, 2001; Hattie, 2009). However, teaching approaches that specifically stress the perspectives of children have also been criticised for, among other things, exposing social inequalities among the pupils and thereby risking permanently positioning them negatively (e.g. Frykman, 1998), especially if the pupils' everyday life interests do not directly engage with disciplinary forms of knowledge (e.g. Young, 2013).

Religious education (RE) in Sweden, has been since 1919 non-confessional in compulsory education and since 1962 is also expected to be objective and plural, and children's perspectives, particularly identified as their "livsfrågor", have had a special position since the 1969 national curriculum (Osbeck & Skeie, 2014). The term most literally translates as "life questions" (see O'Grady, 2013) but has also been translated as "vital issues" (Hartman, 2010), or "questions of life" (Falkevall, 2010). The Swedish word "fråga" is similar to "Frage" in German, being a broad word that can be used for "concern", "issue", or "question". The fact that the first part of the concept "*livsfråga*" is also complicated to translate, as it can mean "life" or "existential", makes the concept in total even more difficult. In order to capture the broad meaning of "*livsfråga*", we have most often chosen here to translate "*livsfråga*" as "existential concern", while being well aware of the approximate nature of the translation and that it is not possible to be completely consistent. However, the challenge of the translation has directed our focus, as Swedish-English collaborators, towards the difficulty in discussing "*livsfrågor*" in Swedish, since the term covers different understandings of the phenomenon at stake, from pre-set existential themes to general classroom questions. Therefore, even though "existential concern" in our use of the term is broad, we distinguish it from both pre-set existential themes and classroom questions in general. In the development of RE as a plural and neutral subject in the 1960s, existential concerns were understood as a shared human phenomenon with potential thereby to constitute a common platform for further exploration of different religious and non-religious standpoints, echoing contemporaneous systematic theology which had also taken an existential turn, for instance Tillich's (1951) notions of religion as "ultimate concern", and of a "theology of correlation".

Being aware of pupils' existential concerns as an RE teacher has been understood as being of specific value, since religions can be presented in the classroom as providing different answers to such common questions. The idea can be described as the backbone of the reformed Swedish RE of the 1960s but has of course not escaped criticism in Sweden. For example, the risk of using life-interpretation processes in a shallow or instrumental

way has been stressed (e.g. Benktson, 1986) as these processes also can be understood as having no final answers and the process of reflection can be seen as a goal in itself (cf. Almén, 2000; Selander, 1993). Religious traditions are perhaps as much sources of existential concerns as sources of answers (e.g. Dahlin, 1989; Hull, 1998). Keeping the difficulty of translating the word “fråga” in mind, it seems likely that the disagreement in the debate may be related to how one understands “fråga”. It is therefore of interest that the Norwegian curriculum for RE, which since 1997 following a major change to the subject is similar to the Swedish curriculum (Skeie & Bråten, 2014), currently includes “exploration of existential questions [No: *eksistensielle spørsmål*] and answers” (Skeie & Grønlien Zetterqvist, 2023, p. 2), as one of five key elements. RE researchers have therefore taken on the task of defining existential questions for school settings, where five criteria should be met for “existential questions”: (1) a person is the agent, (2) this person is asking a question, (3) the question is important to this person, (4) the question has a distinct content, (5) the question is formulated in a particular context. Here a pupil's existential question may be shared in the classroom by other pupils but it cannot be assumed to be relevant to all of them (Skeie & Grønlien Zetterqvist, 2023).

Even though pupils may be interested in questions about existence, national evaluations of Swedish RE from the early 2000s have pointed towards how teaching that addresses these questions does not seem to be very common (Jönsson & Liljefors-Persson, 2006). One reason that has been proposed is that it may be hard in practice to conduct this kind of delicate teaching. Furthermore, such teaching, or a question-based teaching generally, can be expected to be even more scarce these days due to increased demands regarding tests and marks, notably in middle school. Despite teachers' interest in dealing with existential concerns, a lack of time is reported (Henriksson Persson, 2018; Löfstedt & Sjöborg, 2018). Middle-school teachers in social studies have described a change from a focus on open and individual understandings of social issues toward an emphasis on knowledge about predetermined content (Löfgren & Löfgren, 2015; Strandler, 2017). What kind of consequences a more content-focused national curriculum has had for RE teachers' conceptions of the subject and classroom practice is an open question, however.

The purpose of this article is to investigate how Swedish middle-school RE teachers balance children's existential concerns and the curriculum content in their teaching, as well as how they describe current curricular goals and pupils' questions, and to explore how these ways of balancing positions can be understood in light of how well-known RE approaches balance the child and the curriculum. Our discussion of these issues is both contextually Swedish, built around national curricular and educational concerns, as well as being representative of wider international debates about RE pedagogy.

2 Some RE approaches

Having considered these broad questions about the relationship between the child and the curriculum, both in theoretical writings and in the Swedish context, the next more specific consideration is how different approaches to RE theorise, whether explicitly or implicitly, this relationship. This is important for this article but is also a feature of teacher education in religious education. Responses to this question are likely to be nested within two other concerns. First, the broad goals of RE are significant, in that different subject aims, such as, for example, faith development, moral education, or learning about plurality for social cohesion, will all reflect upon this relationship. Second, these different approaches

may in themselves place a particular value on pupils' own questions and concerns, possibly as an aspect of personal development or because of a strongly constructivist approach to learning. This is because these different approaches may have a particular conception of the learner in relation to curriculum content, though within each approach there may be differences of perspective. Faith-based approaches could equally either downplay the importance of individual questions when seeking to impart a correct view of religious doctrine, or alternatively emphasise children's questions as fundamental to the development of a personal spiritual commitment. Likewise, pluralistic approaches might simply emphasise the phenomenological accuracy of pupils' understandings of different religions, or might consider pupils' own questions about different religions in response to what is contextually significant.

Rather than reviewing the wide scope of different approaches to be found internationally, we focus here on some key articulations in the development of pluralistic RE, adopting this term to mean in response to the social fact of religious pluralism, and as it is used by the European Court of Human Rights (see Fancourt, 2024), rather than in a theological sense; a supranational term is valuable in applying the term to teaching in different countries. We also deploy Cooling's (2000) distinction between "pupil-structured" approaches, which focus on personal development and simply draw on religious material "insofar as it offers helpful insights", and "content-structured" but "pupil-related" approaches, which focus on how a systematic understanding of religions should "make sense in the pupils' world of experience" (p. 163). Surprisingly perhaps, these different articulations are all English, in the work of Clive and Jane Erricker, Michael Grimmit, Robert Jackson, and Andrew Wright. These perspectives have heavily informed Swedish developments, and research more internationally. The four approaches can be presented as being on a broad spectrum, from those that are most explicit to those that are least explicit about the pedagogical value of children's existential concerns, from the Errickers, through Grimmit, to Jackson, and then Wright. Further, these authors have revised and refined their positions throughout their careers, most notably Clive Erricker (2010), so key texts have been selected here. However, our concern is neither to argue for or against any approach, nor to review various critiques and responses, but to consider whether and how the approaches accord pedagogical significance to pupils' existential concerns.

The most radically pupil-structured approach is Erricker and Erricker's (2000a) post-modernist "reconstructing" of religious, spiritual, and moral education, which draws on an earlier project on the education of the whole child (Erricker et al., 1997; Erricker & Erricker, 2000b). They considered contemporaneous policy and practice to be too rooted in unequal power dynamics to be genuinely educational, and argued that "pedagogically... what matters is to find out what is of interest—what matters to those involved in learning". This is the construction site where learning, development, growth—call it what we will—takes place. (Erricker & Erricker, 2000a, p. 136). In this approach, teachers were being asked "to act in opposition to the demands increasingly made by curricula to concentrate on objective knowledge and instead to value subjective knowledge in the form of narratives, or stories that children tell" (Erricker & Erricker, 2000b, p. 201). They enthusiastically quote from a primary school teacher who digressed from teaching mathematics when a pupil "poured her heart out":

I then asked myself...why feel guilty about going with the mood and needs of the group and abandoning a core subject! (p. 201, original ellipsis)

The curriculum, for them, is based upon children's existential concerns, whether these are traditionally classed as religious or not: teachers' work is to stimulate and build upon them.

Another strategy seeks to balance children's existential concerns and identifiable religious beliefs by placing them within or alongside an even wider category. Existential concerns were an essential element of Grimmitt's (1987) model of RE as personal development. To overcome the potential tension between children's potentially erratic concerns and the subject matter of religions, Grimmitt posited eight universal "Core Values" (p. 121), which were shared by not just all religions but all pupils as well. This dual rootedness was for Grimmitt the basis of the two pedagogical strategies of "learning *about* religion" and "learning *from* religion", which were originally contrasted in Grimmitt and Read (1977); the latter "involved encouraging pupils to ask autobiographical questions and to engage in both personal and impersonal evaluations of religious beliefs, values and practices" (Grimmitt, 2000, p. 35). His approach built pre-set existential themes into the curriculum model, but clearly it also offered the potential to react to pupils' impromptu classroom questions. Similarly, the Westhill project (Rudge, 2000), with which Grimmitt had strong connections, suggested that "shared human experience" (p. 94) linked traditional belief systems with pupils' existential concerns. For both Grimmitt and the Westhill project, religious and other beliefs, and own pupils' questions were part of a wider category of human existence and were validated in lessons because of this, thereby seeking to combine pupil- and content-structured principles; arguably both are tipped slightly in favour of pupil-structured approaches. Indeed, part of Grimmitt's (2000) ire at the transliteration of the two strategies into national policy curriculum goals was that they were considerably weakened in this regard (see also Teece, 2010; Fancourt, 2014).

The third possibility is one that largely passes over the pedagogical importance of pupils' existential concerns, and is exemplified by Jackson's (1997, 2000, 2004) interpretive approach. His starting point was the issue of representation of religions, i.e. ensuring that pupils developed an accurate understanding of the complexity and variety of different religious traditions, because of his and Nesbitt's work with Hindu and Sikh pupils (Jackson & Nesbitt, 1993). This led logically to a focus on how pupils interpret what they study, before then considering how pupils develop a reflexive stance on their learning. This third reflexive element is itself comprised of three sub-elements: a re-assessment by the pupils of their own "way of life" in relation to their learning, termed edification; a critique of what they have studied; a critique of the process of learning. All these three sub-elements are responses to the underlying learning rather than being expressions of pupils' own views or questions, though the first, edification, is closest. This is not to imply that children's voices or perspectives are ignored; indeed, the Warwick RE project's textbooks focused heavily on children's and young people's personal religious perspectives, and the notion of "bridges to religions" (Jackson et al., 1994). This, therefore, is a content-structured but pupil-related approach.

The final approach is also content-structured and pupil-related but is explicitly wary of overvaluing pupils' existential concerns. This is most evident in the critique of "liberal" RE by Wright (2003, p. 1). He was concerned that the liberal approach was "rooted in the modern ideal of the autonomous individual. Here our identity is seen to be dependent on our self-understanding. It is through introspection and self-reflection that we come to develop our sense of identity." (Wright, 2000, p. 171). For Wright, attention to pupils' existential concerns, especially as found in Erricker and Erricker's approach, was part of an inappropriate pedagogy. However, Wright does not discount the pedagogical role of pupils' perspectives, but instead sets them up against religious or other perspectives in a creative tension, in a critical pedagogy or critical literacy approach (Wright, 1993, 2000, 2003; see also Aldridge, 2015; Easton et al., 2019; Hella & Wright, 2009). He argued that there are two "horizons", of religion and of the pupil, which should be put into a critical dialogue,

particularly in relation to truth claims about theological, philosophical, and ethical issues. His pedagogical sequence starts with the horizon of the pupils before considering the horizon of religions. He therefore holds that pupils should be:

given the freedom and encouragement to recognise and articulate their emergent religious beliefs and attitudes without constraint or manipulation, and that the horizons of the pupils – whatever their material content – become a conscious and integral part of the learning process. (Wright, 2000, p. 178)

However, this is typically described as being in relation to a particular topic—the existence of God or nature of reality (see Easton et al., 2019), rather than being as open as Erricker & Erricker’s reconstructive approach. Religious claims set the scene, and the horizon of the pupils is recognised in relation to those claims, but not in itself.

This account of these four perspectives has shown how they can be placed across a spectrum, from a completely pupil-structured approach to a more cautious view of pupils’ concerns. Clearly, none of them ignore pupils’ views and perspectives, but they value different aspects of these, and contextualise them differently within other pedagogical processes. There would potentially be other approaches that could also be considered in this light, such as an experiential approach (Hammond et al., 1996; Hay, 2000), not least as it encouraged pupils to focus on the question of “who am I?” (Hay, 2000, p. 80), or indeed Cooling’s (1994) concept-cracking, which he considered to be pupil-related. However, the four can be divided into: those that make pupils’ existential concerns and questions a priority; those that connect such concerns to religious or philosophical issues through some wider category; those that do not prioritise these concerns; those that are wary regarding the value of these concerns in teaching.

It is worth noting that others have subsequently sought to combine these different approaches creatively. Blaylock (2004) offered a light-hearted comparison of six different pedagogies applied to the same lesson, and Freathy and Freathy (2013), in the RE-searchers project, required pupils to adopt and then reflect on four different approaches to learning: “See-the-story Suzie (narrator/interpretation explorer), Debate-it-all Derek (philosopher/critic), Ask-it-all Ava (interviewer/communicator), and Have-a-go Hugo (participator/experiencer)” (Freathy & John, 2019, p. 36; see also Freathy et al. 2017). This approach keeps open the question of what religion is, though the variety of perspectives also seems to downplay the pupils’ own questions. In the English context, it is worth noting that this kind of pedagogical position-taking has largely ceased, with no new theorists emerging, whether because research foci took different directions and/or because a combinatory approach seemed more pragmatic. The combinatory approach does not, however, solve the problem, since the principle of combination itself would need pedagogical justification, and this itself could be pupil- or content-structured.

3 Previous empirical research on RE teachers’ goals and pupils’ questions

Theoretical pedagogies are one thing, but classroom realities are another, and in this section, we consider research on teachers’ actual pedagogical choices, and especially on teachers’ responsiveness to pupils’ existential concerns but also, since this seems to be empirically relevant, to pupils’ questions during lessons.

3.1 RE teachers' views of the goals of RE

Studies about what teachers regard as important to teach in RE are often related to predetermined aims, for example from the curriculum. In an English study from the nineties, 221 secondary school teachers were asked to assess 80 different aims of RE (Francis et al., 1999). The study shows that teachers who are subject specialists, to a higher degree than other teachers who teach RE on the basis of their personal interest in faith, take advantage of in-service training. It also shows that this group of teachers prioritises aims related to pupils' understanding of the influence of religion and to aims about reflecting on ultimate questions. At the same time, this group of teachers gives low priority to promoting a religious way to live. In another British study, teachers' and pupils' views of RE and religion were compared through a qualitative questionnaire. The study showed that the teachers, mostly white middle-class teachers, and the pupils, mostly Muslim working-class pupils, shared a commitment to an RE, emphasising pluralism and respect for religion (Miller & McKenna, 2011).

Some previous Swedish studies (Osbeck, 2009) on goals of RE teachers have related the variation to the well-known *learning about-learning from* dimension concerning goals in RE (Grimmitt, 1987). Examples of goal categories of upper secondary teachers are, for instance, "to provide opportunities to understand how phenomena are interconnected", "to contribute to religious literacy and continuing progression", "to give opportunities to see oneself in the meeting with the other", and "to shape an ability to see the conditions of life and human potential". The categories go from a "provide information about society" focus to an "interpret existence to a greater or lesser extent" focus, calling to mind the learning about-learning from dimension (Osbeck, 2009). The category pair, learning about-learning from, as goals of RE, has also been tested among Swedish secondary and upper secondary teachers, showing that 95% of the respondents backed up the statement measuring learning-about and 49% supported the learning-from statement (Osbeck & Pettersson, 2009). Another pattern in Swedish RE teachers' goals is that they are quite focused on values, which is why the idea brought forward by Skeie (2011), that there may be reasons to divide the learning-from goal into at least two parts, a personal and a societal dimension, is interesting.

Even if the values stressed in the general part of the national curriculum can be found in studies about RE goals of RE teachers for older children, the pattern seems even stronger in perspectives of teachers of younger pupils, in middle school, who argue for a mainly societal and value-related RE where social cohesion is given priority (Osbeck, 2014). For instance, relativising aspects of religions that seem exotic to the pupils is stressed as important, as well as highlighting similarities between religions and preventing prejudice. What kind of content is used in order to attain these goals is seldom described concretely. Content is discussed in general terms.

3.2 RE teachers' views of children's existential concerns and classroom questions

Another aspect of RE teachers' views of their teaching relates to how children's existential concerns and classroom questions are received and perceived. An Australian teacher interview study (Rymarz & Belmonte, 2020) indicates that pupils do ask questions in RE class, even if in some cases questions were not forthcoming or were focused on challenging the teacher. The teachers in this study also expressed that they sometimes felt unable to answer

the pupils' questions adequately due to the cognitive complexity of the questions. Another Australian study, carried out in two Catholic upper secondary schools for girls (Buchanan, 2009), showed that the pupils had a particular interest in, for example, justice issues pertaining to women, miracle stories, and biblical characters. According to Buchanan (2009), these interests were ignored in favour of pre-set curriculum choices even though a broader range of curriculum topics might have been considered if there was a greater interest in listening to the pupils' voices.

An example of research addressing how teaching can be designed to encourage pupils to ask questions during RE lessons is Ipgrave (2004), where it is recommended that teachers respect the integrity of their pupils' faith backgrounds by making room for the children's own experiences and perspectives on the traditions to which they belong and giving equal value to the different faith and non-faith backgrounds of children in RE lessons. As well as feeling valued, pupils also need to feel safe. The article argues that the children's interests are best served, not by avoiding sensitive and controversial areas of religion, but by establishing a framework of openness and respect within which children can express their views with confidence, differences can meet, and pupils and teachers listen to and learn from each other. Another way of making space for pupils' perspectives is shown in an interview study with British teachers teaching RE according to the Hampshire agreed syllabus "Living Difference" (Wedell, 2010), which drew on Erricker's (2010) later work. The teaching takes its point of departure in different concepts related to religious and non-religious experiences, and according to the teachers, this way of teaching gives a clear focus on intended learning outcomes but also allows space for the pupils to reflect more freely, as the teachers do not teach as much predetermined content. In a German study (Heil & Ziebertz, 2004), it was also shown that teachers revised their teaching to respond to pupils' perspectives. Since the pupils' understanding of religion and religiosity had become more pluralistic, and since the pupils did not ask questions about religion, the teachers searched for connections to Christianity in conversations with pupils, in order to adapt their teaching so that it could be perceived as meaningful.

Some of these studies partly focus on the pupils' reluctance to ask questions in the classroom. Rymarz and Belmonte (2020) give some explanations in the Australian context, and Heil and Ziebertz (2004) in the German context. One explanation seems to be the growing disengagement from religion by young people. Another explanation is that there is a stability of worldview among young people, so they are content in their present view and do not need to question their own or others' views. From this, the conclusion is drawn that teachers and school leaders should investigate strategies that enhance a classroom climate that encourages questions from the pupils. A shift in mentality is needed from an attitude that assumes that questions come naturally and spontaneously towards an attitude that recognises that this is something the teacher must work with and support the pupils in. To succeed with this, teachers need to have better content knowledge and good teaching skills to best address the needs of the pupils.

4 Method, material and analyses

In order to investigate RE teachers' ways of balancing child and curriculum positions, eleven middle-school teachers (of pupils aged 10–13 years) from ten schools were interviewed on two occasions, focusing on their goals and their experiences of pupils' existential concerns, especially in classroom questions. The interviews followed a semi-structured

protocol with had a three-level structure in which first, teaching more generally was the focus, and then their teaching within social studies (SS), where civics, geography, history, and RE can be taught in an integrative, thematic way, and finally their subject-specific RE teaching. While the teachers' perspectives on general teaching and SS teaching have been explored and reported on previously (Kärnebro, 2023), the focus here is specifically on the subject of RE. The two interviews were conducted so that the central strands from the first interview could be confirmed and further developed, which was made possible for both researchers and teachers by sending the first transcript to the interviewee before the second interview. Five of the teachers were active in the northeast region of Sweden and six in the southwest part of Sweden. They were purposively selected to represent a variety of municipalities, schools (in socioeconomical terms), and also teaching experience (from 18 months to 35 years). Eight women and three men participated. The interviews were audio recorded and transcribed. The study is a part of larger empirical project that was sent in its entirety to an Ethical Vetting Board and was approved. Two of the three authors worked with the transcripts of the teacher interviews, namely Annika Lilja and Christina Osbeck; they also interviewed the teachers, together with Katarina Kärnebro.

The analyses can be understood as being of an abductive character (Timmermans & Tavory, 2022), inspired by constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2011, 2014; Thornberg & Charmaz, 2013). Open, inductive, empirical analyses were the starting point, without being naïve concerning how our preunderstandings and previous knowledge could affect our interpretations. Instead, a continuous debate on how our viewpoints may be biased by, for example, current research trends, has been conducted. We also discussed the risk of misunderstandings between researchers and teachers due to differences in work practices and similarities in previous common work practices (all interviewers have a background as teachers). Open, explorative analyses, going back and forth between close readings of the transcripts of all the conducted interviews, to tentatively formulated summarising labels, and further to these labels as parts of a growing result pattern, have constituted the main process. As described by Charmaz (2014), the analyses can be understood as a stepwise coding where, in our case, the initial coding was guided by the analytical questions about the teachers' goals for RE, and the presence of pupils' existential concerns and questions in their teaching. In the second, focused, coding process, we abstracted from the initial codes wider and more expressive categories, labels, or codes in order to reach a more organised understanding (Charmaz, 2011). In a third, abductive, step, we left the transcripts and brought in perspectives and understandings from influential internationally discussed RE approaches (see above) to the second-order codes. Here, the intention has been to better understand and interpret the meaning of the pattern in the second-order codes with regard to goals, concerns, and questions. In that way, it is possible to identify theoretical perspectives embedded in the empirical material (Thornberg & Charmaz, 2013), but also to see what perspectives are present or lacking in the teacher responses in relation to the approaches, as well as to see how the teacher interviews might give rise to new conclusions in relation to established knowledge in the field. This means that the primary knowledge interest in the analyses is an empirically-grounded conceptual understanding of RE teachers' understanding of the relationship between the child and curriculum in their teaching. The teachers' voices and the excerpts presented in the article contribute to an understanding of the categories and concepts brought out by the analysis and also to embedded meanings in previous perspectives known from RE approaches.

The results of the second step are presented under the heading "Empirical Categories and Findings", and the results of the third step are presented in the section "Theoretical Discoveries and Conclusions".

5 Empirical categories and findings

5.1 The interviewed teachers' expressed goals for their RE teaching

In the analysis of what the teachers express as important goals for RE during the interviews, it was shown that the goals can be placed on a continuum between a focus on the child's experiences and on the curriculum, understood as subject content: see Table 1. The analysis also shows that the goals include both a learning-about aspect and a learning-from aspect, as shown in previous studies (Osbeck, 2014).

On one side of the continuum, the identified goal is that it is crucial for pupils to be able to see that religion and faith address existential concerns; this is a perspective interpreted as closely related to the child. At the other end of the continuum, related to the curriculum, is an understanding of the goals of RE as relating to the ability to follow ethical rules; the term "ethical rules" is used as it is the term in the Swedish curriculum, and the term teachers used, rather than religious or spiritual rules. The other expressed goals, which lie between these two poles, are: to grow in one's empathic ability and to be knowledgeable. This means that the expressed goals focusing on the position of the child are more linked to learning-from ambitions, and the goals focusing on the curriculum are more linked to learning-about ambitions (Grimmitt, 1987). Three of the eleven teachers talked about their teaching in a way that has been interpreted as being related to two goals, while for the other eight teachers, their comments were interpreted as being related to one of the identified goals.

The first goal, to see that religion and faith address existential concerns is described as teaching with the purpose of awakening the pupils' thoughts about what faith and religion can mean in people's lives and thereby indirectly what it might mean in their lives. This can simply be solidarity: "the important thing is what holds us together" (Monica). Further, the teaching can be understood as aiming at giving the pupils inspiration in relation to shared existential dimensions of everyday life. "That we now celebrate Lucia [St Lucy's Day, on 13 December] or whatever we do but that is perhaps the reason and, in some way, also show the beauty of who we are, that we humans feel good about having rituals and doing beautiful things together." (Felicia).

The second goal, to grow in one's empathic ability, is also about taking a child's perspective rather than a curricular perspective. This goal is about developing pupils' capacity to put themselves in the situation of others, to gain knowledge which provides conditions for respecting others, and to recognise that everyone has equal value. This goal can be exemplified with a quotation from the teacher called Anders.

Table 1 The interviewed teachers' expressed goals for their RE teaching

Important goals for RE (going from a larger focus on the child's experiences to a larger focus on the curriculum)
... to see that religion and faith address existential concerns
... to grow in one's empathic ability
... to be knowledgeable
... to follow ethical rules

Well, sort of being able to understand other individuals and why they act in a certain way a little in that direction, I would say. [...] being able to understand and think, reflect, be able to discuss, be able to put yourself into other people's perspectives and all that. So that's what I see as the central thing. (Anders)

The third goal in the continuum between child and curriculum is *to be knowledgeable*. We interpret this goal as being roughly midway between the child and the curriculum. The goal is about learning factual knowledge, but the teaching strives for the pupils to learn about different religions, central concepts and people in different cultures, and things related to religions which they do not have the opportunity to experience in their own lives, that is, to widen the pupils' own understandings (cf. Miller & McKenna, 2011). The quote from the teacher called Tamara illustrates how she expresses herself to her pupils concerning becoming knowledgeable, but also how this is related to classroom teaching for her pupils (cf. for example Ippgrave, 2004).

Because we have many different pupils from different religions. It will be exciting, for them, most of our pupils, they are Muslims. I have noticed if I have to teach Judaism then they become very careful, there is a bit of religious sensitivity, [...]. And I had a pupil, so I started talking about Judaism, so he said, no, I don't want to listen, it's 'haram', it's forbidden, that's how it is. But I have to talk to them in some way so that they feel safe, it's just, we're just studying it, I don't want to turn them into a Jew, no, it's not dangerous. We just tell how it is in that religion, yes. (Tamara)

The fourth goal, *to follow ethical rules*, is emphasised by some of the teachers. The category is here placed close to the curriculum-pole, due to the fact that it is not only content about religions that can be understood as relating to the curriculum, but also socialisation goals, such as rules, norms, and values connected to the RE teaching. The interviewed teachers want their teaching to contribute knowledge so that the pupils learn to behave well and abide by the curriculum values. This is in line with previous research about Swedish RE teachers (Osbeck, 2014).

Behaving well may concern the classroom context, in relation to other pupils, as expressed by Pontus, for example, on the question of what is central in RE for him: "That you meet each other and treat each other in a more human way, not to condemn". Behaving well is also about being a responsible citizen in society, as emphasised by Karolina: "Well, social studies is also a lot about becoming a competent citizen of society, i.e. having a little control over the outside world in all these, well, different subjects related to social studies."

Despite the fact that this last goal is clearly related to the curriculum, this is not the case for the other goals discussed by the teachers. It is interesting to compare the categories identified here with, for example, Francis et al.'s study (1999), where they found that what teachers regard as important to teach in RE is often related to predetermined aims from the curriculum, in a way that could be interpreted as lying closer to the curriculum-pole than the quotations here indicate, even in this last category.

5.2 The interviewed teachers' descriptions of children's existential concerns and classroom questions

Recurrently, the teachers describe pupils' concerns and questions as relatively absent in their RE classrooms. The responses vary between "questions are lacking" and "questions are present", with a middle position of "some interactionally created questions present", as shown in Table 2, with their sub-categories.

First, the fact that pupils' *questions are lacking*, can be disappointing for teachers. One of the teachers stresses that she actually points this out at parent-teacher meetings,

Table 2 The interviewed teachers' descriptions of children's existential concerns and classroom questions

Descriptions of children's existential concerns and classroom questions	
Questions are lacking	Since the pupils are considered... ... too young ... lacking requisite prior knowledge ... too afraid
Some interactionally created questions present	Due to the teacher's way of working with... ... motivation ... (their) teacher knowledge ... techniques
Questions are present	Some of the questions are considered... ... irrelevant ... potentially relevant ... relevant

or *utvecklingssamtal* [literally, 'developmental conversations'] as an area that can be improved.

...it's like this in general, even if I look over time, the pupils ask far too few questions. [...] I have said that in many, many parent-teacher conferences back in the day as well. (Gudrun)

These teachers who regard questions as being absent also have ideas on why this is the case. Here, there are three positions to be found: that pupils are too young, lacking needed prior knowledge, or too afraid.

The pupils can be regarded as too young to have questions, in all cases in relation to the current curriculum.

Teacher: The problem in the sixth [year] then, is that some have come a long way in development and some are still... so it can be a group that wants to discuss a lot and who also understand and can and are interested in life issues and think a lot, while some prefer to...lie down and crawl under the table. Then there will be a very big difference.

Interviewer: So you can see that interest in life matters has to do with age and maturity?

Teacher: Yes. (Gudrun)

In close connection to this position, the teachers considered that pupils lacked the requisite prior knowledge that would enable them to ask questions.

Interviewer: You work dialogically all the time.

Teacher: Yes, I try to do that as long as it's not an area that I think is very fact-oriented, then I usually go ahead and give the factual basis and then steer it forward instead, that you talk more about this foundational knowledge...(Nicole)

But the pupils can also be interpreted as being too afraid to put questions. They may be afraid both of giving an incorrect answer and of how their questions and opinions will be viewed.

It may be that you (the pupil) might think that 'No, he/she will still answer first or he/she will still say it or he/she always knows the right answer', then you might not dare because you don't feel as strong as some others. (Nicole)

The interpretations can be compared with previous studies stressing the importance of a safe classroom in RE (e.g. Ipgrave, 2004).

Second, in the middle position, the fact that there are not very many questions sometimes means to teachers that *questions can be created interactionally*, by teachers and pupils jointly. The emanating understanding of how questions can be interactionally created or developed in teaching can be said to circle around three concepts: motivation, knowledge, and techniques. Common to these is an understanding of the presence of pupils' questions as related to something specific that the teacher does (Ipgrave, 2004; Rymarz & Belmonte, 2020). S/he can affect the presence or absence of questions.

Motivation is partly about positive reinforcement, being encouraging when questions crop up. However, being provoked, for instance by exaggerations from your teacher, can also provide motivation to ask questions and express your thoughts.

We work a lot with them so that they practise expressing their opinions and thoughts and try to provoke discussion and a lot of this with daring to raise your hand and daring to ask questions about things you don't understand and daring to discuss things, so that we work a lot with. (Robert)

Well, I encourage, encourage them and when they ask questions, I give praise as well: 'But oh what a good question! How lucky that you asked.' and 'This was interesting.' and 'Yes!' (Karolina)

These approaches would support both existential concerns and questions as well as factual or other queries, and perhaps also a classroom climate in which existential concerns can flourish.

Moreover, **teacher knowledge** and teachers' own interests in the subject may also inspire pupils to be more active themselves, to ask questions and show their opinions. Conversely, this can mean that a lack of knowledge may make it harder to awaken curiosity.

Since there is so much that is kind of new to me that I haven't taught before, you kind of have to read a lot so that you know what you're talking about. To be able to awaken this curiosity, and you notice those days when you have planned but don't have enough with you, then you can't manage to give so much, so they kind of get energy and curiosity from that too. (Karin)

Previous studies have also indicated links between teachers' subject knowledge and their interest in pupils' ultimate questions (Francis et al., 1999). In addition, knowledge may also facilitate the teacher's listening, what s/he hears, which has been shown to be important in order to pick up on pupils' questions (Heil & Ziebertz, 2004).

The **techniques** mentioned in order to shape questions are formal processes, tasks designed to achieve explicit reactions from the pupils, for example evaluation tasks such as exit tickets (giving the teacher notes with questions when leaving class), or different kinds of discussions (combinations of individual tasks (E), pair tasks (P), and whole-class tasks (A)).

And then, according to this EPA method [individuals, pairs, whole class], which is also part of cooperative learning, I make them think for themselves first and then

talk with their shoulder partner and then in a group. And then we look at what all the groups have done. (Gudrun)

Another motivational technique mentioned by teachers is that it may improve the situation to stress how pupils' activities, and thereby questions, can affect their grades.

In the third category, when pupils' *questions are present* in the RE classes, they can be considered both irrelevant or relevant, but also potentially relevant.

Irrelevant questions are those that draw the focus of teaching in the wrong direction or confuse the intended order of information during the lesson. The findings can be compared with previous studies showing how RE teachers can find it safer and therefore important to stay with the planned curriculum (Buchanan, 2009).

No, I mean, they ask a little, they can ask as much as they want if they get started on some half-crazy side track that one of them thinks of, they very rarely ask about pure facts, whether we have gone through a text or I tell them about something. (Gudrun)

However, it may also be the case that pupils' questions are being interpreted as irrelevant, or of less importance.

Interviewer: Do you encounter a lot of such everyday questions, existential questions, questions that are important to them in their lives as well?

Teacher: No, there is very little of that actually. A few things can come up, but nothing major, it can be small things that come up like that and mostly it's still just like before like this nearby, it can be like conflicts between each other and things like that. So that like no major stuff, it's not. (Karin)

Since relationships and conflicts between peers seem to be one of the most frequently occurring existential concerns of school children (Osbeck et al., 2024), it is interesting to notice how the issue is treated as irrelevant or is neglected by the teacher Karin.

Furthermore, potentially relevant questions are ones where everyday life events are focused on, such as climate issues or the Corona pandemic. These kinds of questions may not directly relate to the teaching themes but may later be of relevance or something to relate the teaching to.

Interviewer: Are there more contexts when you encounter questions like this that are of an existential nature?

Teacher: Well, this thing about the climate threat and that you..., how will things go in the future. (Monica)

Among the questions that are seen as relevant, some are perceived as unanswerable, while others are seen as being possible to discuss or even that they may bring the teaching further. The reasons why some questions may be understood as unanswerable can be related both to the nature of the question, typically the "why-is-it-so" questions, and to the teacher's lack of knowledge.

Interviewer: Is there something that you find difficult to teach in RE?

Teacher: Yes, it would probably be my own knowledge when they ask why-questions, then I have no idea. (Pontus)

That the difficulty in responding to the pupils' questions can be a real challenge in teaching is something that has also been stressed in previous studies (e.g. Rymarz & Belmonte, 2020). However, when answering the pupils' questions requires knowledge

that teachers may consider that they lack, there are strategies that teachers use, such as googling things together with the pupils or suggesting that the pupils look things up themselves and come back to class with the required information.

Teacher: I think it's good, because these why-questions come, it's also a sign that they want to know more and then you have to take it based on that and if I can't answer then we google it. (Anna)

Among the questions interpreted as relevant and possible to discuss are the so-called existential concerns. Example of what such questions may concern are truth, suicide, and struggles to find, or come to terms with, oneself.

Questions that are more directly interpreted as bringing the teaching further are those questions that indicate that something is unclear, concern comparisons with other religions, or show a clear interest in the subject in question.

Teacher: It can be quite connected to the different religions, what they find exciting, what they don't know and what they want to know more about, maybe about a Hindu god. (Monica)

So, what do these categories of existential concerns and classroom questions tell us? Firstly, the reported absence of pupils' questions is striking. The material has also shown that these questions may be invisible to teachers rather than absent. Moreover, there are also indications that teachers may treat pupils' questions as irrelevant, not seeing them as "real" questions with potential for development, since for instance they only concern problems with friends. Secondly, the absence of questions, or the teachers' low level of interest in pupils' questions, may be due to teachers' lack of knowledge. This can concern the subject, where a lack of knowledge can cause teachers both to be afraid of difficult and sensitive questions and to lack an inspiring passion for the subject. However, concerning possible methods for generating questions, the examples from the material are limited and are all of a generic nature rather than a subject-specific one.

6 Theoretical discoveries and conclusions

So, how can central patterns of the findings concerning RE teachers' ways of balancing child and curriculum positions in their teaching, and their descriptions of goals and pupils' existential concerns/questions, be understood and interpreted in light of the four RE approaches presented?

While each of these RE approaches is primarily pupil-structured or primarily content-structured, an awareness of this tension between pupil and content is expressed within each approach. However, one should not assume the teachers interviewed expressly commented on this tension; indeed, it is not particularly apparent in their descriptions of their teaching. Teaching does not appear to be based in this tension or the relationship between child and curriculum. RE teaching seems to be one thing, presenting information on religions with varying levels of knowledge to draw on, and the presence of the pupils in the classroom is another thing, where the teachers find the pupils to have different levels of maturity and ability to focus. How the teaching should be conducted in order to develop the knowledge positions of the pupils and what these positions are do not seem to be the questions that guide the planning.

A perspective on the child that recurrently emanates from the interviews is the child as a future adult citizen. This perspective is well described in previous studies and has also been criticised. It carries the risk of neglecting the present child, who is not being recognised in their own right, as a “human being”, but is rather treated as a “human becoming” (e.g. Prout, 2005). The “child” in the teachers’ descriptions is at risk of being that future citizen, the child that as a mature and curious adult can contribute with tolerance and expanded knowledge to a democratic, multireligious society and its cohesion. It should be noticed that it is the awareness of a pluralistic, multireligious society and the importance of living in mutual tolerance that seem to drive many of the knowledge perspectives in the teachers’ descriptions, unlike, for instance, in Wright’s content-structured RE, where certain contributions and philosophies of the studied religions are emphasised.

From the presentation of the RE approaches, it is easy to get the impression that a less pupil-structured RE approach means a more content-structured one and vice versa. However, the teacher interviews focusing on RE practice show that this is not necessarily the case. The fact that actual children’s questions, children’s interests, children’s positions, and children’s difficulties are lacking—aspects that in the Errickers’ RE approach constitute the hub of teaching—does not automatically mean that a curriculum perspective is dominant. On the contrary, despite the lack of a child-centred teaching view, descriptions of content and discussions of central issues are almost absent in the teacher interviews. This makes the position of the curriculum vague. It is not, as in Wright’s RE approach, that religious truth claims set the scene, and actual children’s positions have to be toned down. Besides shared human values from the curriculum, which would allow pupils to participate in a multireligious society, it is not very clear what specifically the teachers want their pupils to be offered regarding RE content.

When the teachers make special efforts to bring pupils and content closer together, they do so by using generic methods and techniques, such as different forms of discussion (individual, pairs, and whole class) and evaluation (e.g. exit tickets). When comparing such methods with those described in the four RE approaches, it becomes obvious that in particular Jackson and Grimmitt, who represent the approaches that most clearly stress child and curriculum, are arguing for RE-specific methods, *edification* (Jackson) and *evaluation* (Grimmitt). New RE knowledge provides an opportunity for new personal insights.

For Jackson, *edification* is a part of the reflexivity on which his interpretive approach is focused. Reflexivity in the study of religions gives rise to self-understanding. Through the emerging understanding of the other, a new way of seeing oneself can grow. RE offers specific opportunities since we rarely see what we take for granted until this is contrasted with other perspectives. It is this process of self-understanding that Jackson calls *edification*, as a sort of enlightenment or *Bildung* process.

Central to Grimmitt’s (1987) understanding of religious traditions is that they constitute reference and meaning systems within which individuals place themselves and can relate themselves to. More or less consciously, the individual can thus be said to *evaluate* themselves in relation to this meaning system. In this way, religious practice and the RE practice show similar traits. The study of religion at school can function as self-evaluation for the individual. Education has a responsibility to help the individual become more self-aware and thus become an author in her/his own life. Grimmitt has described such consciousness-raising processes in six steps. In the identity stage (1) you try to understand who you are and in the acceptance stage (2) attention is paid to how you experience your identity, which is not necessarily the same as acceptance, even if it is a possible outcome. Illumination (3) is the phase when understanding of how you have come to be who you are, what has influenced you, is sought. When different ideals (4) are focused on, it is precisely

their transcending possibility that is central, i.e. the understanding of what a person could be and the power of holding something to be true. Making different ideals and possible consequences visible can lead to a desire for personal adjustment (5) and evaluation (6). According to Grimmit, teaching has a responsibility to make pupils aware of the function of beliefs and how self-awareness takes shape and is reshaped. Teaching should contribute content and create learning situations that have the potential to start these processes. This does not necessarily mean that only the teacher should present evaluative questions. Such conversations could occur spontaneously in relation to material and content where pupils discuss their pre-understandings and try out positions linked to their own life, though this again presupposes that teachers have access to techniques for facilitating discussion.

At the beginning of this article, we stressed, following Dewey (1966), how the relationship between child and curriculum can be understood as foundational for all education. The child and the curriculum can never in practice be separated since they are integrated in the learning individual: in education, a particular individual is learning something specific. Through the studies conducted here, we have seen how this can be phrased differently but just as strongly in relation to RE. First, some classic English RE approaches, which were themselves being developed in relation to each other, provided a valuable lens to view both the spectrum of potential theoretical positions and contemporary Swedish teachers' perspectives. Rather than prioritising any one approach, we highlight their shared underlying concern for the child and the curriculum in RE. Second, how such a Deweyan position, with a simultaneous awareness of child and curriculum, can be made clear in actual RE classroom practice remains to be seen. However, revisiting these approaches in combination with concrete examples of teachers' experiences has brought our understanding further, and has also drawn attention to the need for awareness and clarity regarding the child, the curriculum, and the relationship between them.

Funding Open access funding provided by University of Gothenburg. The study has been funded by the Swedish Research Council (Dnr 2018-03435).

Declarations

Conflict of interest The authors have no competing interest to declare.

Ethical approval Ethical approval was granted by the ethical review board (Dnr 2019-01828).

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