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Powerful Knowledge in Religious Education—Questions of Epistemology and Subject Literacy in Democratic and Inclusive Educational Contexts

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Abstract: In this article, the focus is to grasp ongoing discussions regarding powerful knowledge in relation to social sciences in a broader sense, but especially in relation to religious education. Discussions around norms and values are central in classrooms where both multireligiousness and secularity characterize students' everyday life and where students constantly move between different multicultural contexts. It is the aim of this contribution to explore the ongoing discussions relating powerful knowledge in RE to existential questions and controversial issues. One way for teachers to work with these goals is to focus partly on subject literacy and on powerful knowledge in relation to inclusive teaching, and partly on subject content where core value issues are expressed together with existential and controversial questions. This will be discussed and explored in this contribution focusing on powerful knowledge and epistemology in social science, and especially in the school subject of religious education.

Keywords: powerful knowledge; religious education; subject literacy; teacher training; compulsory school; existential questions; controversial issues



Citation: Liljefors Persson, Bodil. 2023. Powerful Knowledge in Religious Education—Questions of Epistemology and Subject Literacy in Democratic and Inclusive Educational Contexts. *Social Sciences* 12: 642. <https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci12120642>

Academic Editor: Peter Hopkins

Received: 1 October 2023

Revised: 26 October 2023

Accepted: 3 November 2023

Published: 21 November 2023



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1. Introduction

The religious landscape of Sweden has changed since the middle of the 19th century to today being one of the world's most secularized countries. Sweden is also one of the most multireligious countries in Europe. This causes major challenges where the requirements for the knowledge of and understanding for different cultures, religions, and lifestyles are increasing in society at large. These are important issues for both school and higher education that are also reflected in school curricula and in various subject syllabi. Teaching about values and norms is already emphasized on the first page of the curricula for both compulsory school and upper secondary school, and it is also central in social sciences, especially in the subject religious education which, in Sweden, should be nonconfessional. Students at all educational levels should be given the opportunity to process and discuss the importance of an inclusive society as well as to develop tools and knowledge to analyze and critically examine both historical events and contemporary events, in both Swedish and international contexts. Students should also have opportunities to test and critically examine their own values and experiences in dialogue with other students, and to test them in dialogue with the school's core values and democratic principles. Teachers in religious education have, in this context, a special responsibility to enable the students to encounter various worldviews and experience the diversity in society.

In this chapter, ongoing discussions regarding powerful knowledge in relation to social sciences in a broader sense, but especially in relation to religious education, called "religionskunskap", which translates to "knowledge of religion" in Sweden, will be presented (Young 2008, 2014; Liljefors Persson 2022, 2023; Franck and Liljefors Persson 2023; Franck and Thalén 2023). The aim of this contribution is to explore the contexts of powerful

knowledge and subject literacy in religious education and suggest how to work with values, existential questions, and controversial issues in various educational contexts.

Two main questions are the focus of this article; the first centers around what disciplinary literacy and powerful knowledge could be in religious education, and the second question concerns how existential questions and controversial issues may contribute in religious education to promote a democratic and inclusive society.

The results section, Section 3, is structured into two main parts that correspond to the two main questions; thus, the first part highlights discussions of disciplinary literacy and powerful knowledge, while the second part focuses on how existential and controversial issues may contribute when teaching religious education in the classroom to promote a democratic, inclusive, and sustainable society.

2. Materials and Methods

This article is based on a careful close reading of the research literature, mainly about powerful knowledge, disciplinary or subject literacy, and controversial issues, and is based on a contextual analysis of the literature in the context of religious education. Therefore, this article is, thus, a study of the literature, and the analysis is inspired by critical discourse analysis. Parts of the content in this article have been published in (Liljefors Persson 2022, 2023).

3. Results

3.1. *Disciplinary Literacy and Powerful Knowledge in Religious Education*

There is no simple answer to the question of how to define disciplinary literacy or subject literacy; however, the following two quotes from researchers emphasize some different perspectives on what subject literacy can be and what is required of teachers:

“A disciplinary literary approach emphasizes the specialized knowledge and abilities possessed by those who create, communicate, and use knowledge within each of their disciplines.”. (Shanahan and Shanahan 2012, p. 7)

“Consequently, teachers need support in broadening their understanding of literacy and in consciously unpacking, as subject experts, the discourse practices and ways of viewing and communicating about the world that are characteristic of their academic disciplines.”. (Mac Mahon 2014, p. 32)

As can be seen from the above quotes, it is emphasized that each academic subject has its own subject literacy, and each school subject obtains its literacy from both the school subjects' own practices and the academic disciplines that they originate from (Mac Mahon 2014; Shanahan and Shanahan 2008, 2012). From these quotes, we understand that subject literacy is strongly linked to both the academic subject and the school subject. The quote from Mac Mahon stresses the importance of teachers needing to broaden their understanding of what subject literacy is and what teaching practices mean, and that each subject has its own epistemology and way of looking at the world (Mac Mahon 2014). The concept of literacy should be understood in a broader sense than the narrow understanding of only the ability to read, write, and count. Thus, subject literacy includes a broader contextual ability and competence when it comes to actively participating in various social practices in specific subject areas or educational contexts.

Theoretically, subject didactical research in Sweden could be said to have developed in two ways: out of the academic disciplines of each subject, and from the research traditions that, from a historical perspective, have continuously developed, if gradually, within the framework for school research and teacher training (Hartman 2000; Skogar 2000; Heimbrock et al. 2001). The subject didactical research in the social sciences and, thus, also in religious education are created today in the meeting between academic research, teacher education, and teaching practices in school. Nowadays, this research is characterized by an effort to develop both the academic subjects and the school subjects, but also by the

endeavor to connect subject theory and teaching practice more generally. However, what this collaboration looks like differs in various national contexts.

According to Michael Young (2014), syllabi are generally developed with a connection to the traditional academic subjects, which he explains is an established cooperation seen from a historical perspective. In Sweden, however, it has not always been organized in this way. Here, there has rather been a connection between teacher training institutions, not traditionally with the university institutions, and the national authority—currently the Swedish National Agency for Education—which has been given the government’s assignment to formulate and develop curricula and syllabi and has, thus, acted as a guarantor to produce subject knowledge in all the school subjects (Hartman 2000; Skogar 2000).

In didactic research related to epistemology and subject literacy, we find discussions regarding concepts as first-order and second-order concepts (Seixas and Morton 2013; Stolare 2015). If we continue to look at international research, the term threshold concepts indicates a clear, new, overall understanding of a subject acting as a threshold, or a gateway, into one gradually increased subject understanding (Niemi 2018; Franck 2021). Examples of threshold concepts in religious studies, according to Niemi (2018), are lived religion, the world religion paradigm, emic/etic, and orthodoxy/orthopraxy, which are concepts that contribute to the fact that many students in higher education reach a new dimension in their subject knowledge and thus gain a new overall understanding. Together with the concept powerful knowledge, concepts such as big ideas and key concepts are also found in these epistemological contexts related to various subject disciplines. They refer to what is considered central knowledge in the subjects, and these concepts are also used in the research literature (Meyer and Land 2005; Young 2008, 2014; Seixas and Morton 2013; Jackson 2004, 2008, 2019; Franck and Thalén 2023).

All of these concepts can be transferred to ongoing theoretical knowledge discussions regarding the school subjects. This, in turn, has led to subject development which, among other things, can be concretized in curriculum development both at universities and in school. For example, Young defines the concept of powerful knowledge as follows:

“Powerful knowledge refers to what the knowledge can do or what intellectual power it gives to those who have access to it. Powerful knowledge provides more reliable explanations and new ways of thinking about the world and . . . can provide learners with a language for engaging in political, moral, and other kinds of debates.”. (Young 2008, p. 14)

In an article concerning the subject of geography, it is also emphasized that powerful knowledge partly gives students new ways of looking at the world, and partly gives the students abilities that enable them to follow and participate in debates on important local, national, and global issues (Maude 2015). These two ways of emphasizing what is powerful knowledge are directly transferable to the subject of religious studies.

Based on close reading of the national course syllabi in religious education for compulsory schools, powerful knowledge could, for example, enable the student to gain and develop a deeper knowledge of facts about various religions and religious traditions and understanding, and thereafter be able to make comparisons and thus see similarities and differences both within and between religious traditions. Also, powerful knowledge could contribute to understanding the concepts of lived religion and representation that are found in the course syllabus for grades 7 to 9. Likewise, for example, the ability to reflect and to be able to contextualize one’s knowledge are central concepts in the subject of religious education in Sweden (Lgr22). Thus, to develop deeper knowledge of religions and to be able to compare religious traditions, to understand the concept of representation, and to be able to reflect upon them are some examples of what is considered powerful knowledge and are thus central in religious studies in general, particularly in the school subject religious education. This also has a bearing on the epistemological context and discussions about what is central knowledge related to both the subject religious education and the academic discipline religious studies. By developing their knowledge and abilities in religious education, students can, from a longer perspective, through their religious competence, also

contribute as active citizens in an inclusive and socially sustainable society (Cotter and Robertson 2016; Liljefors Persson 2022; Franck and Liljefors Persson 2023).

In this context, the concept of critical literacy is also important, which means that students gradually, through their schooling, also increase their ability to critically review and evaluate knowledge by using the subject content knowledge they have acquired (Shanahan and Shanahan 2008, 2012; Biesta et al. 2019).

Powerful knowledge entails and provides changed competences and familiarity with a subject (here, religious education) and enables students to act as active citizens in the society around them. The syllabi of the various curricula contain a lot of what is called powerful knowledge in different subjects, i.e., the knowledge that is considered central to one subject. Many teachers in an international context also believe that course plans often have too-extensive content, which in practice leads to material overcrowding in teaching (Young 2008, 2014; Biesta et al. 2019). This can also be recognized from discussions which have been ongoing regarding the course syllabi in various school subjects at different levels in the Swedish educational system (Liljefors Persson 2022).

3.2. Democratic and Inclusive Teaching in Religious Education—Focusing on Existential Questions and Controversial Issues

The teaching content differs in the school subject of religious education both in an international context and in relation to Sweden, but there is also much in the course plans that is common (Heimbrock et al. 2001; Jackson 2004, 2008; Alberts 2010). For example, in the course syllabi in many countries, we find that formulations on multiculturalism, religious diversity, and democratic values are emphasized, which speaks for the importance of the subject in relation to existential and controversial issues. In research, it is often stated that teaching in religious education contributes to students partly learning about religion in relation to ethics and life issues, and partly learning themselves from the studies in the subject, which is to say, religious education also provides the students with a form of education for life.

Existential and controversial questions thus have a natural place in teaching both in social science in general and in religious education. At the same time, both existential and controversial questions offer a challenge in that they are connected to both the attitudes and opinions of the students, but they also provide good opportunities to practice democratic work in the classroom. Based on such questions, teachers can, in a didactic way, consciously work on naturally connecting the school subject religious education with the school's general work on basic values (Thalén and Franck 2023; Franck and Liljefors Persson 2023).

Existential questions and questions of life have been a central content in the curricula for the school subject religious education since the 1960s in Sweden. In the curriculum for religious studies in compulsory school, it says, among other things, for the purpose of the subject:

“The students must also be given the opportunity to reflect on what religion is and outlook on life can mean for people's identity and how own starting points affect the understanding of religion and outlook on life.” (Lgr22, p. 188)

In the central content of religious education in compulsory school, the following points are highlighted for grades 7–9:

“Conflicts and consensus between different religious and different secular views, for example in matters of religious freedom, sexuality and the view of women's and men's roles.” [...]

“Analysis of and reflection on ethical issues from the students' point of view own arguments as well as based on interpretations within religions and other worldviews and based on ethical models. Such questions can for example be about freedom, justice and solidarity.”

“Conversation about and reflection on life issues from the students' perspective own thoughts and based on interpretations within religions and other world-

views. Such questions can, for example, be about identity, love, sexuality and the meaning of life.” (Lgr22, p. 192)

Already in the purpose and central content of the religious education syllabus, existential questions and questions of life have a strong position, which provides clear direction and support for teachers to focus on in the choice of teaching content. Engaging students in discussions that relate to such issues is a way of broadening the understanding of other life worlds, which may include different norms and values to the students’ own.

The results from the National Evaluation in 2003 from pupils in year 9 showed that they want to discuss issues to a great extent related to the meaning of life, death, love, friendship, war, and questions about the future and about the environment. The evaluation shows that they had not faced these issues to such a great extent as they had desired. This is also confirmed by teachers’ and students’ experiences and reflections on the teaching they had experienced themselves during their own school days (Liljefors Persson 2018).

There is, thus, good support for introducing more teaching around existential questions, such as love, sexuality, and relationships. The subject of religious education can be an inclusive room for all students to meet and discuss (s)existential questions in teaching. The student teachers express, in addition, that they want to receive in-depth training on how to teach about life issues and existential issues related to, among other things, sexuality and relationships, because they believe this is both important and interesting for teaching the subject of religious education (Liljefors Persson 2018).

The concept of controversial or sensitive issues has been used within social orientation in the subject for many years, and there are different ways of defining what is meant by it. A simple definition is suggested to be “issues which arouse strong feelings and divide opinion in communities and society” (Kerr and Huddleston 2015, p. 13). Controversial issues are seen as questions that generate contradictory explanations and complex solutions. These are questions that tend to divide into different groups, without simple solutions or answers. They can both lie further back in time and be current and contemporary (Cowan and Maitles 2012; Alvéén 2021). In summary, it can be said that controversial issues are always sensitive or difficult to deal with and decide on. At the same time, these are questions that are significant to learn about or that help to understand what democracy is about, and for teachers they are considered to be challenging to work with in the classroom.

David Kerr and Ted Huddleston (Kerr and Huddleston 2015, p. 7) articulated the importance of working with controversial questions and emphasized the necessity of learning democratic processes and human rights by quoting Bernard Crick in a rather well-known quote from 2002:

“Learning how to engage in dialogue with and respect people whose values are different from one’s own is central to the democratic process and essential to the protection and strengthening of democracy and fostering of a culture of human rights.”. (Kerr and Huddleston 2015, p. 7)

Perhaps the value in teaching about and having discussions on such questions lies precisely in actually facilitating them. Then, conflicts are made visible, and students can engage in democratic discussions, which means that they also learn to tolerate each other’s different opinions (Alvéén 2021, pp. 188–89). The goal of teaching about controversial issues and conducting good discussions in the classroom is to help students develop and test their opinions, and gain an increased understanding of and consider new perspectives on multiple issues. At the same time, they learn to critically review and discuss in a civilized manner with their classmates, even if they do not agree on the precise issue being discussed (Flenser et al. 2021; Franck and Liljefors Persson 2023).

4. Discussion

If we consider that powerful knowledge is developed in the contact zone between the academic disciplines and school subjects (Young 2008, 2014), then we can understand that didactical research has evolved in between these two instances, at least during later

years. This has become clear during the work on developing the latest curricula and course plans in Sweden. The National Agency for Education has invited different groups of academic researchers and teacher trainers from the Universities and the National Agency for Education, together with active teachers from schools and other interest groups, for consultation during the ongoing process with this work. This seems to be a fruitful cooperation that is beneficial for all educational levels.

The purpose of the school subject religious education includes formulations relating to facts and understanding of different religions and their role in society, but also about what the roles that ethics questions, existential questions, and life questions play in the students' personal way of life. A way of working didactically with these goals is to focus partly on subject/disciplinary literacy and especially on powerful knowledge in relation to inclusive teaching, partly on subject content where core value issues are expressed together with existential and controversial questions.

From a European perspective, the teaching content in religious education differs between countries, but we also find much that is common with the subject's construction in Swedish schools. Many course plans highlight the importance of the subject religious education for multiculturalism and religious diversity, and for citizenship education. This might be considered as being urgent content in the context of the epistemology of the subject religious education in many countries (Heimbrock et al. 2001; Jackson 2004, 2008; Dinham and Shaw 2017; Cotter and Robertson 2016). Similar formulations can be recognized from the national curricula in Sweden. An aspiration with such teaching content is to develop both an understanding of and a recognition of religious and cultural diversity.

In the national evaluation that was most recently conducted in 2003 in Sweden, students also expressed that they wished to discuss issues related to diversity, value-based work, and questions about norms and ethics in different ways. Based on existential questions and life issues, teachers can work in a didactically conscious manner by connecting the school subject religious education with the school's general values-based work. Both in research and in surveys of what students wish to learn in the subject religious education, it is clear that they want to focus on, e.g., questions of solidarity, justice, equality, diversity, poverty, and climate and environmental issues (Liljefors Persson 2023). This type of content connects well with the core values formulated in the national curricula and still found in the latest governing documents from 2022. The various curricula contain much of what seems to satisfy the proposed criteria for powerful knowledge in social science subjects and thus also in religious education. Powerful knowledge is knowledge that is considered central to the subject. It is knowledge based on the meeting between the academic subject and the subject taught in school. Within religious education, teaching based on powerful knowledge is intended to provide a democratic competence and ethical awareness that is important in an inclusive and socially sustainable society (Liljefors Persson 2023; Franck and Liljefors Persson 2023; Franck and Thalén 2023).

For students to be able to develop a religious literacy/religious competence, teaching in school needs to focus on both knowledge of concepts and facts at a concrete level, and to develop the ability to reason, discuss, and analyze arguments. As seen in the section regarding existential questions and controversial issues, these are two ways to focus on democratic and inclusive teachings within the subject religious education. To focus on existential questions and controversial issues might also develop the student's abilities to strengthen their understanding and their competence in actually practicing democracy. To work with controversial issues is one example of how to teach about global ethics and global values. This may be a rewarding way to arouse interest in teaching about values and existential questions that in turn can contribute to develop competencies useful in a democratic, inclusive, and (socially) sustainable society. This would be interesting to investigate in further studies.

5. Conclusions

In the school subject religious education, students have the opportunity to compare and reflect on facts about religions and religious traditions, and issues of basic values, ethics, and norms, as well as a chance to discuss in detail what democracy, solidarity, equality, and inclusion can mean. These examples of content are examples of powerful knowledge content in religious education. Teachers can, through working with existential and controversial issues in religious education in a didactically conscious way, and by connecting with the general values-based work in the school, reach a long way in their quest towards the goal of teaching for a democratic, inclusive, and sustainable society. More research is needed in the future on the areas discussed and suggested here in this article.

If the teaching in religious education gives opportunity in the classroom for discussing existential questions and focusing on controversial issues and places them in relation to human rights and the Convention on the Rights of the Child, then the content connects well with the school's value-based work in general, as well as with humanistic values and what is called citizenship education. Hopefully, the students' own knowledge development contributes to giving them confidence and the power to stand for a position, as well as to express themselves and communicate about subject content both inside and outside the classroom, so that they can participate in democratic conversations both in school and in society.

In conclusion, we can say that being literate in religion and religious education means that the students acquire powerful knowledge as subject knowledge, subject understanding, and skills. In turn, this means that with the help of this religious literacy/religious competence, they can actively participate in the school's teaching and, from a wider perspective, the students can participate as active citizens and navigate in a democratic, inclusive, and socially sustainable society.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: No new data were created or analyzed in this study. Data sharing is not applicable to this article.

Acknowledgments: The author would like to extend a warm thanks to the editors, Christina Osbeck and Olof Franck, for inviting me to participate in this Special Issue of Social Science. I also want to warmly thank M.A. Lindy P. Gustavsson for assisting me with the English editing of this article.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

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