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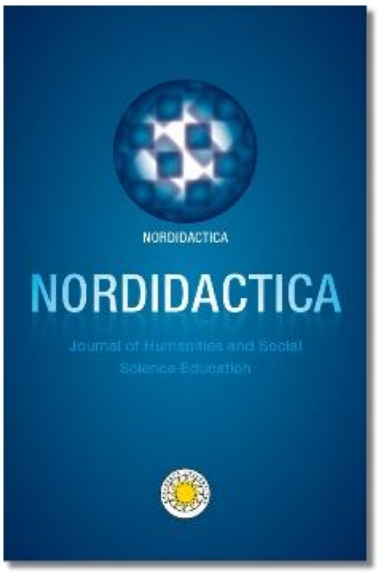
Katarina Kärnebro



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Teaching RE – for what purpose? A discourse analysis of teachers' talk about their teaching in relation to the children's existential questions

Katarina Kärnebro

Department of Education, Umeå University

Abstract: In the 1960s, existential questions [sw. livsfrågor] were introduced as a theme of the Swedish subject "Knowledge of Religion" to make space for students' own questions. However, studies on the recent curriculum changes show that teachers experience that there is a stronger emphasis on knowledge about a predetermined content than before. Based on interviews with eleven upper primary school RE teachers, this article investigates what the teachers consider today when planning their teaching, and highlights the discourses that teachers construct, engage in or sustain when talking about their professional and pedagogical actions. The aim of the study is to contribute to a deeper understanding of the enacted curriculum when it comes to students' existential questions, and to discuss some implications of how the teachers view RE - as a transmission of knowledge or as a transformative practice for the learners. The results indicate that Teaching for the syllabus is a dominant discourse in the teachers' talk, at the cost of Teaching for understanding democratic values and Teaching for engagement. The dominant discourse stems from perceived systemic constraints, and constructs the students as objects of teaching, which leaves little regard for the students' own questions.

KEYWORDS: EXISTENTIAL QUESTIONS, RE-DIDACTICS, PRIMARY SCHOOL, TEACHER INTERVIEWS, TRANSFORMATIVE EDUCATION, DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

About the author: Katarina Kärnebro has a PhD in Educational work and is Senior Lecturer at the Department of Education, Umeå University, with special interests in gender studies, subject didactics, citizenship education and social justice.

Introduction

Studies of the impact of current educational policies have shown that the curriculum developments of the past ten years have resulted in a shift from a student-based orientation to a more subject-based one, where more focus is on a rather fixed and defined subject content which can be assessed (Hopmann 2008; Adolfsson 2018). As a consequence, there is little or no room for other knowledge forms, for example the students' own experiences or their questions (Strandler 2017; Persson et al. 2017). Objectives that are more difficult to assess than others also risk being subordinated (Wahlström et al. 2020). This is also the case in the subject of Religious Education (Sw. 'Religionskunskap'), where there is a tendency that teachers focus their teaching on facts and intellectual understandings of the subject, instead of on the existential dimensions that have to do with practices, lived experiences and emotions (Jonsson 2016). Recent studies on the role of students' existential questions show that although Swedish RE teachers believe it is important to engage in students' existential questions, such questions seldom become a focus in their teaching due to lack of time (Löfstedt & Sjöborg 2018) or due to expectations to deliver results that count in an age of marketization of schools (c.f. Löfgren & Löfgren 2015). Another view of religion is that it is a private matter that should not be exposed in the classroom (Risenfors 2012).

A crucial question to ask is how teachers actually reason when planning for and carrying out the curriculum-in-practice in the classroom. How do Swedish RE teachers approach their students' existential questions and concerns in their teaching? What importance is attached to the questions, and how do the teachers motivate their didactical choices? The purpose of this article is to identify the discourses at play when RE teachers in Years 5 and 6 didactically describe their teaching, to analyse what makes up these discourses, and to discuss some of their practical implications on the teachers' positions and on their approaches to the students' questions.[1]

Background and previous research

The social studies subjects in the Swedish compulsory school are Civics, History, Religion and Geography. Historically, subject integration of the four subjects in Years 1-6 was quite common until 2011 when a standards-based national curriculum was introduced and subject-integrated teaching became more challenging (Olovsson 2021). The curriculum, *Curriculum for the compulsory school, preschool class and school-age educare* (NAE 2011)[2] has a strong emphasis on subject-based teaching content and

[1] This study is part of a larger project *Child & Curriculum. Existential questions and educational responses*, where the aim is to generate new knowledge on children's existential questions as educational concerns, both as expressions of their worldviews and as questions seeking knowledge that are calling for educational responses.

[2] In Swedish: *Läroplanen för grundskolan samt för förskoleklassen och fritidshemmet*. In the autumn of 2022, a revised curriculum came into effect. This study was conducted before that and is based on the version from 2011.

assessment criteria, as these are closely aligned (Sundberg & Wahlström 2012). Actually, the development from a learner-centred curriculum towards a more subject-based one is a Swedish trend that stands out from transnational policy (Adolfsson 2018). In NAE 2011, the content and knowledge requirements in each subject are stated for Years 3, 6 and 9. The students' knowledge development is continually monitored, but the students do not receive grades until they are 12 years old. In addition to the individual syllabi in each subject, the overarching curriculum objectives stating overall goals, guidelines, and fundamental values and tasks of the school are to be considered in the teaching. The social studies subjects have objectives similar to the overarching objectives in the curriculum and they are often expected to carry out the democratic assignment (Henriksson Persson & Irisdotter Aldemyr 2017). This is particularly the case for RE, since the historical development of the subject is closely connected to a fostering assignment (Jonsson & Månsson 2021).

Existential questions (Sw. 'livsfrågor') appeared in Swedish curriculum and the RE-syllabus in 1969, when the subject was transformed from 'Knowledge of Christianity' (Sw. Kristendomskunskap) to a more objective variant 'Knowledge of Religions' (Sw. Religionskunskap) (Hartman 2018). At that time, the subject was the most unpopular subject among students, even though studies showed that the students had a substantial interest in existential questions (Hartman 1986). Since then, the emphasis on existential questions in the Swedish national curricula has varied over the years (Sporre 2021). From being introduced as a base for teaching RE in the late 1960s, the concept of 'livsfrågor' did not gain full momentum until the 1980s. A decade later there was a radical shift, and in the 1994 syllabus the students' own existential questions were marginalised. The knowledge of worldviews was at the centre instead, and existential questions were described as ways to reflect on religions or as questions belonging to secular worldviews. While 'livsfrågor' reappeared in matters relating to identity formation and ethical attitudes in the 2011 national curriculum, they were still subordinated to the study of worldviews, and it is not clear that it is the students' own questions that the RE syllabus text refers to (Sporre 2021). In comparison with curricula texts from other Scandinavian countries, the Swedish RE syllabus is the most proclamatory, with a strong focus on qualification through the acquisition of knowledge of worldviews and low interest in students' own experiences. The word 'dialogue' is not even mentioned in the Swedish syllabus from 2011 (Sporre 2021).

The RE syllabus has had its own unique historical development as a result of societal debates but it has also been largely affected by curricular changes that have been more or less suitable for the subject. Ethics education, for example, cannot be easily assessed in standardized tests (Sporre 2019). Although studies have shown that students' questions are important for their interest and performance in social studies (Osbeck 2019), questions of life and existential matters in ethics are usually marginalized compared to the other objectives in the syllabus (Osbeck 2014; Kittelmann Flensner 2015).

The focus on existential questions in RE has been criticized for simplifying how such questions arise (Grimmitt 1987) and for the influences from Christian traditions that underlie the approach (Böwadt 2009). An objection is also that the approach may give

the students a poor understanding of religious traditions, for example by viewing them as instrumentalized answers (Osbeck & Skeie 2014). A previous discourse analysis of what an RE teacher must know and do to be able to meet the demands of the profession (Carlsson 2016), showed that teachers need to know the subject, know the pupils, and know themselves in order to be competent RE teachers. Although the identified discourses were complementary in relation to each other, the dominant discourse in the study was to know the subject, and it was also considered more important to be able to deepen the content than to enhance the dialogue in the classroom. This meant that two oppositional views arose, the teacher as the transmitter of knowledge, and the learner as the actual centre of the teaching (Carlsson 2016). Another opposition that was highlighted was that between the importance of representing the content by involving the students' own experiences, and the need for them to feel safe in the classroom (Carlsson 2020). Other studies have proven and discussed these risks in RE teaching, for example that open conversations and interactions may turn the classroom into an unsafe space where the respect for religions, worldviews and individuals is violated or where stereotypes are reinforced due to a dominant secular discourse or youth culture (Osbeck et. al 2017; Kittelmann Flensner 2015; Osbeck & Lied 2012).

To summarize, unless the teachers' professional and pedagogical actions when addressing the students' questions in RE are well thought through, they may lead to different learning outcomes. On the basis of the above findings, the discourse analysis presented in this article aims to shed some further light on teachers' considerations and how they view and handle their students' existential questions and concerns in their teaching.

Theory and Methodology

Willem L. Wardekker and Siebren Miedema have highlighted the dominant view of general education as transmission of knowledge by contrasting it to a transformative model of education showing different potentials for the RE subject (Wardekker & Miedema 2006). A transmission model suggests that the teacher is the main provider of knowledge, and that facts, insights, norms, and values are to be transmitted to the students so that they can learn to live in society. This model also relies on a view of knowledge as representation, which leaves little room for emotions or personal development. A risk with this model is that RE could be reduced to cognitive information about different worldviews that will neither help learners to understand plurality, nor give them experiences that are potential identity-forming material. The other model, a transformative view of education, is better suited for the RE subject since it is based on ideas of participation and encompasses modes of knowing, being, acting and feeling in a holistic sense. In this model, for learning to be successful, a subject content of knowledge, skills and values should be transformed in the classroom into a base for acting. This means that the students should also be active, and that learning should be contextualized and not seen as individualistic or merely cognitive. Following the pragmatist line taken by Dewey, education should offer means of participation, and thereby assist students in a double process of socialization and individuation. Religious

education should then be connected to everyday life, be open for creative exploring, and foster critical thinking among the students (Wardekker & Miedema 2006).

Although this theoretical stance is somewhat normative, the two models, the transmission view vs the transformative view, as presented by Wardekker and Miedema, will be used as figures of thought in the concluding section of this article in an attempt to characterize the identified discourses and discuss their implications for Swedish RE.

Material

Eleven upper primary school teachers were interviewed on two occasions. The analysis presented in this article is based on a close reading of the first round of interviews since it was there that the teachers provided rich background descriptions about what they considered when teaching. The teachers were eight women and three men, and their teaching experience ranged from 18 months to 35 years. Their schools were selected for the study since they were located in different municipality types and represented variation regarding the socio-economic backgrounds of the students. Most teachers taught their classes in several different subjects and knew their students well. The interview questions focused on how the teachers view their classes and students, how they view their teaching in general, what their considerations are when designing their teaching activities, especially in RE, and their awareness and use of the students' questions in their teaching.

Discourse analysis

The perspective adopted here is based on Silverman's (2000) 'interview-as-local-accomplishment'. This means that talk is seen as constructive rather than as a resource to underlying realties. The teachers' talk about their RE teaching is significant because it sheds light on how the RE syllabus is experienced in practice, and an analysis of their talk may offer a greater understanding of the current views of the curriculum as constructed by the teachers. Discourse analysis was chosen for this reason. It can identify a speakers' cultural universe and the ideological nature of everyday discourse through the use of categories and understandings in social interaction (Potter & Wetherell 1987). The principles of discourse analysis are that meanings and identities are constructed, that speakers are both the producers and products of discourse (Edley 2001), and that language has consequences, since people use meanings as discursive resources to make sense of the world (Potter & Wetherell 1987). According to Foucault, discourse is 'practices which systematically form the object of which they speak' (Foucault 1972:49). Foucault points out that words are particularly powerful within the context of institutions, since words define, describe, and categorize things and people, and that these practices may have real-world consequences for individuals. In this sense, talk is always restricted by the context and by what is commonly recognized, but the use of language can still be flexible and fluid (Wetherell 2006). This means that the teachers in this study are seen as active agents who can use different, similar, or contrastive resources when they discursively construct their teaching and their

approaches to the students and their questions. Discourse analysis is an ethical way to report results from the interviews since the focus is not on the individual teachers, but rather on the discourses they draw on and the resources they use for this.

The operated analysis here is based on the concept of 'discourse' and the analytical terms 'interpretive repertoire' and 'subject position'. Discourse in this study refers to the discursively constructed practices containing beliefs that set the agenda for RE teachers in school as an institution (Foucault 1972), i.e., the frames for RE teaching that the teachers draw on in their narratives about their work. Interpretative repertoires are 'the building blocks' or the resources that the teachers use in the interviews 'to develop accounts and versions of significant events in social interaction and through which they perform identities and social life' (Wetherell 2006:2). Used here as an analytical concept, interpretative repertoires identify and summarize some of the regular blocks of connected arguments that the teachers use as resources in their narratives, i.e., relatively stable patterns of talk that ultimately make up the discourses. Subject positions in the analysis refer to how the teachers position themselves and their own actions in relation to their narratives, i.e., their descriptions of what they actually do in their RE-teaching. The teachers can relate to various subject positions in the same interview.

The data for this study was generated from semi-structured interviews, and not from natural, casual speech. This means that the data was both enabled and constrained by the method. However, the semi-structured interviews allowed for in-depth data-gathering (cf. Hollway & Jefferson 2000). A common criticism of discourse analysis is that there is a risk that the researcher will impose theoretical interests on the material (Widdicombe & Woffit 1995). The eclectic version of discourse analysis applied here did justice to the data by combining bottom-up and top-down interpretations, and by recognizing both broader contextual aspects (discourse) and the speakers' stable ways of talking (interpretative repertoires) as well as individual, temporal and sometimes even contradictory stances (subject positions) (cf. Wetherell 1998).

A discursive approach focuses on the use of language and how things are expressed, but the analysis must be based on an analysis of what is said. The analytical process was as follows: First the interviews were transcribed in full and then summarized as condensed and coherent narratives, including significant quotes. In this way, the material became easier to handle. The narratives were analyzed in several steps according to the objective of the analysis. Segments in the narratives were categorized and organized thematically. Then the transcribed interviews were read once more in full with a particular focus of the how, which resulted in the emergence of some new themes. Among the themes, dominant constructions of the teachers' RE teaching in relation to the students and their questions were identified as discourses. Alongside this process, the interpretive repertoires that the teachers used as resources were identified, as well as the subject positions that the teachers referred to. Some of the most distinctive ones are illustrated in this article by means of short excerpts or quotes from the interviews.

Results

The analysis identified three discourses and eight interpretative repertoires.

TABLE 1

Discourse	**Interpretative repertoire**
D1. Teaching for the syllabus	(D1-1) A general knowledge repertoire
	(D1-2) A maturity repertoire
	(D1-3) A time shortage repertoire
D2. Teaching for understanding democratic values	(D2-1) A future citizenship repertoire
	(D2-2) A communication skills repertoire
	(D2-3) A world-in-the-classroom-repertoire
D3. Teaching for engagement	(D3-1) A holistic repertoire
	(D3-2) A collaborative repertoire

Teaching for the syllabus

One discourse is dominant in the interviews, namely Teaching for the syllabus (D1). Within this discourse, the teaching is directed towards having the objectives of the RE syllabus as a starting point and centre. The teachers motivate this in terms of a general knowledge base repertoire (D1-1), a maturity repertoire (D1-2) and a time shortage repertoire (D1-3). An interpretive repertoire that is frequently used is D1-1, a general knowledge repertoire, where learning RE is seen as learning a base for the future and where the teachers put emphasis on getting their students to learn subject content such as facts and concepts. In D1-1 the teachers state that what ultimately governs their teaching is the syllabus objectives, and for some teachers, using textbooks and complying with them becomes a guarantee that no important subject content is left out. For some of the teachers, this way of thinking is not their own choice. Teacher 2 says:

> *T2: Well, the textbook that we use has a ready-made teaching plan that I follow, and it has been decided by our principals that we must follow that plan because when the students leave our classes for the next, they (the new teachers) will know what we have done.*
>
> *I: What, then, do you see as key things the students have learned from RE when they leave you? What do you think is most important?*
>
> *T2: They should have a little knowledge about everything and also a curiosity to learn more, I believe that at some time they will want to deepen their learning and then it is better if they can do that when they are mature enough to do so and perhaps when they are more interested in learning RE.*

As the excerpt above shows, Teacher 2 is not allowed to design her own teaching plans for RE, and she explains this by drawing upon D1-1 and a maturity repertoire (D1-

2). Although the teacher's argumentation seems strong, Teacher 2 shifts her subject position later in the interview and takes a critical stance to the way the school has organized the RE teaching by expressing that she feels sad that she can only give her students the basics and that she "can never reap the fruits of the labour".

A general knowledge repertoire (D1-1) includes arguments about the RE subject having a rather fixed content where the focus of the teaching is on the major world religions, especially on facts about and differences between them. Teacher 5 has been working as an RE teacher for more than 35 years and describes teaching RE today as a challenge:

> *T5: I think it is hard to keep up with, I mean I think it is difficult to get everything in and to know what to focus on, that is hard. I can tell that the students think so, too, because they are like 'Wow, that's a lot'. And it is, it is really a lot, the curriculum is... so if you want to go through it all, it will have to be dealt with very superficially. I can feel the stress of that.*
>
> *I: Do you think it was better before, with the previous curricula?*
>
> *T5: Then there was not so much emphasis on... I mean I think the knowledge demands today are much higher than they used to be.*

Some problems regarding D1 are highlighted here through references to a time-shortage repertoire (D1-3). In this repertoire, the RE syllabus is described as overloaded in relation to the number of hours allocated to the subject. A combination of D1-1 and D1-3 comes up in many interviews, and the teachers position themselves as someone who must direct and control their student's learning so that the students learn "enough" and the "right" things in the short time available (Teachers 2, 5, 6, 7, 8, 10, 11). In many cases, this means that the teacher must eliminate obstacles to learning and make sure that nothing interferes with their current teaching plan. For example, the teachers found it troublesome to have to deal with conflicts between students during lessons, or when the students' questions made discussions go off-topic, since they usually did not have time to let their students waste important lesson time.

Arguments for the general knowledge repertoire (D1-1) as transmission of knowledge for the future operate together with a maturity repertoire (D1-2) and this is quite prevalent in the material (T 1, 2, 5, 6, 8, 10.) This chain of argument goes as follows: The RE syllabus has high knowledge demands for the age group, facts must come first, and understanding cannot come until later, since RE is a subject that requires hard work and abstract thinking which most students are not yet capable of. D1-1 and D1-2 support each other in this respect. When talking about 'later', the teachers mostly seem to refer to future school achievements rather than to future life, as shown by the following answer given by a teacher on the question about what is most important that the students learn:

> *As many facts as possible! Because that is what they need later to get a passing grade, I mean I know that they are the skills that they must show as early as in Year 6, but unfortunately children haven't got the capacity to use those skills when they are in Year 6. They need to know facts first in order to be able to compare, reflect on and analyze things. You can't do that if you don't know the facts. It is clearly what is most important to learn. (T6)*

The above argument from Teacher 6 is based on the fact that her students will be assessed in the RE subject in Year 6, and she therefore believes that her students need a solid knowledge base transferred from her to be able to get a passing grade in the subject later on in school. Although her view is that facts and concepts must come before any reflection or analytical thinking can happen, she also thinks the students lack the capacity for the latter due to their age. This way of reasoning about transmission of facts being the core of the teaching means that time for discussions with the students is given lower priority (cf. Wahlström et al. 2020). As a result of the view of the children as immature and lacking in knowledge expressed here, the students' own questions and concerns risk being downplayed by the teacher, and existential questions among the students may even be considered as non-existent. This is indicated in some of the interviews when the teachers state that their students hardly ever ask any questions other than task-related ones, and that most questions come from conscientious students who want to complete lesson tasks correctly.

Teacher 8 has also worked as a teacher for a very long time and reflects in the following way on the recent changes of the overarching curriculum, as well as the RE-syllabus, which he describes as a shift to a more prescribed subject-based content than before that has affected his approach to his students' own questions:

> *…If one hadn't been so pressured, then maybe they (the students) would... If they had asked questions then maybe you would have allowed for more time, like 'Ok, let's check that on the computer, we will check it together' and then they could have worked that way, but now there is no time for that. Instead, I usually answer the questions instead.*

Another teacher with long experience as an RE teacher says that a problem with teaching in general, and RE in particular, is the students' attitudes to learning:

> *… when they came to me in Year 4, I was quite concerned about their attitude and the fact that they thought learning was boring and that they felt no need for it. They said "I don't care, I don't want to". (T1)*

The students' attitudes to RE are brought up as a problem within the Teaching for the syllabus discourse (D1). Some of the reasons for this, as stated by the teachers, are the students' misconceptions of the RE subject or a negative group climate in the class. For example, Teacher 1, who is cited above, says that she had to work consciously and hard to convince her current students that RE is interesting to learn, and that she often finds it difficult to navigate between teaching according to the syllabus objectives and preserving her students' curiosity for the subject.

A general point of view among the teachers is that most students do not like RE because it has a reputation for being a difficult and heavy subject. These students may ask challenging questions like "Why do we need to learn this?" The teacher must therefore present the subject content in a way that eliminates any problems that may appear. Some teachers describe how they often have to scale down and simplify the subject matters so as not to kill their students' motivation to learn. The trouble with this, according to the teachers, is that the learning becomes superficial and not long lasting. Some teachers describe how they constantly work in various ways to make the subject

less challenging for the students, for example by using films, or by keeping an easy-going attitude in the classroom and continuously bracing and praising their students' progress (T 5, 10, 11).

In summary, the discourse of Teaching for the syllabus (D1) operates through connected arguments from a general knowledge repertoire (D1-1), a maturity repertoire (D1-2) and a time shortage repertoire (D1-3). The interpretative repertoires are tightly intertwined with each other in the teachers' narratives, which makes all of them powerful and makes the discourse seem strong. Most teachers do not consider this way of teaching to be optimal, but seem compelled to act accordingly, as illustrated in some of the quotations above. A view of the students as objects of teaching becomes both a consequence of and an argument for this discourse. The students' own questions and concerns risk being ignored by the teacher within this discourse, or at least seen as being of secondary importance. In some cases, the teachers do not expect any questions at all from the students, especially not existential ones, due to their view of the students as being immature or uninterested. This has implications not only for the students' acquisition of subject knowledge, but also for the overall dynamics between the teacher and the students.

Teaching for understanding democratic values

The discourse of Teaching for understanding democratic values (D2) is also quite prevalent in the interviews. This discourse is constructed and referred to through a future citizenship repertoire (D2-1), a communication skills repertoire (D2-2), and a world-in-the-classroom repertoire (D2-3). Teaching the students to take on different perspectives is central to this discourse, and the teachers believe that their students will learn the subject best through discussions and communication activities that can deepen the transmitted knowledge into understanding. When it comes to the teachers' subject positions within this discourse, they see themselves as being role models, by being neutral and open to different religions and worldviews. The teachers express that fostering democratic citizens is as important as providing the students with RE subject knowledge since this is in line with the overall goal in the curriculum (cf. Henriksson Persson & Irisdotter Aldemyr 2017), and some teachers also say that RE should promote this more than other school subjects (T2, T7). All in all, this is encompassed in a future citizenship repertoire (D2-1). This repertoire includes both individual, cultural and social dimensions and advocates openness to different opinions and beliefs. For example, teacher 7 says the following about the central aims of RE:

> *T2: We must respect the fact that religion is a private matter. What I believe in, what you believe in, has nothing to do with me but we must learn to respect and have tolerance of, acceptance of that. That is really, really important.*
>
> *I: Why is that important?*
>
> *T2: All the conflicts, I often find, not always but often, that conflicts come from people's views of religions and which one is the 'right' one.*

Teacher 2 finds it important to emphasize similarities between religions and worldviews instead of teaching about differences. As a teacher, she must be an unbiased role model, and consequently she never reveals her own faith or religious background to her class. She also thinks that it is important to provide equal time and space to both facts about religions and discussions about them. Discussions become a way for the students to practice democracy as well as a way for them to be able to reach a deeper understanding of the subject that can lead to tolerance towards other people's lives and beliefs.

The teachers who relate to Teaching for understanding democratic values (D2) say that they think their students are naturally curious to learn about other religions and worldviews and that they will ask many questions if only the teacher encourages them to do so. The problem is that the students generally tend to ask few questions in all subjects, and the main reason for this is that they lack communication skills. They need help to develop such skills, for example by learning to listen respectfully to others and practice expressing their views. Some of the teachers use dialogical methods to improve their students' communication skills, for example by frequently organizing discussions for the students in smaller groups, or by using talking sticks or rounds and other collaborative communication models, such as 'think, pair, share'. In this way, a communication skills repertoire (D2-2) permeates the discourse, although the argument chain does not clarify exactly how these skills can lead to a deeper knowledge and understanding of the RE subject and democracy. It seems that it is taken for granted that discussions are a good way to teach RE and a guarantee for democracy. Only a few teachers reflect more extensively on this correlation in the interviews and in relation to the subject positions of themselves as teachers. Teacher 4, for example, describes herself as being oriented towards human rights and fundamental values in her RE teaching. She wants her students to be able to express their opinions, but also to be open to discussions and able to critically examine arguments. As she believes that practicing communication skills is equally important as learning subject-based matter, she often makes time for discussions during her lessons, usually after having presented a subject content to the students. Her subject positions are to be a discussion moderator in the classroom and someone who provides a safe classroom space for the discussions, but also someone who models for the students how they can problematize fixed beliefs or understandings, since communication is key to understanding religion:

> *T4: It is to discuss and problematize, that is what it is, I mean that you challenge yourself, and the point is that the students must learn to challenge themselves and their thinking and their prejudiced opinions and why they are what they are. I think it is quite common when it comes to religion and existential questions that everybody is prejudiced, that's why it is important to problematize things and look at them from different perspectives.*

According to teacher 4, consistently teaching about critical thinking and argumentation can help the students to see through prejudiced opinions and help them form grounded judgements about others, which will prepare them well for being democratic citizens.

Within D2, the teachers also link a communication skills repertoire (D2-2) to maturity (D1-2), but the students are viewed as immature when it comes to communication skills in general, not just in relation to the RE subject. Some students who are perceived as more competent communicators than others also have more confidence to express their thoughts and opinions. It is the task of the teacher to train the students to be able to ask more questions and to start thinking for themselves. In some cases, teachers also link communication skills (D2-2) to a general knowledge base repertoire (D1-1). Teacher 5, for example, says that she thinks that the students need to have a certain amount of confidence to speak, but they also need to learn some basic facts first:" When they don't know or understand something, they haven't got the understanding to be able to ask a question either". What is interesting here is that some teachers see weak communication skills in girls as being due to a lack of confidence or lack of a knowledge base, whereas boys' shortcomings are mainly ascribed to a lack of maturity (T6, T8). Some students are viewed by their teachers as being too young to be able to formulate their own religious beliefs, especially since they are often influenced by their parents or peers. These teachers believe this will happen eventually, with maturity, for example in upper secondary school or in adulthood. What they are teaching now will therefore be a base for their students' individual future development.

The discourse of Teaching for understanding democratic values (D2) takes a broader stance than the discourse of Teaching for the syllabus (D1) in the sense that the teachers make use of a world-in-the-classroom repertoire (D2-3) more than a general knowledge repertoire (D1-1). In the world-in-the-classroom repertoire (D2-3), the teachers state that they prefer to use news and current events as starting points for their teaching and that they see the textbooks as complementary sources to the topics at hand. Ethical questions and dilemmas are also subject specifics which are preferred by the teachers since they are well suited for open discussions and interest their students more than, for example, subject content about world religions. Within D2-3, conflicts in the class can be seen as learning opportunities instead of obstacles, and the students' different identities and backgrounds can also be used as resources. An opinion expressed by many teachers is that a multicultural classroom where different world religions are represented among the students seems to improve both the motivation of the teachers and the students, since the students can show and tell each other how they practice their respective religions. Teacher 2 says:

> *T2: We are lucky to have three Muslims in the class and when we started learning about that (Islam), everybody in class had thousands of questions, so we didn't really have time to use the plan in the textbook. Instead, one of the students brought her prayer mat and her clothing to class, and then she showed us how to turn to Mecca, how to pray, so it was like a practical demonstration of it. And I thought to myself, this is how you should use the resources that you already have in the classroom.*

The teachers only mention the benefits of using students as representatives of a religion and do not reflect on any of the risks that may come with this approach (cf. Carlsson 2020; Osbeck et. al 2017). In some cases, though, a multicultural classroom is seen as being problematic, for example if some of the students are strictly religious or

heavily influenced by their parents' beliefs and attitudes towards other religions, since that can make the students resistant to learning about religions other than their own. In such cases, the teacher must try to loosen their resistance. One way to do so is, for example, to work with ethical dilemmas first, alongside teaching communication skills (T 7).

When it comes to teaching the subject specifics about world religions, the teachers state that it is harder to create interesting discussions with the students. Because the RE subject is to be graded in Year 6, the teachers feel obliged to teach facts and concepts in a certain order and in a rather traditional way that neither the teachers nor the students seem to like. Here, a time shortage repertoire (D1-3) is brought up. However, it is not only time that is a problem but also the students' motivation. Many of the teachers find that it is easier to motivate their students to learn about things that are considered different, weird or dark. For example, topics dealing with death, war or 'exotic' religions can be seen by the students as more interesting than learning about Christianity. One explanation for this is that most secularized students see RE as an outdated school subject. Teacher 4 says:

> *I don't know if it gets… if it becomes too abstract for them when you talk about these old stories and things that no longer exist. I think it is common in Sweden today that many children and their parents do not believe in any religion. I think they see it as superstition and that RE is sort of a fake subject in the sense that it requires you to sit down and talk about stories that are real only in some people's minds, for example about Abraham and what he did.*

Some of the teachers who are not religious themselves find it hard teach to about religions, especially when it comes to contrasting religious views with scientific ones (T 10, 11). Other teachers find secularized students somewhat problematic since secularized views can be an obstacle to learning the subject properly and truly understanding the purpose of religions. These students are described as prejudiced by some teachers, and in need of learning new perspectives. However, the secularized students are not necessarily seen as equally problematic as the students with strong religious beliefs, who need to overcome their restricted and one-sided views.

To summarize, even if the discourse of Teaching for understanding democratic values (D2) seems to stem from a view of communication as being the basis for learning, students' questions and concerns are not automatically at the centre. When it comes to the teachers' subject positions, there is still a strong emphasis on teaching subject content first before practicing discussions, and although the students are seen as resourceful in many ways, the teachers' views of them are split. Since the future citizenship repertoire (D2-1), the communication skills repertoire (D2-2), and the world-in-the-classroom repertoire (D2-3) are in some ways operating together with the repertoires that make up the first discourse, the students are to some extent viewed as objects of teaching, or at least as not fully developed subjects in this discourse, too.

Teaching for engagement

In the third discourse, Teaching for engagement (D3), the teachers express that they aim for a child-centred perspective. Although many of them state that they want to teach RE this way, only two teachers seem to be doing this more consistently, according to the interview accounts. In D3 the students are seen as active in their own learning and the teachers try to use the students' own questions and concerns as starting points for their planning as often as possible. The discourse consists of two interlinked repertoires: a holistic repertoire (D3-1) and a collaborative repertoire (D3-2). A holistic repertoire (D3-1) operates through the arguments that the objectives of the syllabus must be connected to the students' lives and their prior knowledge, and that the teacher must provide learning for both the present and the future, both inside and outside the classroom. The subject positions that the teachers refer to are that the teacher must help their students to make relevant connections to the subject matters and that both content and methods should be adjusted to the students' preconceptions of the subject. This means that the teachers must sometimes make certain deviations from the RE syllabus to be able to do what is best for their students. D3-1 also implies that the students need help to understand contexts. Teacher 9 says:

> *I believe so partly because I think many children know very little about many things today because they get so much information all the time, and they may know certain bits and pieces about things, or they hear only snippets about what is happening in the world. That is why it is important to help them to sort things out.*

If a holistic perspective is not provided, the students cannot understand the subject fully or make the knowledge relatable to themselves. Teacher 3 sees her teaching as providing a base that the students must explore themselves: "..it is like… I provide a range (of views and religions), a smorgasbord of things that you don't have to agree on or choose among, but which you must know about". The teacher helps the students by providing time for exploration, by adjusting and varying methods, and by guiding the students to a deeper knowledge or understanding according to their individual needs. The teachers also express the standpoint that learning is an explorative effort that involves collaboration between the students and their teacher. This collaborative repertoire (D3-2) operates through a relational view of pedagogy where the teachers see it as important to know their students well. This means that the teacher should spend time with their students also between lessons and show a genuine interest in them:

> *... It is not only what happens during lessons, but also small talk before or after lessons and in the school dining hall that matters, because that way you can find out what they are thinking about, what their interests are, what is important to them and what they are talking about right now. (T9)*

Some teachers express frustration that they can never really know what questions their students are thinking about, especially not existential questions, since these are considered personal questions. The only way to get to know the students' questions is to have a close and open relationship with the students, which is not always easy because of a lack of time spent together, a large student group, or the age and gender differences

between the teacher and the individual students (T 5, 6, 8). Some teachers use social media to keep track of their students' interests and concerns (T2), and some consciously develop activities or tools that can capture the students' questions, for example by using post-it-tickets and a question box where the students can post their questions anonymously (T3).

The teachers who advocate D3-2 also believe that the students can learn from each other, both through shared life experiences and through their differences, for example when it comes to learning abilities. The most important thing is that they are given time to explore questions that interest them. Thus, the teachers in D3 say it is essential that the teaching should be planned together with the students, but also that the aims of the subject are seen as something bigger than learning with a view to meeting the curriculum objectives that are to be assessed. Teachers 9, 10 and 11, for example, state that a fruitful approach is to let the students produce something that is useful to others, an audience outside the classroom, like school magazines or films, since this makes learning more fun and creative and inspires the students to want to learn more and understand the subject more deeply. What is problematic with planning together with the students and with learning activities that extend beyond the classroom is of course the limited time available and the dilemmas that may arise when the teachers have to mark the students' performances. Although the teachers want to take their students' questions as a starting point, in practice they must take into account the objectives in the syllabus. As a result, the students may have an influence on the *how* in the planning of the teaching, but not so much on the *what.*

Another problem that may arise in connection with time shortage (D1-3) and subject objectives is that the teacher often must teach at a level which allows all students to progress. Even if the D3 provides better conditions for successful individualized teaching than the other discourses, this is a problem that seems to trouble nearly all the teachers. Other dilemmas that may arise within D3 are what types of questions and whose questions are attended to by the teachers. A student might want to ask about things that may be considered sensitive. For example, some teachers say that they do not want too many discussions about death, as they fear this topic might trigger negative emotions in the students or plant negative thoughts in their heads that were not there before (T 4, 10). Questions or topics that involve suicide or alcoholism are other examples that the teachers see as being of a more private character, and which they believe they must avoid or at least try to moderate, mostly out of consideration for students who may have experienced such things (cf. Risenfors 2012). As for whose questions are attended to within D3, it is evident that it is usually those posed by a group of able and keen students. Since these students tend to be middle class, there is a risk that only certain types of questions will be explored. There is also a risk that some questions or topics will be dealt with more thoroughly in some classes but not in others, depending on the students' particular interests, their abilities, or their social backgrounds. This becomes evident in the interviews with the teachers who teach RE in more than one class and who can thus compare how these factors affect their teaching (T2, T6).

In conclusion, the view of the child in Teaching for engagement (D3) is quite different from that found in the other discourses. Here, all students are seen as competent and naturally curious, and thus they all have questions that the teacher should listen to and attend to. The students are also expected to have existential questions they may want to discuss with others if the teacher allows them to and puts some effort into working on their relationship with the students. Within D3, if a child is lacking in understanding abstract concepts in RE, it is not the child's fault. It is the base of the teaching that needs to be changed. Just as in the other two discourses, time management (D1-3) is problematic within this discourse since the subject objectives of RE do not really allow the teachers to be flexible this way in relation to the students' inquiries. Maturity (D1-2) only becomes an issue when it comes to certain questions that are considered unsuitable for the age group in question.

Concluding discussion

The benefit of the present analysis is that it yields valuable understanding of how the current curriculum is dealt with in the teachers' talk, and what interpretative repertoires and subject positions the teachers have at their disposal in the context of teaching RE to 11 to 12-year-old students. The three discourses identified in the analysis are viewed here as the social structures that the teachers are embedded in which express the beliefs, expectations, and dominant practices the teachers sustain and provide when talking about their current RE teaching (cf. Foucault 1972). When applying the two models of education presented by Wardekker and Miedema (2006) to the discourses, it becomes evident that they are strongly influenced by a transmission model, although many teachers also say they would prefer a transformative model.

The dominant discourse in the analysis, Teaching for the syllabus (D1), is to a large degree based on a transmission view and a view of knowledge as representation (Wardekker & Miedema 2006). Although many teachers did not believe that this was the best way to teach RE, they constructed this discourse as being the most pragmatic way for them to teach in the circumstances. The strong qualification approach seemed to limit the teachers' work (cf. Sporre 2019). Experienced teachers also indicated that they taught RE differently prior to the current curriculum when the syllabus and the knowledge requirements were different. The finding that the teachers feel challenged by, and are critical of, the changes in the current curriculum is in line with previous studies (Wahlström 2020). D1 constructed a view of the students as objects of teaching. The students were mostly expected to ask task-related questions, or challenging ones when unmotivated. Existential questions were thus considered rare, or even not expected. Their view of the curriculum as being fixed, overloaded and with knowledge requirements that are too high for the age group also made the teachers believe that they had to teach their students for the future, especially future school performance, and that the students' own understanding of the subject and their own questions related to existential concerns could come later.

In the second discourse, Teaching for understanding democratic values (D2), fostering democratic citizens was equally important as providing subject knowledge,

and the teachers viewed RE as the subject that above all should promote democracy (cf. Henriksson Persson & Irisdotter Aldemyr 2017; Jonsson & Månsson 2021). Some teachers regarded teaching ethics as more important than teaching facts about religions and worldviews, and some teachers fostered critical thinking. This discourse is in line with a transformative view in the sense that it encompasses the importance of practicing skills (Wardekker & Miedema 2006). But even though D2 promotes a form of teaching that can open up for more questions from the students themselves, a transmission model still underlies the discourse, since transmission of knowledge, skills and values is seen as a basis for future transformation, participation and personal development, rather than present-life learning (Wardekker & Miedema 2006).

The third discourse, Teaching for engagement (D3), was constructed by most teachers in terms of how they would like to teach. Some arguments for D3 were that the students need help to acquire a wider picture in relation to their own lives and that they can learn from each other. The students were seen as active, competent and curious children with many questions, including existential ones. This discourse is in line with Wardekker & Miedemas transformative model of student participation, contextualized learning and connection to the everyday life of the students.

Systemic constraints for a transformative pedagogy?

Although the discourse analysis identifies three different discourses that may result in very different teaching and learning processes, the dominance of D1 seems to create limits as to how far away from it the teachers are able to venture. A teaching that is strongly framed by a subject and fact-oriented content restricts the teachers' autonomy and leeway and steers the teaching towards an almost canonical-like version of the subject, which none of the teachers seems to support (cf. Adolfsson 2018). However, even teaching practices based on dialogical or explorative methods are still largely dominated by a facts-first attitude, according to the interview accounts. This is perhaps most evident in D2, where the teachers express a common opinion that teachers must prioritize subject content that is to be assessed over the wider democratic assignment in the curriculum. The time shortage problems might be what is directing the teaching this way, since that is what ultimately constrains the possibilities to let the student's own experiences, questions and concerns be more central. Another factor is the view of the students. Although D2 and D3 construct the students as more active and resourceful, some students are not constructed as equally resourceful as others or may be seen as lacking in relation to the syllabus requirements. A risk is that questions from these students might go unnoticed by the teacher.

Altogether, the discourse analysis indicates that there are systemic constraints for a real transformative pedagogical approach. The teachers' discretion is limited by the current syllabus which leaves little space for teacher agency (Wahlström 2020) and little room for dialogue (Sporre 2019), and the knowledge requirements and assessment practices preclude certain methods and complicates subject-integration (Sundberg 2018; Olovsson 2021). Hence, the opportunity to devote time to the students' interests and provide space for children's perspectives is reduced (cf. Löfgren & Löfgren 2015).

What is evident from all the interviews is that the teachers care a great deal about their students and wish they could teach them differently, but that they somehow have to handle the pressure they feel from outside. The discourse analysis illuminates that the systemic constraints do not only have practical implications that limit the teachers' subject positions, they also affect the dynamics between the teacher and the students in a quite traditional, asymmetrical direction. What could be a joint enterprise in the RE subject based on exploration of the students' questions and concerns using a transformative pedagogy, instead becomes a rather stressful and difficult task for both teachers and students.

Given the results of the analysis, didactical approaches that may bridge the gap between the child and the RE syllabus should be explored. Other studies that could provide valuable insights might include an in-dept investigation of how the teachers navigate between the discourses in the classroom, and in relation to the different demands of students, colleagues, school leaders and parents, or in relation to the quality management of the school. A study of teacher training, and whether it prepares trainee teachers for working with students' existential questions along a more transformative pedagogy, would also be fruitful.

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