

# EDUCATION BETWEEN FORMATION AND KNOWLEDGE – A DISCUSSION BASED ON RECENT ENGLISH AND NORDIC RESEARCH IN RELIGIOUS EDUCATION

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## SAMMENFATNING

Artikkelen tar utgangspunkt i spenningen mellom kunnskap (knowledge) og danning (formation) og utvikler dette som religionsdidaktisk problematikk ved hjelp av impulser fra engelsk religionsdidaktikk som tale rom å lære om og å lære av religion i skolen. Michael Grimmitt, Andrew Wright og Robert Jackson diskuteres i forhold til hverandre og det påpekes hvordan de alle fører den religionsdidaktiske diskusjon i nær kontakt med bredere tankestrømmer i pedagogisk og filosofisk tenkning. Denne diskusjon føres videre inn i nordisk religionsdidaktisk debatt via Bråtens komparative studie og ved hjelp av Berndt Gustavssons danningsteoretiske perspektiver. Her vektlegges samspillet mellom ulike dimensjoner i danningen og det demonstreres hvordan dette kan bidra til å fange inn nyere forskningsbidrag i religionsdidaktikken. Konklusjonen er at fagdidaktisk debatt og forskning tjener på å bli sett i lys av mer allmenpedagogiske perspektiver og at den kan bidra til utdyping av den allmenpedagogiske debatt om skolens innhold og mål.

*Nøkkelord: religious education, religionsdidaktik, danning, kunnskap*

## INTRODUCTION

In public discourse about educational issues, people sometimes position themselves by referring to words like *formation* and *knowledge*. The first has both denotations and connotations towards *Bildung*, *bildning*, in English sometimes called 'general education', and refers to the broad aims of education, seeing this as a transformative process, contributing to a sense of citizenship, personal character and familiarity with the knowledge tradition of human societies. Those who instead prefer to position themselves by referring positively to 'knowledge' rather than 'formation' may see education as a somewhat more limited project where emphasis is the transmission of cognitive content and skills, making students acquainted with the accumulated stock of knowledge associated with the different scientific disciplines. With such constellations, the 'formation' and the 'knowledge' positions

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appear as complimentary; you may invoke the one in order to criticise the other, or you will be placed according to the rhetoric you employ. In a complimentary pair of binary oppositions, there is a tendency to use the extreme versions of the opposing positions as reference points for critique. So, formation-oriented, transformative education may be pictured as totalitarian, while a knowledge and transmission-oriented education can be seen as instrumental and essentialist.

Even if the knowledge-formation discourse in itself is almost a stereotype, it is detectable also in academic debate, and more particularly within religious education. Here, the 'formation' perspective accepts the possibility that religious education may influence students existentially, while the 'knowledge' perspective underlines the illegitimacy of such influence and reinforces the need for an objective and descriptive perspective on religious education<sup>[1]</sup>. In this way stereotypes are strengthened and rather than showing the large field of partly overlapping positions, there is sometimes a lack of will to negotiate disagreements in a more nuanced way or to accept the possibility of such oppositions to be part of a dialectic that all education has to deal with or possibly transcend. In the spirit of transcending rather than rejecting the oppositions, this article discusses recent religious education research in the light of 'formation' versus 'knowledge', by using the two terms heuristically and by arguing that theories of general education and of religious education can fruitfully influence each other.

## FORMATION AND KNOWLEDGE: LEARNING ABOUT AND LEARNING FROM RELIGION

Researchers from countries with 'confessional' and 'non-confessional' religious education largely constitute one research community and many of the research issues are similar, in particular the challenges and opportunities of diversity. The practice of teaching and learning about religion and world-views regularly raises discussions about the pedagogy of religious education (often termed 'didactics' in Nordic countries), and as part of this, concepts with a family resemblance with 'formation' and 'knowledge' are on the agenda. One example is a much used expression within religious education literature, namely Grimmitt's distinction between learning *about* and learning *from* religion (Grimmitt, 1987, 2000), which also has even entered into the national religious education curriculum.<sup>[2]</sup>

Grimmitt's understanding of this was originally based in his ambition to develop a 'theory of religious education's contribution to human development' (Grimmitt, 1987, p. 13). In other words, his starting point is educational theory, not theology or religious studies, and the underpinning is partly philosophy of knowledge and partly a philosophically based anthropology. Grimmitt argues that religion has a distinct contribution to make in education, and that this 'educational use of religion' (Grimmitt, 1987, p. 46) shall contribute to humanisation, to the development of children and young people. Therefore, religious education should both help students to learn about and learn from religion:

When I speak of pupils learning about religion I am referring to what the pupils learn about the beliefs, teachings and practices of the great religious traditions of the world. (...) When I speak of pupils learning from religions I am referring to what pupils learn from their studies in religion about themselves – about discerning ultimate questions and 'signals of transcendence' in their own experience and considering how they might respond to them (Grimmitt, 1987, pp. 225-226).

In his later writings, Michael Grimmitt has used this differentiation to discuss pedagogical models (Grimmitt, 2000, p. 17f, 34f). He argues that a pedagogy of religious education aims at promoting a 'particular kind (or several kinds) of interaction between the pupils and the religious content which they are studying.' (p. 17). 'These interactions may be grouped into two broad categories: those which contribute to pupils *learning about religion* and those which contribute mainly to pupils *learning from religion*.' (pp. 17-18). The first category includes 'instructional, conceptual, empathetic interactions' and the second 'reflective, interpretive, critical and evaluative interactions'. According to Grimmitt, pedagogical models or approaches in the different subject areas of education employ pedagogical principles, procedures and strategies in order to articulate the relationship between students and content matter, and ideally this 'use' should be as conscious as possible. He presents and comments on eight different pedagogies of religious education and finds that all of them in one way or another address the issues of learning about and learning from religion.

The proponents of all eight approaches to religious, with the exception of Andrew Wright seem to address the double perspective positively, seeing it as a legitimate educational concern. Wright's background for being critical towards the 'learning from' perspective, is that he sees this as giving in to 'the mind-set of modern romanticism' with a strong emphasis on subjective experience, that the cultivation of spiritual experience 'fails to empower children to think critically about religion' and 'bypasses questions of ultimate truth' (Wright, 2004, pp. 186-190).

Wright wants religious education research and practice to reflect on its philosophical foundations in order to become 'literate' and he goes through theories of philosophy, theology and education in order to explain his 'critical religious education. In some of his writing one may get the impression that he is presenting learning about and learning from as a dichotomy, a question of choosing which side you are on (Filipsone, 2011). More recently Wright has made clear that he is now supporting a combination of the two, also in writing together with Elina Hella (later Elina Wright) (Wright, 2007, p. 259; Hella & Wright, 2009, p. 62).

Hella and Wright argue that the relationship between the two is in need of clarification that since it should not be based on the pursuit of tolerance, not on the development of spiritual experience and not on students' freedom to construct individual visions of reality. Instead the unity of learning about and learning from 'lies specifically in the *pursuit of truth and truthfulness*' (Hella & Wright, 2009, p. 58). Based in critical realism with the principles of ontological realism, epistemological relativism and judgemental rationality, they recommend phenomenography and Variation Theory of Learning as pedagogical strategies for a liberal and critical religious education that has this aim of truth and truthfulness (Wright & Wright, 2012). Even from their rather short presentation it seems that the use of these pedagogical theories points in the direction of a somewhat more complex and context sensitive representation of learning about and from religion than suggested in Wright's earlier writings.<sup>(3)</sup>

Also Robert Jackson suggests a critical approach to religion and education, even if does not support Wright's specific view of critical realism and also disagrees on other points (Jackson, 2008; Wright, 2008). While generally supporting Grimmitt's perspective on learning from and learning about (although seeing the two as very closely related hermeneutically), Jackson qualifies his own position by underlining that he has 'not been considering 'religion' as an abstraction nor 'religions' as straightforwardly definable belief systems' (Jackson, 1997, p. 132). He sees different religions and cultures in Britain as more internally diverse than Grimmitt and he places less emphasis on the ambition that all should reach 'the same 'educational' goal – that is, they should become fully autonomous individuals' (p. 132). Jackson also presents his approach as being less structured in terms of 'formulating the effects of 'learning from' the material studied', seeing this as more 'spontaneous' (p. 132). It is interesting that Grimmitt does not argue with Jackson on this point but rather emphasises the achievements of the interpretive approach in enriching the concept of 'learning about' through their encouragement to engage pupils in hermeneutical activity (Grimmitt, 2000, p. 39).

The core concepts of the interpretive approach can therefore be understood as conceptual alternatives to the learning about/learning from duality, or rather as a way of qualifying it. Jackson does not emphasise the pursuit of truth and on the truth claims of distinct traditions, but argues strongly for the *representation* of diversity by differentiating between levels of 'tradition', 'group' and 'individual' within religions. Further, the *interpretive* perspective involves, among other things helping to make the learners' presuppositions about the learning content visible, by comparing and contrasting these presuppositions with each other, with research based text-books, with the perspectives of insiders and outsiders, and with historically transmitted presuppositions (Jackson, 2004, pp. 88-94). By doing this, the interpretive approach includes a certain degree of personal involvement, often associated with 'learning from', in the representation of religion, which otherwise could be seen mainly as belonging to the 'learning about'. The third core concept, *reflexivity*, emphasises 'various aspects of the relationship between the experience of students and the experience of those whose way of life they are attempting to

interpret' (Jackson, 2007, p. 82). See also Robert Jackson (2011, p. 192). This includes critical engagement with the content including discussing questions of truth, tolerance, respect etc. (eg. Jackson 2009a), evaluating one's own worldview in light of the content studied (edification) and reviewing of the methods of study. By including edification in the wider category of 'reflexivity' the perspective of 'learning from religion' is integrated in a larger whole, and in a way borrows from what is often associated with 'learning about':

'Edification does not imply the *adoption* of the beliefs of followers of a religion being studied, but does recognise similarities and differences between all humans and of the relationship between the identity of each person and the manifestation of differences...' (Jackson, 2011, p. 193).

Jackson involves the learner as an actor in the process of 'learning about religion' by making the process a more self-reflexive and transformative, while he opens up the process of 'learning from religion' towards interaction and collective reflection without excluding the personal dimension. This is partly done by drawing on epistemological perspectives, partly by using research-based perspectives coming from ethnography, social sciences, educational theory and religious studies and partly by integrating this with a the reappraisal of religious education research the past and present.

Even if Grimmitt, Wright and Jackson present different ways of managing the perspectives of learning about and learning from religion, they all affirm a broad trend in English religious education, which is to see the relationship between 'learning about' and 'learning from' as part of the educational enterprise itself and not something particular to religious education. In this way religious education is liberated from a stereotyped opposition between descriptive and normative perspectives. By using the relationship between 'learning about' and 'learning from', all these three researchers contribute to a discussion about religious education 'for all'. They also seem to share the idea that both theology and religious studies have something to contribute in religious education research, in addition to other disciplines like philosophy and social sciences.<sup>(4)</sup> There is not a general dismissal of theology for being too formation-oriented or of religious studies for being too knowledge-oriented even if the relationship can be full of tension (Cush, 1999, 2009)

In spite of the general agreement in English religious education research that 'formation' and 'knowledge' are not something you can choose between, the knowledge/formation distinction can be used to bring forth both similarities and differences between religious education research positions, in this case between Grimmitt, Wright and Jackson. One may sum up the positions by suggesting that they all see 'knowledge' as the content part of education and 'formation' as the functional part. As such they are both indispensable, but so is the tension between them. All three relate to a framework of general education theory. In dialogue with this, they develop their distinct pedagogies of religious education (or 'subject area didactics' / fagdidaktikk / religionsdidaktikk). Such distinct 'approaches' have been less pronounced in Nordic religious education research to which I now turn.

## COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVES

Oddrun M H Bråten has done a comparative study of religious education in England and Norway based on both empirical and literature/document data. She argues that while most researchers and teachers in England use a combination of 'learning about' and 'learning from', Norwegian religious education seems to have moved somewhat in the direction of France, where learning *from* religion according to Bråten is 'entirely absent' (Bråten, 2009, p. 168). She sees this development as a result of what she terms 'supranational forces' at work, like the European Human Rights Court in Strasbourg, but this is interacting with the 'national imaginary', which among other things includes 'plurality as a more integrated feature of the English national imaginary than the Norwegian' (Bråten, 2009, p. 171). She arrives at her results about England and Norway by using a sophisticated and fruitful analytical framework that takes into account several levels of comparison and draws on several theoretical sources (including Goodlad). She presents four interrelated levels of curriculum with data to support them:

A: the societal level (Data: Themes within academic debates in Norway and England)

B: the institutional level (Data: Recent legal and political developments in Norway and England)

C: the instructional level (Data: Case studies from Norway and England)

D: the experiential level (Data: Pupils perspectives in Norway and England)

In order to capture the comparative dimension, these four levels of curriculum investigated in the two countries are seen in the light of how nations respond to internationally shared challenges. These challenges are differentiated by pointing to three different levels;

1: Supranational (example: secularisation, pluralisation and globalisation)

2: National (example: responses to secularisation, pluralisation and globalisation)

3: Subnational (example: differences in how regional or local practices exist nationally)

This complex dynamic is beautifully illustrated in the following figure, which is employed in Bråten's analysis.

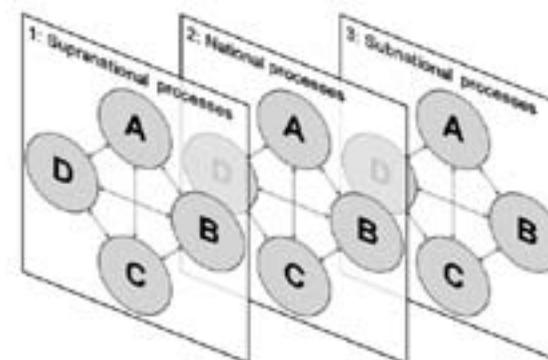


Figure 1: A model for comparative analysis of religious education (Bråten 2009:305)

Bråten's main findings in terms of explaining differences between England and Norway are that the scholarly traditions within religious education proved to be quite different and that the school systems were so different that this also contributed to significant differences in RE. In fact, with such different school systems, it is particularly interesting that both countries justify their multi-faith religious education in the same way; as a response to increasing plurality in society.

Applying the learning about and learning from religion at instructional and experiential levels, Bråten found in her case studies that this differentiation was more clearly understood and practised among the English teachers and students than seemed to be the situation in Norway. She also points towards interesting differences in the academic debates on religious education as part of the societal level of curriculum, and mainly refers this to certain national processes. In England religious studies as an academic discipline has developed in close relationship with religious education for several decades, while theology has been much more dominating in Norway (Bråten, 2009, pp. 114-115).

Bråten shows how complex this field is, and that pedagogical approaches and legal arrangements interact in different ways with local, national and international processes in addition to the different curricular levels and that only a careful unpacking of these relationships will give a sufficient understanding of the situation in a given country in order to argue normatively. Bråten gives an example of such reasoning in her comments on Wanda Alberts<sup>(5)</sup> research, which recommends a 'study of religions approach' as the general pedagogy of religious education (Alberts, 2006, 2007):

The tradition for RE research in England can be described as an educational/pedagogical tradition where a range of distinct *pedagogies* are suggested, some of which are more theologically based while others are more clearly based in a religious studies or social science tradition (see chapter 3). This is why, in my view, making a very clear distinction between theological and study-of-religions approaches, as Alberts (2006, p. 360) suggests, would be a step back in the English context. In the German, and perhaps also Norwegian context, this might still be useful (Bråten, 2009, p. 323-324).

The mere distinction between a theological and a religious studies approach does not solve the challenges of religion in education. One important reason for this is that these are possible to identify as academic disciplines, but hardly as school based or school related practices. When the issue at stake is religion in education there needs to be a conversation between these subject area disciplines as well as with educational theory and practice. Even if Nordic countries are different in terms of legal framework of religious education, researchers in all of them could benefit from an open and unbiased discussion about how to address the internationally relevant questions in the field of religion and education that we are confronted with. Oddrun Bråten has given both insights in how to do it and challenges to be met by addressing comparative issues in religious education and by applying insights from general education related to the contextualisation of subject area pedagogies.

Inspired by this, I want to suggest the use of a well-known tension from the field of education, namely between content-oriented and child-oriented approaches in order to construct a map or typology of religious education pedagogies. This is relevant for the purpose of the present discussion since we can assume that content-oriented approaches are more knowledge-oriented in their aims ('learning about') and that child-centred approaches are more preoccupied with formation (learning from'). By using this mapping devise we may get the following picture.

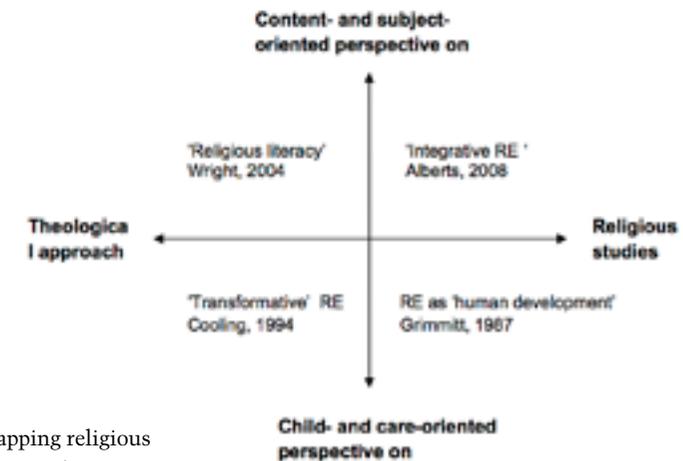


Figure 2: Mapping religious education approaches

It is not possible to discuss the details of this here, including the location of examples from religious education theory. They are placed in this system of coordinates in order to exemplify how such mapping can be done. By doing this the dialectic between formation and knowledge is expanded towards a richer and more complex picture. This is done by drawing on educational theory, but in conversation with the distinctive character of subject area didactics. A similar expansion can be done by looking more closely into the *Bildung* aspects of religious education.

## BILDUNG AND RELIGIOUS EDUCATION

In his discussion of the meaning of general education (*Bildung*), Berndt Gustavsson presents this as a complex and dialectical unity of several elements (Gustavsson, 1996). Drawing on other scholars, he is working with a combination of three basic dimensions:

- classical education (tradition),
- citizenship education (society)
- personal development (identity/individual)

From Gustavsson's perspective these dimensions are intersected by certain questions about relational 'pairs':

- between the known and the unknown,
- between theory and practice
- between difference and integration.

In the following I will restrict myself to the three dimensions of education. I see Gustavsson's concept of 'classical education' as being parallel to what I have earlier referred to as 'knowledge' orientation and as 'learning about' in the field of religious education. In other words, Gustavsson includes the knowledge dimension in the 'Bildung', not seeing this as contrasting perspectives. This is in itself worth a discussion, but for my present purpose I will focus on the two other dimensions; citizenship education and personal development. These two can and should be seen as different aspects of 'formation' in a religious education context. Historically speaking, the 'formation' element in education can be seen as oscillating between an emphasis on a collective and an individual pole. In the case of social formation or citizenship education, political and societal aspects of Bildung are of course central, and educational aims drawing on this has become more and more relevant to religious education research in recent years, sometimes to the extent of dominating the other two dimensions of education (knowledge/tradition and individual development). Debate on religious education policies, practice and research today often focus on issues of multiculturalism, intercultural education and social cohesion, and this is also reflected in research (Jackson, 2009b Jackson, Miedema, Weisse & Willaime, 2007; Skeie, 2006, 2009; Ziebertz, 2003).

For religious education research it is important to draw this development into its own theoretical reflection process in dialogue with general education theory. In order to stimulate this, I will argue that both the social and the individual dimension of religious education can be formulated as dimensions of 'formation'. I continue to argue that 'formation' and 'knowledge' are interrelated in a way that 'formation' is not considered only as different from 'knowledge', but also as dependent on it. In order to visualise the above I have made the following illustration.

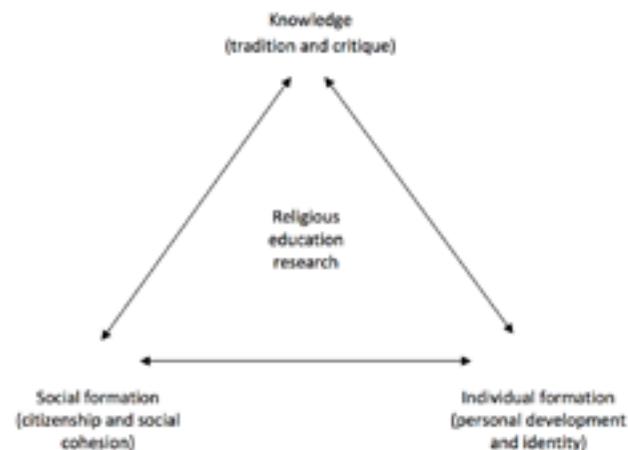


Figure 3: Dimensions of Bildung in religious education

How this interrelationship can and should be understood, is a longer debate, but I believe that religious education research has a role to play in this discussion. The reason for finding Gustavsson's contribution particularly relevant for religious education research is that it includes several dimensions in the concept of education, and keeps them in a relationship with each other. Also, by loosening up the dyad of 'knowledge' and 'formation', replacing this with a triad, opens possibilities for further reflection. In the following I will draw particularly on the social dimension in order to show that in discussing education for citizenship and social cohesion, the opposing categories 'formation' and 'knowledge' are insufficient. This resonates well with Gustavsson's inclusion of an ethical perspective in the educational thinking. Education should be seen as one of several efforts to make a good life accessible for all people in society. The fact that ideas about 'social formation' also may be exploited for oppressive purposes does not make citizenship and social cohesion obsolete, no more than the constant critique and revision of what 'scientific knowledge' is makes science or knowledge obsolete. Similarly, the questions of personal development and identity should not be stored away as a residual element of education or as a possible bi-product, but should be researched and discussed as vital part of the equation. In order to substantiate this I will discuss how some examples of Nordic religious education research have dealt with issues of social and personal formation.

## KNOWLEDGE AND SOCIAL FORMATION

Mette Buchardt has done descriptive empirical investigation of multicultural classrooms and she explicitly refuses to present views on how teaching about religion should be (Buchardt, 2008). Her PhD thesis is categorised as 'sociology of education', but this can be challenged since it is placed within the academic framework of religious education research and draws on this for relevance. Buchardt argues that there is an increasing focus on pupils' identity and on multicultural issues in Danish educational policies, and she justifies her study by claiming that it looks into these issues at the level of classroom micro-politics. According to her, there is a mismatch between high political focus and interest in the religious education school subject on the one hand and the lack of research based interest in the actual teaching and learning going on in classrooms.

In her contribution to such research, Buchardt is aiming to describe how knowledge about religion and politics is 'coming to be' in the RE-classroom. The research material is recordings from the classroom interactions in religious education as well as documentation of how people in the classroom take turns in acting and speaking and how they are placed and move in the room. She also has conducted interviews with teachers and students. By using her analytical tools rooted in a theoretical framework particularly based on Michel Foucault and Basil Bernstein, and applying discourse analysis, Buchardt builds up a case for certain findings. She refers to identity as 'a spatial and differentiated production of subjects and subjectivities – as differentiated locations in the room. This production is to a large extent being done 'from below' intimately connected with bodies' (Buchardt,

2008, p. 348, *my translation*). This is what Buchardt calls the micro-politics of the classroom and here she finds 'religion' and 'culture' as elements of identity production. 'Religion' and 'culture' are not seen mainly as a given stock of educational knowledge, but a 'productive and potent part of social classification'. Therefore the category 'Muslim' as it appears in the classroom, is not only to be understood as related to social classification and redistribution of knowledge, but it is in itself part of a process of social classification and redistribution going on in the classroom (Buchardt, 2008, p. 349). In other words, the understanding of what it means to be a Muslim is at the same time school subject content ('knowledge') and also a way of shaping the understanding of Muslims present as well as those in the local context ('formation'). As part of this, there is even one 'legitimate' and another 'illegitimate' Muslimness being played out in the classroom. This is possible through the power that is built into communication and utterances, in particular through the powerful valuation done by the teacher. Classroom conversation should therefore not be seen as a 'free' conversation about e.g. Christianity and Islam, but analysed as a discourse where some utterances are legitimate and others not. Knowledge about religion is likened to power relations and ways of self-definition and these are not possible to decouple according to Buchardt.

On the one hand Buchardt's analysis is both convincing and impressive; but there is hardly any interpretation of motives, only a discussion of communicative practices with background information to support the analysis. This means that both teachers and students seem to be strongly determined by forces of power in the multicultural society. The lack of discussion about alternative teaching methods and about the interpretation of pupils' actions and utterances is a consequence of the theory and method used, and the results highlight power and social relations as the vital elements in the production of knowledge in the classroom. All the small things said and acted out in the classroom together form the subject area knowledge and contributes to the shaping of people's self-understanding. This may seem one-sided, but is particularly relevant in times when 'knowledge' in education sometimes seems to be pictured as a result from an international standardised test. This research shows how knowledge in religious education is also a result of micro-politics. We may link this up to the main theme by summarising; for Buchardt knowledge is built on micro-politics and formation is strongly power laden and because of this partly out of control of the classroom actors.

A political perspective is also prominent in another recent thesis by Lars Laird Iversen, drawing on empirical research in Norway<sup>(6)</sup>. Iversen is not from the outset a religious educator, like Mette Buchardt, but sees himself as a sociologist of religion, investigating Norwegian multicultural classrooms, and his main interest is the relationship between religion and national identity (Iversen, 2012). Also he discusses the production of knowledge in religious education, but combines the analysis of curricula with empirical classroom studies and focuses more on the social dimension of identity than on subject area knowledge. While Buchardt hardly discusses the literature on multicultural society or classrooms, Iversen relates his findings and analysis to the debate about multiculturalism in Western

Europe. As a result of this discussion, he comes up with the concept of 'viscosity'. The identity claims of groups in society are seen as being different in their degree of permanence, coherence and openness to change, they are fluid. Iversen argues that this is related to a similar variation on the level of social practices. Sometimes these practices tend to be stable and solid, at other times they are less so, and Iversen shows how this can be analysed fruitfully in order to understand better the actors and actions in the classroom. On the level of curriculum, Iversen's analysis shows that the focus on identity has changed. By studying changes in the meaning of 'values' in curriculum texts between 1974 and the present he shows that in the beginning the term 'values' was related more or less exclusively to ethics, while in the 1990s the term became much more connected to notions of identity. Along the same lines, also religion in the latter period is seen by the curriculum authors as a resource for both individuals and society at large, providing stability in terms of both individual identity and social cohesion. This result is achieved not by appealing to religion as a spiritual force in confessional terms, but more by using it as a cultural framework on a metaphorical level.

Iversen has combined curriculum analysis with empirical classroom research. Here his findings does not show that the same ambition to produce stable individual and social identities found in the curriculum. Even if religious identities are referred to and used in self-description or to characterise others, the same identities are also negotiated, challenged etcetera, what Iversen calls being 'worked on'. In this way identities appear to be fluid and open to change or objects of reinterpretation. Identity is something worked on through the opportunity school gives to engage with differences and diversity, rather than offering stability and a common framework of thought or 'sameness'. Sometimes this is facilitated by the actions of the teacher, usually by attempts to manage disagreement, not trying to create uniformity. In Iversen's terminology, the classrooms sometimes appeared to be 'communities of disagreement', sometimes 'communities of shared action', sometimes 'communities of shared decision making' and sometimes 'communities of shared knowledge' (Iversen, 2012). Iversen's research shows that social and individual (trans-) formation is taking place in the classroom, and that this is not possible to separate from the teaching and learning of subject knowledge even if it is often going on parallel to the formal teaching and learning. Individuals make use of the resources they find to be of interest, which points towards the individual dimension of formation.

## KNOWLEDGE AND INDIVIDUAL FORMATION

In 2008, before the economic crisis hit Iceland, Gunnar Gunnarsson presented his research on the thoughts and ideas of young people in his country (Gunnarsson, 2008). In the light of this, it is striking how optimistic and secure the young people seemed to be at the time. Gunnarsson's research focuses on the motivations, thoughts and opinions of young people and through his analysis we come close to the individual. The insights most relevant to religious education are therefore

not related directly to the class-room situation, but more indirectly by presenting background knowledge about the learners.

While there are several examples of investigations into the life-interpretation of children and young people in other Nordic countries, both recently and from earlier years, one of the most prominent being Sven G Hartman, Gunnarsson breaks new ground by including Icelandic youth into this picture. He highlights the importance of contextual perspectives, and how Icelandic youth is also gradually becoming more influenced by socio-cultural plurality. Gunnarsson also discusses gender, a perspective which is generally lacking in Nordic religious education research. Perhaps better developed gender perspectives can add something significant to our insight into the social and individual dimensions of formation, and also to the construction of subject area knowledge in the classroom? The lack of gender perspectives is noticeable also outside Scandinavia (O'Dell, 2009, 2012)

Gunnarsson's empirical studies show that Icelandic youth are preoccupied with trust and security in their lives. These values are closely tied to their family life and the situation in the family as well as their relationship with peers. More in the periphery, social and cultural surroundings are also coming into the view. Summing up his findings, Gunnarsson sees one line – representing tension between plurality and homogeneity – being crossed with another line stretching from security to insecurity. Within this system of coordinates the young people he has studied can be seen as occupying different life-interpretation positions. Maybe Gunnarsson's map does not exist only in the thinking of the researcher, but also to some extent in the young people's minds, as a map of the terrain they are moving in. Sometimes they want security, and sometimes they risk insecurity in their movement between homogenous and more heterogeneous contexts. Gunnarsson argues convincingly that religious education needs to pay attention to the 'work' that young people are doing in order to interpret their lives while living them. If this is not done, knowledge about religion is not going to have much relevance to these young people, and then what values does it have?

In his PhD thesis Gunnarsson has covered much of the debate about life-questions, life-views, life-interpretation and life-philosophy, particularly in Sweden and Norway and discussed conceptualisation in relation to empirical investigation in the field. A considerable literature including conceptual debates and empirical studies related to concepts with 'life' in them has appeared since the late 1960s in the Nordic countries. Nevertheless, there is no agreement in terms of how this relates to the educational questions of knowledge and formation, and also what implications it has for pedagogy of religious education. In terms of terminology Gunnarsson prefers the concept of 'life-interpretation' and it would be interesting if his research opens the path for more international debate about what may be called a Nordic discourse (Heimbrock, 2004). Signhild Risenfors' dissertation certainly proves that this dis-course is alive and self-reflexive (Risenfors, 2012).

There are also researchers critically addressing issues of individual formation in Nordic religious education research. Bengt Ove Andreassen has analysed the textbooks used in teacher training of religious education in Norway (Andreassen, 2008). There are limitations to such a study, because it does not say anything about how these books are used, only about their content. However, the textbooks may be seen as reflections of research trends in the field. Andreassen is representing an emerging interest in religious education from young researchers from the discipline of religious studies/history of religions and he uses this perspective programmatically. By focusing on the textbooks for teacher training mainly towards primary and secondary teacher training Andreassen is looking for the construction of a teacher training school subject. In this way he hopes to get insight into 'what understanding of subject area knowledge that underpins the education of school teachers' (Andreassen, 2008, p. 25, my translation). In addition he focuses on what kinds of student-role and teacher-role seems to be implied in the books. His method is discourse analysis, drawing on Foucault's theories about knowledge and power, arguing that the texts he is investigating need to be interpreted and analysed as 'power texts' which define an area of knowledge. Based on his methodological approach constructs a map of key concepts used in the books and of the networks of meaning in which these concepts are inscribed. The reading of the textbooks is sensitive and critical with a hermeneutical interest in power and context.

The result of his analysis is that the existential dimension proves to be particularly strong in the most used textbooks in contrast to an approach with more emphasis on 'knowledge'. The dominant way religious education is pictured points in the direction of learning *from* religion. He sees this as being close to the perspectives often found in new religious movements where religion is seen as a resource for self-development. The way the books picture the role of the student parallels this by emphasising students as young persons who are developing 'themselves'. By using concepts like 'life-interpretation' the textbooks are focusing on this self-development and on how this can be brought in contact with a religious language. The role of the teacher is to facilitate and possibly guide the students in the development of a life-interpretation. In this way the teacher appears to be some kind of 'identity-expert' or facilitator, supporting the students in their search for a more mature self-understanding. The aim of this search is not a Christian identity, which was the case in religious education years ago. Instead all religions are seen as resources in the search for meaning and identity. Andreassen also finds books that point in other directions; one points towards a Christian-theological position, while another is more religious studies and knowledge oriented. But since these books are not the most used ones, Andreassen can argue that his main result covers the most powerful texts: There is a hegemonic discourse defining pedagogy of religious education in Norway and there are other marginal discourses pointing in other directions. He argues that the dominating discourse is a mainly theological one, but an important qualification is that it is not bound to one religion. The 'learning from' perspective is in itself theologically biased, according to Andreassen, since theology sees religion as something to 'learn from', while from a religious studies perspective the emphasis is on the 'learning about' approach. His analysis of the

dominant discourse in Norwegian religious education also uncovers a underlying discourse of 'goodness', where conflict, borderlines, differences and contradictions in the field of religion(s) are excluded from the picture.

Even if Andreassen's analysis may be challenged in various ways, this is a type of research relevant for the debate about 'learning about' and 'learning from' religion, irrespective of whether one accepts the way Andreassen pictures the relationship between academic disciplines. The question is rather how religious education pedagogy is going to deal with the challenges related to individual formation and the role of research in this.

## INDIVIDUAL AND SOCIAL FORMATION

This discussion of the complexities of the formation/knowledge relationship supports the view that rather than being a dilemma to be sorted out or a choice between different paths, the dichotomy has proven to be a fruitful heuristic tool, and points in the direction of more dialectical relationship between the two. The English researchers presented all dealt with this as a dialectic of substance (knowledge) and function (formation) where both are inconceivable without the other. Also Nordic research on religious education and research in the field of subject area pedagogy (didactics) can benefit from more dialogue with general education and vice versa. The field of religion in education may seem to many as special, since it is not only connected with academic disciplines but also with contextualised beliefs of individuals and groups. I hope to have shown that the questions and answers presented in religious education research have something to offer in the discussion of what we want education to be across subjects, and I am particularly concerned with the humanities and social studies. Several of these subjects are marginalised by the present policy focus on skills in reading, writing, arithmetic and science, but life on the margins can also be a stimulus to renew the discourse of what these subjects deal with. By not getting involved in the debate about knowledge, but by expanding the discourse about knowledge and formation it is possible to raise a debate about the content and aims of individual and social formation in education. Here I believe recent and on-going research in religious education research has important contributions to make.

## NOTES

(1) See the discussion of French and English religious education in (Meer, Pala, Modood & Simon, 2009).

(2) See National Curriculum website where the curriculum content as well as attainment targets are structured according to 'learning about' and 'learning from' as headlines: <http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20100823130703/http://curriculum.qcda.gov.uk/key-stages-1-and-2/subjects/religious-education/index.aspx> (accessed 2011/04/27)

(3) (Filipsone, 2011) does not refer to this article (Hella & Wright, 2009) but she upholds her critique in spite of (Wright, 2007). Another recent critique of Wright focuses on his emphasis on rational argumentation in the learning about religion and his knowledge- and truth- oriented understanding of 'religion' (Strhan, 2010). For a recent comment on the learning from/learning about perspective see (Wright & Wright, 2012) where this distinction is commented critically as in danger of 'assuming a basic dualism between the learner-learning-from and the object-learned-about, and invites the notion that certain skills must be cultivated if the division between the two is to be overcome'. Instead Wright and Wright here argue a 'virtue-centred education'.

(4) See reflections on theology (Grimmitt, 1987: pp. 170-173, 257-261; Wright, 2004, pp. 67-124), religious studies (Robert Jackson, 1990), and both (Cush, 1999; 2007; 2009)

(5) Wanda Alberts is working at the University of Bergen, Norway and has compared approaches of religious education in England and Sweden in her PhD thesis (Alberts, 2007).

(6) Lars Laird Iversen is identical with Lars Laird Eriksen, which is the name he had when he delivered his thesis at the University of Warwick 2010. It was later published (Iversen, 2012).

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