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Cultural Encounters, Co-existence and Identity formation - Teaching Religious Studies for a Global and Sustainable Society

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Abstract

*This paper is based on a critical close reading of the contemporary national curricula in Religious Education in Sweden and seen in an international context as well. What common basic values and goals do they strive to promote? Is it possible, even wishful, to construct a sort of a global curricula of Religious Education? To create a climate in the classroom that is based on openness, respect for cultural and religious diversity, critical and analytical thinking and filled with joy and creativity are long term ideal for teaching, didactics and pedagogy. In relations to this some suggestions for sustainable didactic perspectives in religious education will be highlighted from the experiences of the research project *The Children of Abraham at the teacher education at Malmö University*.*

This article focuses on a research project that aims at creating rooms for negotiation between pupils with experiences from different religions and cultures at various levels in the educational system. It combines experiences and results from the National Evaluation of Religious Education in Compulsory School from grade 9, conducted by the Ministry of Education in 2003, NU03 – and a teaching method that originated in the 1980s in Rinkeby, a multicultural suburb to Stockholm in Sweden. Now this is developed by The *Children of Abraham/Ibrahim Foundation* which is a non-political and non-religious NGO founded in 1991. Dorothea Rosenblad, a teacher in RE, developed this method in dialogue with, among others Lisbeth Lindvall, who is a librarian in Rinkeby, and this teaching method helps pupils to understand both themselves and “the other” on the basis of stories from the Bible, The Koran or Jewish or Islamic legends and other narratives (Rosenblad and Rosenblad, 2004, Jönsson and Liljefors Persson, 2006).

Within the Main Programme *Religious Studies and Learning* in Teacher Education at Malmö University a section entitled *The Children of Abraham* is included in the course *Cultural Encounters and Identity in School* which is the second course in the Main Programme for Religious Studies and Learning that originated in 2001. We are always evaluating the courses together with the students and the aim is to try to develop further the course as a whole and thus also this approach for teaching about co-existence and dialogue on the different levels in both Compulsory School, at Secondary School and in Higher Education.

Based on a critical close reading of the contemporary national curricula in Religious Education in Sweden (Lpo94, revised in 2000) and also of some textbooks in religious education this article aims at illuminating perspectives important for classrooms of cultural and religious diversity. What common basic values and goals do national curricula strive to promote? Is it possible to compare them with national curricula in other countries – and would it even be possible to construct a sort of a global curricula of Religious Education? These were questions that I asked myself when I started the work to prepare this article– and I will not be able to give definite answers to those here (Larsson and Gustavsson, 2004). However, after having discussed with colleagues and also with students from several European countries I can say that the Swedish curricula for Religious studies/Religious Education is something that many countries have strived to work towards. This drive is towards a humanistic and social scientific approach to the study of religion and ethics, and also on lifes vital questions. Many countries strive towards a non -confessional study of the subject of Religious studies/education, and in Sweden this has been formulated in the national curricula since 1962. From discussions with colleagues from. Finland, Denmark and Norway at an international symposium in Odense in Denmark March 2009, I experienced that they have all been glancing at this non-confessional approach. In both England and the Netherlands the curricula have been more oriented towards a multi-cultural and comparative study of Religious Education (Svingby, 1993 and 1998, Jackson, 2004 and 2007). Religious studies/RE has always been an important subject in the Swedish education in compulsory school as well as in higher education. Now, however, the government are introducing a new teacher education reform – and the suggestions is now to diminish the role of religion, so we will have to see what happens in the future!

To create a climate in the classroom that is based on openness, respect for cultural and religious diversity, critical and analytical thinking and filled with joy and creativity are long term ideal for teaching, didactics and pedagogy, and we may all agree to this. In relation to this, some suggestions for didactic perspectives and goals for educational themes with a local as well as a global perspective will be presented here. And what I would label as suggestions for a sustainable religious education will be highlighted, based on the experiences of the research project about *The Children of Abraham* at Malmö University, and seen in relation to national curricula. Also, a critical look at some textbooks on religion shows the need for important didactic questions: What? How? Why?

The phrase “to teach is to choose” is widely used in teacher education programmes, and that phrase is also valid for the authors of textbooks. The content in textbooks, like all sources of knowledge, is always based on somebody’s choice of what knowledge and what content to present. And this, in turn, makes it utterly important to examine the content in textbooks with a critical eye. In Sweden many publishing companies produce textbooks for education at various levels and they are not regulated by the government in any way, even though they often are related to the curricula and syllabuses of the subject. Thus, it is also important that students at teacher programmes develop skills and tools for critical analyses of textbooks, however this aspect of our work will not be developed further in this article.

The research project consists of two parts:

The first presents the comparative approach of the method *The Children of Abraham*. How can this theme be studied? What is good practice for classroom studies with the theme?

The second part examines the students teaching experience of the theme the *Children of Abraham*, and their own learning process during the lectures and seminars in the Religious Studies Programme. What is the learning outcome?

This study was initiated in 2007 and results have been presented from the project both at the CiCe Nordic conference in Malmö in October 2007 and in Istanbul in May 2008 at the CiCe International Conference. More evidence based results from the students’ perspectives on the project and published for the first time.

The Children of Abraham approach

First, the theme *Children of Abraham* is based on a comparative approach to the study of three religions: Christianity, Judaism and Islam. The ultimate goal for the teaching method, labelled the IE-method (identification creates empathy, by Rosenblad) is to develop mutual respect between pupils from different political, historical, cultural and religious backgrounds (Rosenbladh and Rosenblad 2004). The pupils identify themselves with some of the characters in the narratives told by the teacher (For example, from the Bible or the Koran - many of which have the same main characters – Abraham/Ibrahim, Isak/Isaq, Moses/Musa, Maria/Mariam, Jesus/Isa and so on.). Role play theory in psychology of religions by Hjalmar Sundén, forms the theoretical background for this method that strives at creating empathy (Rosenbladh and Rosenblad 2004).

The teacher could introduce the theme in various ways and it could be either very short or more in-depth and focusing on both historical background and on traditions of belief and rituals related to Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Then the teacher starts telling a story from either the Bible, or the Koran or other religious sources. It could be only one part or episode of the story, or it could be several episodes.

The next step is that the pupils get a paper and choose a character from the story. The pupils write their own version of the story and take on different roles, and thus they may create different versions of the story as well. Then they will try to dramatise their story and perform it for the whole class. They can also make sketches and illustrate their stories of course. A good exercise to end it with is to let the pupils reflect on their stories, and their own interpretations as to how the stories continue should be accepted.

It has been recognised that the pupils use their own experiences without loosing their integrity by writing their stories in the first person. It is through exercises like this that the pupils develop empathy and mutual respect for the various people or actors in the stories. Since most European classrooms today represent cultural and religious diversity the teachers may adapt and change the exercises to their own classroom contexts. The learning outcome of these kinds of exercises is often a discussion of existential questions

and it is fairly easy to point out common roots and similarities in traditions. These are stimulating experiences that may well promote co-existence and respect for the individual in the classrooms as well as outside them. Stories found in the Bible, the Quran and in other collections of sources for religions in the world, and also poetry, other world literature, movies and lyrics may be used in teaching about co-existence and identity formation in various ways. (Rosenbladh and Rosenbladh, 2004, Axelsson, 2008).

This method is but one example of creating possibilities for inter-cultural and multi-faith dialogue. Also, from this comparative approach with the theme the *Children of Abraham*, it may be possible to identify other “rooms of negotiation” were similar methods may be fruitful in order to stimulate dialogues for religious and cultural co-existence that engages both younger and older students at all levels of education.

The students learning processes – preliminary results

Now we will turn to the first results that examine students’ possibilities and experiences to create arenas for negotiating identity and co-existence in classrooms of diversity at different levels. This goal of creating possibilities for negotiating is one of the main results regarding the subject Religious Education from the National Evaluation 2003. The pupils wished for more opportunities to discuss and learn about cultural encounters and about different cultures and religions (Jönsson and Liljefors Persson, 2006). Many of the students in the Religious Studies-programme have their school-based practice in schools in the multicultural and multi-faith city of Malmö but also in the whole part of Scania, the southernmost part of Sweden. Some of them have made their own teaching experiences regarding this thematic approach of *The Children of Abraham*. As this study is recently initiated we only have limited research results, around 130 questionnaires from students, and about 10 informal interviews are collected so far. From the preliminary result it is clear that many students see the possibilities, but some critical questions can be raised, such as the fact that it is also important to see the differences between the religions – and that these are also essential to discuss with the pupils. Mostly positive voices are heard though, both from the students own learning processes and from their teaching experience.

During spring semester 2009 I visited a class from the later years in compulsory school with pupils about 13-14 years, were Fredrik Ernstson, one of the students, worked with the theme *The Children of Abraham* under the supervision of his tutor Kjell-Åke Gustafsson at Västervångskolan i Landskrona. The pupils were very positive and eager to take on the task and they worked with the theme during about ten lessons over three weeks time. They wrote a theater script on basis of the narrative, dramatized their narratives, created posters about their play and wrote a diary chapter about their interpretation and thoughts about the various characters in the narrative as well as they also had lectures about the history and rituals of the three religions and they also had an individual test the last week. It was an ambitious project that worked well and it was also very well documented with a videotaped version of the dramatisations produced by the tutor, and photographs taken by Adam Wassrin, another of the students, who visited the class that day. From a research perspective it was interesting to follow the project, and more close-up studies like this will hopefully be pursued in the future. An informal follow-up-interview was conducted and both Ernstson and Wassrin were impressed by the pupils work and their performance (May June 5th,2009). When reflecting on the whole project they suggested to be more decisive about having all of the pupils trying to perform more actively, and the experience of the exercise to write a diary chapter on each of the characters, may well be used and maybe even developed more in the future.

From the collection of questionnaires following categories of questions and answers is especially interesting. The students were asked the questions, here written in italics, and below I have collected a sample of typical categories of answers from all the questionnaires from 2007, 2008 and 2009.

What have you learned during the course Cultural Encounters and Identity in School – especially regarding the theme Children of Abraham?

- The importance of emphasising similarities, focusing on what religious traditions have in common.
- That there is a lot to learn from dramatising and acting, to take on another persons role.
- That ”religion is more than religion. It is also identity for many people”.

How have you been working with the theme during your school-based practice?

- I have been working with similarities and differences as a theme
- I have been working with the CoA-theme as an elaborative theme including dramatising, writing diary from different persons perspective and creating posters for the particular story.

What is your opinion about the thematic approach of CoA? Both positive and negative comments.

- “to create understanding for the common roots, faith and history”.
- “to teach pupils to see similarities, not differences”
- “the ‘othering-process’ is diminished”
- ”roads can be different, but the goal is the same”
- “Maybe that differences disappear and that they often are the focal point for prejudice and conflict”.
- “It could be problems if pupils or their parents have strong opinions about the superiority of their own religion”.

What do you want to emphasise in your teaching about cultural encounter and co-existence?

- “That we all gain from helping each other”
- “to create a climate in the classroom that allows for discussion and to be free from prejudice”
- “fundamental values are important”
- “to value pupils own ‘narratives from below’ and stories from their old home countries”
- “to meet ”the other” at various occasions”

(Questionnaires from 2007, 2008 and 2009).

The student’s voices above inform us about the possibilities that they see in teaching about cultural encounters and co-existence. They further state that they need to have knowledge about the various religious traditions and their history and they also need to understand the meaning that religions have to people for themselves, in order to be able to teach about the theme with pupils in the school. The students also emphasise that they need to embrace the fundamental values – and of them maybe the most important are the democratic values such as equality of all people and solidarity. This also connects very well to the result of the National Evaluation of Religious studies from 2003 (NE03), and to some of the goals formulated in the national curricula for religious studies. However, this is something that can well be more clearly visible in the coming revision of the national curricula.

Identity formation and negotiation - based on promoting similarities within borders of diversity

To engage pupils in discussions concerned with life-vital questions is another way of opening up possibilities for meeting other pupil’s life worlds. In using life vital questions as an issue pupils learn both about themselves and from other pupils, they learn both from and about each others views of life (Eriksson, 2000). Support for this approach is found in ongoing research where dialogical religious education is emphasised. Also, discussions about multicultural and intercultural approaches and Religious education and religious literacy would serve as theoretical bases for this approach (Taylor, 1994, Jackson, 2004). Also, this connects very well to the project “To Gather” in Europe (see <http://to-gather.org/page/community>).

The NE03 show clearly that the pupils do wish to discuss questions about the meaning of life and death, love, friendship, war, questions about the future, and about the environment. Another part of the NE03 dealt with immigrants and their culture and religion. 39% of the pupils agree with the statement that: “immigrants have dangerous religions”. 37% of the pupils agree with the statement that: “immigrants should not be allowed to conduct their religion in Sweden”. It seems obvious that the teaching in schools has not reached the goals formulated in the syllabus for Religious Education. (Compare with *Islamophobia Report*, by Ingrid Ramberg, 2004). A third group of questions deals with the attitude towards immigrants as a whole, and a large group of pupils, between 40 % and 50 %, show sympathy with statements which declare that there are too many immigrants in Sweden, that immigrants won’t work. As a counterpart to this xenophobic group, we find another group, a majority of between 70 % and 80 %, who state that it is important to show solidarity with people in need and that it is important that Sweden gets the opportunity to help them. To work for human rights is considered important by 60 % of the pupils, and they would consider joining an organisation that works against racism and xenophobia. Almost two thirds of the pupils see the immigration in Sweden as positive, arguing that it brings new culture and new labour to Sweden. Also, 50 % state that immigrants ought to get help to retain their national culture and traditions.

The syllabus for Religious Education in Swedish compulsory school contains aims that are based on and develop further the fundamental values that are also formulated as the guidelines for school.

“The subject contributes to an understanding of traditions and cultures, and thus provides a foundation for confronting xenophobia, as well as developing pupils respect for tolerance.

One aim of the subject is to increase the ethical awareness of pupils and thus create preparedness for action with regard to democratic, environmental, gender equality and peace issues.” (Skolverket 2000.)

These aims are also fundamental concerning citizenship education in an international society and the results from NE03 show that a rather large group of pupils do not achieve these goals and that more education regarding these goals is needed.

Religious Education and Citizenship Education - a way towards a Global and Sustainable Society

Citizenship education is a subject that in Sweden is in focus in the National Curricula for Compulsory school, but it is not a separate subject, but a theme, perspective or area that should be integrated in many subjects, not the least in Social Science and Religious Education. The Syllabus for Religious Education from 2000 deals with issues concerning life and its interpretation, ethics, belief and traditions of the Religions in the World and as the subject content is formulated it connects very well to various aspects of citizenship education as it is formulated in international contexts (Jackson 2007).

One of the aims in the Swedish RE-subject is to strive at creating rooms for negotiation between pupils with experiences from different religions and cultures. Fundamental values such as the intrinsic value of each person, freedom and integrity of the individual, gender equality, solidarity and support for the weak are the basic guidelines for all work at school. Many pupils state that they fear war, and this is one of the global problems that occupy their minds. Important result from the NE03 as mentioned in this article show that the pupils desire to study more about several parts of the essence in the subject of Religious Education. They state that they had been working a lot on belief in different religions and they regarded that as important. But they wanted more of subjects such as ethics, democracy, living in multicultural societies and the causes of societal change. They also wanted more on environmental questions and about other cultures. Based on experiences and results from the NE03 it is clear that there is a need to work with these perspectives and with citizenship education issues in the Swedish schools at various levels in the Education system (Utbildningsdepartementet 1994, Skolverket 2000).

The *Children of Abraham* approach is one way to meet the challenge for us to teach religion and identity in way that would promote co-existence so that future pupils in Sweden – and in Europe – would accept, respect and understand the various religious identities that their classmates do have. As mentioned in a guideline about religion and children’s identity published by CiCe 2008 (Kevin, Hinge and Liljefors Persson 2008) it is important to promote and embrace the existing religious and cultural diversity in Europe and see this as a base, and a possibility to be used, in order to develop inter-cultural education as well as citizenship education. We suggest good practices that engages pupils to participate in debates/dialogues about plurality at their own level, and practices that encourages pupils to reflect around narratives and source material so that they through dialogue and interaction with each other develop skills for co-existence in a Europe of diversity.

The subject Religious Education might contribute in a very substantial way to nuance the pupils’ images and understanding of “the Other” and their cultures. This is a great challenge for the future teachers and for the subject Religious Education in Compulsory school. The subject Religious Education is one important base for creating rooms of negotiation between people with experiences from different cultures, religions and ideologies and, thus, may be an important arena for identity formation among young people in school. Religious education, as it is presently formulated in the Swedish National curricula and hopefully also will be in the future, in combination with values expressed in active citizenship education and global ethics may guide us into a sustainable society in the future. Thus, both didactics and methods must be further developed, and teaching about cultural encounters, identity formation and co-existence must be part of the important didactic choices that future teachers will make.

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