



Controversial Issues and Their Role in RE

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Abstract

In the non-confessional Swedish subject religious education (RE), teachers regularly address sensitive questions, e.g. concerning pupils' convictions, which sometimes can be regarded as controversial issues (CI). Hence, the overall purpose of this paper is to present, analyze and discuss a minor web survey of which issues RE teachers in secondary school consider to be controversial and how they handle them in the classroom. I will discuss (a) if CI:s can be understood as topics that challenge or violate prevailing ideals, norms and values in a given context, as well as (b) if the teachers' strategies tend to decrease or increase such value conflicts. Two theoretical assumptions are used in order to analyze the results: (1) A distinction between individualist values, predominant in secular societies, and collectivist values, predominant in religious societies. (2) That teachers' strategies for handling controversial issues, through routines and working methods, influence the values which are reproduced in education. This study indicates that the topics the participating RE teachers consider to be CI:s tend to defy individualist values. The study also show that a majority of the RE teachers stated that they handled CI:s by staying neutral or presenting a balanced point of view. This may be a way of socializing the pupils to embrace individualist values, are expected to make autonomous decisions and take responsibility for their choices. In the conclusion, it will be suggested, that the prevailing individualist perspective of Swedish RE may give a biased understanding on alternative point of views.

Keywords: *Controversial issues, Religious education, Values.*

1. Introduction

In the non-confessional Swedish subject religious education (RE), teachers regularly address sensitive questions, e.g. concerning pupils' convictions, which sometimes can be regarded as controversial issues [1] [2]. Even if there is no generally accepted definition of "controversial issues", in the research literature, different characterizations contain what might be described as emotional, cognitive and evaluative elements. This means that controversial issues are something that individuals or groups tend to disagree on, where it is possible to provide conflicting explanations, and where solutions often are based on different values [2-4]. The fact that many RE teachers work in schools characterized by pluralism and multiculturalism, increases the challenge of reaching mutual understanding between pupils and groups [5]. Hence, the overall purpose of this paper is to present, analyze and discuss a minor web survey of *which* issues RE teachers in secondary school consider to be controversial and *how* they handle them in the classroom. In this paper I will discuss (a) if controversial issues can be understood as topics that challenge or violate the prevailing ideals, norms and values in a given context, as well as (b) if the teachers' strategies tend to decrease or increase such value conflicts.

2. Theoretical background

In order to discuss if the controversial issues, RE teachers face in secondary school, can be interpreted as value conflicts we will use the distinction between individualist and collectivist values. Individualist values, on the one hand, are characterized by individual rights being perceived as more important than obligations to others. These values are predominant in secular societies and tend to emphasize autonomy and self-realization. Collectivist values, on the other hand, are characterized by obligations towards others being perceived as more important than individual rights. These values are predominant in religious societies and tend to emphasize common beliefs, practices and goals [6]. This distinction can provide a picture of which values that are considered important in different contexts but also give an indication of which questions that are likely to challenge the majority view, divide people, and become controversial. This point is particularly relevant since Sweden, according to extensive international studies, is the most secular country in the world [7].

In previous studies researchers have identified different strategies teachers use to deal with controversial issues in the classroom. Stradling found that educators often tried to act neutral, balance different views, play the devil's advocate, ally with marginalized pupils, or support the official line [2]. How teachers choose to organize their activities, through different routines and working methods, have also been highlighted as consequential for which values that are reproduced in teaching [8].



Thus, the way in which teachers treat controversial issues can contribute to increase or decrease value conflicts in the classroom and make some rather than other issues controversial.

3. Previous research

There are two main ways to understand the purpose of RE in school, from an international perspective, as confessional and non-confessional. If the subject is understood confessional the aim is to socialize the pupils in a religious faith. In confessional RE, issues that concern, e.g., gender roles, sexuality, terrorism, and creationism vs. evolution are identified as particularly controversial [cf. 9-12]. If the subject is understood as non-confessional the aim is to give the pupils an opportunity to learn about different religions. Some examples of issues that researchers identify as controversial include ethical dilemmas, extremism, terrorism, Islam, and religiosity [cf. 13-15].

There is relatively little research on how controversial issues are handled in confessional and non-confessional RE. However, some studies suggest that pupils who participate in confessional education become aware of that the controversial issues they encounter in teaching often consist of a conflict between collectivist and individualist values [10-12]. At the same time, other studies suggest, that pupils in non-confessional RE do not become aware of these patterns. Rather, they regard themselves as liberated from traditional structures and express tolerance of "others" with religious beliefs who are described in stereotypical terms [13-15].

4. Method

A web-survey, consisting of open-ended and closed questions, was designed in order to investigate which issues RE teachers (N 71) in secondary school consider to be controversial and how they state that they deal with them in their pedagogical practice. The teachers were briefed of the general purpose and invited to participate in the study under the condition that they could discontinue at any time. The participants were informed that their answers would be anonymous, treated as confidential, and used for research purposes only. During the study no personal data were stored and no questions of sensitive character were posed, e.g. concerning political, philosophical or religious conviction. In this way, compliance to the general research ethical principles of informed consent, anonymity, confidentiality, and secrecy was ensured [16].

The analysis of the answers was based on an open coding of words, phrases and expressions that recurred in the empirical material. Some of these were possible to identify as overarching themes (e.g. "Islam" or "ethics") and other more specific answers were related to them (e.g. the "veil debate" or "animal rights"). The discussion, as to whether the controversial issues could be interpreted in terms of conflicts between individualist and collectivist values, and whether teachers' strategies contributed to increase or decrease any possible value conflicts, were primarily based on the theoretical background above. It is important to emphasize that the purpose of this investigation is not to draw general conclusions about RE teachers but to use a mainly qualitative material in order to track tendencies among this group [18-19].

5. Result and Discussion

The teachers who participated in the survey were asked to state the controversial issues they deal with in their teaching and the answers can be categorized in three themes. First, they indicated that issues concerning conflicts of various kinds was controversial. The participants stated that they dealt with controversial issues related to, e.g. "interpretations of religions", "religious conflicts", and "religiosity and atheism". Second, they also considered Islam, in general, as a controversial issue. The participants stated that they treated issues related to the "veil debate", "honour culture", and "oppression". Third, the participants regarded issues concerning "moral and ethics" as controversial in RE. Again, the teachers specified their answer with issues related to, e.g. "sexuality", "abortion", "euthanasia", "animal rights", and "capital punishment". What appear to be controversial in an individualistic secular context can be understood as issues that challenge the prevailing values within the community [20]. Issues that seemingly relates to incompatible beliefs or truth claims, such as whether or not to have a religious belief, is also something that may violate an implicit secular norm which the pupils may not be aware of and is difficult to discover.

The participants were asked to indicate which strategies they use to deal with controversial issues in teaching and given an opportunity to justify their choices. What emerged was that a majority indicated that they sought balance (79%), supported the official line as stated in the governing document (72%), and acted neutral chairman – when controversial issues were addressed in the classroom (49% partly like me, and 35% like me or very much like me). The fact that teachers tend to strive for, i.e. balance and neutrality, seems to contribute to convey individualist values to the pupils, who are expected to



make independent decisions and take responsibility for their choices. At the same time, only a few of the RE teachers stated that they expressed commitment (13%), took side with marginalized pupils (15%), or played the devil's advocate (22%). It is of particular interest, that only a small fraction of the RE teachers that participated in the study, stated that they allied with marginalized pupils – which could promote collectivist values such as solidarity. Similarly, only a limited proportion of the RE teachers stated that they use to play the devil's advocate, which can bring about a critical examination of inherent ideals, norms and values which otherwise often is taken for granted. Thus, it seems that how controversial issues are treated can contribute to convey individualistic ideals, norms and values. Nevertheless, there are interesting exceptions in the empirical material where teachers work deliberately with pupils' self-understanding and critical distance.

6. Concluding remark

What appears to be controversial within an individualistic secular context can be understood as issues that challenges the prevailing values within the community. The fact that teachers to a large extent strive for, e.g., balance and neutrality in teaching seems to contribute to convey individualist values to the pupils who are expected to make independent decisions and take responsibility for their choices. This means that they risk reinforcing the predominant individualist values and contribute to continue to construct collective values as controversial in education.

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