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Possibilities and limitations of religion-related dialog in schools: Conclusion and discussion of findings from the ReDi project

Linda Vikdahl and Geir Skeie

ABSTRACT

This article links together the findings of the case studies reported in this special issue and reflects upon the possibilities and limitations of religion-related dialog in school education at a more systematic level. It also discusses the findings of the case studies in relation to other research and suggests some ideas for further investigation.

Introduction

The key question raised in this article is what can be learned from empirical studies in four European cities regarding religion-related dialog in schools. We have chosen to use the term *religion-related dialog* to cover both interreligious and intrareligious dialog, dialog where secular world views are involved and even other dialogs that are touching on issues of religiosity and world view. The case studies were conducted in London, England; Hamburg and Duisburg, Germany; Stockholm, Sweden; and Stavanger, Norway; all within the European research project Religion and Dialogue in Modern Societie" (ReDi).[1] The project has researched a broad range of issues about religion and dialog, of a theological, sociological, and educational nature.[2]

This article raises the question as to which possibilities and limitations reveal themselves in empirical studies of religion-related dialog in education. This does not signal that the results of the studies are representative of all religious education in the different cities where the research has been done. What we offer instead is a summary and discussion of experiences, analytical results and researchers' reflections. We see this as a contribution to the type of knowledge production that can be exemplified by the discussions in Anglo-American educational research about pedagogical content knowledge[3] and in the Nordic-Continental educational theory about Didaktik tradition.[4] Taken together, we hope that this will give teachers and school leaders a

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better foundation for discussing and applying dialogical approaches in religious education across various contexts. We find this to be particularly relevant for religious education teaching and learning, whether this takes the form of confessional or nonconfessional (integrative) religious education. Here we are even in line with the Council of Europe *Signposts* document, which recommends the inclusion of the "religious dimension of intercultural education" in the curriculum. The research reported here certainly testifies to the intimate relationship between religion and culture.

In most of the case studies presented in this special issue, we see that teachers use different types of dialogical approach, and the individual case studies differ in their way of researching this. These range from action research, where the Stavanger researchers and teachers work together to develop dialogical teaching and learning practices, to a Swedish example where students have problems in talking openly and personally about their religious beliefs. In the last case, the study is informative because it sheds light on the challenges that may be experienced related to the implementation of dialogical approaches in particular local contexts, where religion is an issue of conflict between students.[5]

Methodologically, we draw upon four independent studies, which were not designed as being closely parallel in structure. Comparative studies of teaching and learning approaches are difficult, particularly because the curricular framework for religious education differs from country to country. This makes it hard to find comparable research settings and even to design comparable interventions. In our case, the individual studies are embedded in the wider research of each research setting and linked to the ReDi project as a whole. In Hamburg/Duisburg and London the education case studies are firmly placed within the setting of the broader research, while in Stockholm and Stavanger we have used opportunities to address specific educational contexts that were expected to produce valuable insights. We have sought to identify variation rather than similarity between the cases, to capture a variety of conditions that, taken together, might tell us something about the challenges and opportunities that teachers may be faced with. Because there is no common teaching strategy that has been applied uniformly in the case studies, there is also no basis for a strict comparison of this.

The comparative dimension in this article draws on dialog in religious education, which bridges the very different studies and contexts. This term refers to the fact that dialogical approaches in religious education are relevant for all the educational settings where we conducted our research, albeit in different ways. There are, in the terminology of Oddrun Bråten's comparative methodology, "supranational influences" that can be detected across national settings.[6] We therefore use dialog as a methodological devise that can be traced in its variations, depending upon the context.

By assuming that classrooms are different, as are their local and national sociocultural contexts, the variation can be used to spell out a series of challenges and opportunities that teachers of religious education may face when trying to establish conditions favorable for dialogical learning in their own classrooms. Through this, we aim to contribute to the toolbox that teachers can draw upon for professional reflection on their religious education teaching when trying to make use of dialogical approaches.

We did not agree on a specific definition of dialog beforehand, but rather assumed similarities to be present based on earlier research and consultations. Nevertheless, a key element across the board was the inclusion of a personal dimension in the concept with regards to conversations about religion and world views. This was based on the fact that all case studies were influenced by international debates about dialogical approaches and that the word *dialog* was already in use in all settings. Drawing on Bråten's methodology, we referred to the understanding of dialog presented in the *Signposts* document as "supranational," because Jackson bases his recommendations on religious education research as well as the needs expressed by educational authorities in the member countries of Council of Europe. He refers to specific empirical examples developed within teacher education and in participatory research. Based on Jackson's presentation of dialogical approaches, we have applied a working definition with the following characteristics.[7]

- A general acceptance of religious and world view diversity
- An open and positive interaction across diverse positions
- Some level of personal involvement
- Communicative (verbal) interaction to explore and learn from the diversity represented in class and/or community

This definition takes account of the implicitly positive value content in the term "dialogue", by referring to four different aspects that all are normative. They present both intentions and practical consequences related to dialogical approaches. In order to study religion-related dialog empirically as a school practice, one needs a definition on which to focus attention, but this definition also needs to fit with the data material. The four characteristics should therefore be seen both as preconditions for dialogical teaching and learning and as features characterizing such practice. Our aim here is to investigate the particular possibilities and hindrances for such teaching and learning that arise from the school practice studies. More precisely, we pose the following research questions:

1. What critical dimensions can be found in terms of the opportunities for religion-related dialog in schools?

2. What critical dimensions can be found in terms of the challenges and threats regarding religion-related dialog in schools?

The methods used by the authors of the case studies to investigate religion dialog in schools are mainly observation in classrooms and interviews with teachers and students, plus the limited use of questionnaires. Nevertheless, the different mixture of these methods in each setting, as well as their location within a broader design, show some differences that are explained in the distinct studies. This article is synthetizing findings by drawing on the case studies, but we have also asked the researchers/authors to produce condensed overviews of their research with a focus on the possibilities and opportunities for dialog. By doing this, we hoped to trace some aspects that perhaps are not so prominent in the individual studies, but deserve attention in this overview. This means that, to some extent, we are de-contextualizing the findings in order to address a more general discussion about the opportunities and challenges for religion-related dialog in schools. We hope this decontextualization can be followed by a recontextualization by readers of this article, who will apply the insights on their own dialogical approaches in practice, with the necessary adjustments.

In the following, we present first the opportunities and then the challenges by grouping them into subsections that are not based in the different contextual settings, but rather refer to different dimensions of school practice that appear in the findings; student perspectives, teacher perspectives, contextual issues, curriculum issues and issues related to the school as a community. We conclude with a discussion of these results.

Opportunities for religion-related dialog in school

In terms of student attitudes and experiences, there seems to be plenty of evidence that they appreciated taking part in religion-related dialog. One prominent finding was the appreciation of getting to know one another better, by listening to other students discussing their beliefs. This is striking in the Norwegian case, where small dialogs involving three students on their own clearly contributed to this effect. The Norwegian researchers also found that the emphasis on personal dialog led to less tension related to conflicting truth-claims, and thus made it easier to learn about one another as individuals with religion or world view. This appreciation of the students suggests that they had a genuine interest in learning about one another. Following this, they experienced that, in getting to know other students better, they were also led to reflect on their own reactions to what they had learned. Through this, they learned more about themselves.

The interest in, and experience of, learning about one another was complemented by students in both London and Stavanger reporting that, through dialogical approaches, they received deeper knowledge about religions and worldviews as a school subject. The learned about "the insider's perspective," but also gained access to nuanced knowledge about intra-religious differences and even conflicts. This gave them the feeling of acquiring authentic knowledge, and meant that they became conscious of how knowledge was produced. They discovered that improved skills, in terms of asking precise and relevant questions to dialog partners, provided new insights. This was partly due to the rich variety of input they received from dialog activities, and partly due to the knowledge of rules for conducting dialog. Some students particularly mentioned the feeling of authenticity that was stimulated by doing something different from everyday school activities and they appreciated taking part in something important.

The Hamburg/Duisburg, Stavanger, and London case studies all confirmed the students' appreciation of taking part in conversations about different perspectives on religions and world views during school lessons and their willingness to participate. The London students felt that, most of the time, the classroom was safe enough to express their views freely and they appreciated the sharing of opinions. A particular reason for appreciating discussions about religion in the classroom was that they took place within a framework of controlled forms of interaction, which was not the case when they discussed similar issues in the corridor or in the school hall. London surveys showed that the students had a strong sense of their rights in terms of open conversations. They recognized the need to let each person speak and for each to express his or her own viewpoint, whether religious or not. This rights-based rhetoric seemed to have the potential to create space for dialog. By recognizing the rights of one another to have their own views, the students created the expectation that this was how they all would like to be treated, both by teachers and by one another. The emphasis on rules for dialogical interaction therefore seems to be significant.

Regarding teacher perspectives, the Hamburg and Duisburg staff seemed to appreciate the students exchanging views on religions and world views and recognized the importance of both lively discussion and space for dialog. This was also supported by the Stavanger and London case studies. As educational researchers, we recognize this as belonging to a rather typical teacher narrative about what constitutes a good lesson; that the students have participated in an engaged way and have exchanged views on the subject covered. If so, this means that religion-related dialog probably draws upon this teachers' appreciation of (positive) student interaction in the classroom and has a positive potential.

Teachers in the different studies had many ideas about how they could stimulate dialog and manage the classroom situation to facilitate dialog, even if these do not always end up in "best practice," as the Hamburg/Duisburg case shows. The Stavanger teachers claimed that it was necessary to have a certain element of teacher enthusiasm about trying out different ways of teaching and that they could positively draw on curiosity about the potential of dialog methods. To make dialog work, the London teachers mentioned the significance of their initial teacher training, which had helped prepare them for dialog in school. The conclusions in the Hamburg/Duisburg study shows the potential of creating an atmosphere of openness in the classroom and being able to balance this with the risk of vulnerability for individual students. Areas of tensions could be managed successfully, thus creating a positive process of learning and interaction.

Both the London and Stavanger case studies reported that teachers saw clear instruction about certain ways of engaging in dialog as an assignment of great importance in achieving success. Such instruction would include teaching students the ability to define dialog, and to distinguish it from discussion or debate. In Stavanger, students' dialogical skills were developed by giving them training in how to perform dialogs in several and differently composed groups. Here, teachers also mentioned having the skill to create a positive atmosphere for dialog as a necessary condition, as well as the importance of monitoring this and intervening if necessary. This included making certain students aware that they held a hegemonic position in the conversations and that they needed to reconsider their way of interacting with other students for all voices to be heard. However, teachers also mentioned the need, at the outset, to make visible and explicit to the group the diverse positions of the students, so that any harmonization of views toward consensus could be avoided. Both of these strategies could perhaps be summarized as an ambition to engage students in an open learning environment, with a lack of preset rules about the content of dialog but applying rules about the process of interaction.

Teacher perspectives dealt with how to organize learning, because this is so central to the teachers' responsibility, but they even sometimes commented on how context-related factors referring to the community outside of school could influence opportunities for dialogical approaches in the classroom. The positive side of this was most clear in the Stavanger case, where engaging in dialogs outside of the classroom was a key part of the teaching and learning process. The importance of context for dialogical teaching and interreligious relations in the classroom was more evident in the researchers' analysis of the case studies, with reference both to the context outside the school and the narrower teaching and learning context. Particularly in the Hamburg/Duisburg study there is a thorough discussion

about how teachers may balance the open and process-oriented dialog toward the result-oriented aspects of subject learning. In general though, on the evidence of the present case studies, it is not easy to identify specific positive contextual factors which enhance religion-related dialog. However, teachers can address negative contextual factors. Some possible ways of doing so are presented below.

A more frequently mentioned external factor which has a positive influence on dialog is curriculum. Several of the curricula in the different contextual settings mentioned dialogical approaches as an opportunity for teaching and learning. This seemed particularly clear in the arrangements for a dialogical, inclusive form of RE in Hamburg and Duisburg, but it is also possible to argue for the value of dialogical approaches by referring to the curricular formulations in the studies from England, Norway, and Sweden. Here, dialog was not necessarily mentioned explicitly, but curricula emphasized the support for tolerance, knowledge about diversity, equal rights, inclusion and democratic citizenship, which could be interpreted as requiring dialog.

The importance of support from curriculum formulations is in some ways similar to the positive influence that the general school atmosphere, feeling of community and common values could have in supporting dialogical approaches, even in an indirect way. One example is the positive interest in and support from the school leadership for the action research project on dialogical approaches found in in the Norwegian case study.

Challenges for religion-related dialog in school

Although many students in all case studies, with the exception of the Stockholm one, appreciated dialogical approaches in religious education, others were more doubtful. Some said that they felt that dialog was not particularly fruitful as a way of learning about religions and world views, because this only tended to convey personal opinions and views, rather than a broader picture. Some students in London were not very interested in expressing or hearing the personal views of fellow learners, and even some who enjoyed dialogical activities were critical of the idea of class members sharing personal views. Others felt that, because many students seemed only to share a shallow and limited part of their spiritual and existential thinking, it would be difficult to establish genuine dialog.

Several critical comments were made about the specific dialogical activities used. Some found the attempts to engage in personal dialog to be superficial and, according to some students, important differences were sometimes concealed. One reason for this was the desire of several students to achieve consensus, mentioned several times in the Stavanger study.

Although such consensus could be an obstacle to displaying genuine diversity, the Stockholm case study presented a different picture. Here, religion was perceived by most students as having distinct truth claims that could not be questioned or changed without very negative consequences. For many students in the Swedish case study, this made dialog seem both impossible and futile for them to imagine. Some even expressed the view that a good religious person must be prepared to suffer for his/her religion, and therefore conflict was not considered to be entirely bad. This viewpoint had a clearly negative impact on the nature of the conversation. Even if this attitude was special, a similar experience was also mentioned in the London study, where some students said that the language of rights could lead to a situation where participants simply took the view that they had the right to hold and express their own views, and did not need to go any further in class than declaring their own positions. The Hamburg/Duisburg study showed that many students willingly contributed their views, but that this was not always received with positive attention from the teachers who focused on achieving certain results.

Taken together this suggests that, from a student perspective, it can be quite demanding to understand how individual positioning works out socially and even to which degree it is genuinely appreciated by the teacher as part of the learning process. When the social consequences of expressing personal views are not clear, it becomes difficult to act, and this creates some insecurity. In addition, there are the sociopsychological effects of the relationships of individuals to their own in-group, and towards perceived or actual opposing groups. Here, the Hamburg case study mentions a danger that dialog activities can result in the adoption of more rigid positions when there is too much emphasis on personal involvement. The evidence from the different case studies suggests a division among students regarding their attitudes towards dialogical approaches.

In the Stockholm case, many students emphasize the necessity of positioning oneself religiously, and therefore the aspects of openness and interest in the other were of limited appeal. The students also stated that they found it meaningless to talk about religion when the teacher did not take a personal stand on questions concerning religion; one could not respect a person who did not hold an opinion.

Teachers also recognized certain challenges when introducing dialog into religious education. If they did not succeed in their classroom leadership, the student dialogs could change into discussions, which were seen as a more competitive type of conversation than had been intended. They discovered that certain theoretical insights about dialog that were communicated to the students regarding dialog could be completely forgotten when issues moved closer to personal or daily life. The establishment of trust was

seen as critical, but also fragile. Therefore, there was a risk related to this; there needed to be a constant focus on re-establishing trust. Teachers found that the value and precise understanding of what dialog meant often turned out to be unclear in practice, and that it was often difficult to pinpoint in terms of learning, for example.

The dynamic between teachers and students, studied by the Hamburg/Duisburg team in particular, showed that the dialog intentionally opened by the teacher could quite quickly be closed again during the following interactions. This shows that the teacher's understanding of his/her role can be important if the dialog is to continue. If the teacher moderated the dialog too strongly or was too eager to suggest certain themes for the conversation, this could have a restricting effect on the dialog. Equally, loosely moderated dialog by teachers could have similar effects.

Although a key idea was that dialog activities were intended to increase knowledge about religions and world views, this sometimes proved limited in the Hamburg/Duisburg case, due to the tendency of promoting positive understandings of religions and world views. To reach a more open, process-oriented dynamic, good questions had to be developed, but this takes time and teachers often experienced difficulties in managing dialog. Sometimes they also felt a lack of knowledge about conditions for successful dialog and ways of doing dialogs. Especially in the Swedish case, where the students were reluctant to share personal views and saw themselves more as representatives, the teacher encountered situations in the classroom where she did not feel sufficiently competent to initiate and manage classroom dialog. Although this seemed to be related to the specific context, the London study showed that teachers felt they had not had sufficient training in dialogical methods and that this was a challenge for them.

The challenges sometimes experienced by teachers were related to contextual factors. The analysis of the various case studies revealed several contextual factors which could have a negative impact on student to student dialog related to religion. The first one, particularly present in the Norwegian case, is the secular hegemony in the classroom experienced by many religious students. They felt that others saw them as being unintelligent since they believed in religion, and also that their life-style was questioned by some non-religious students. In addition to the tension caused by this, religious students and secular students tended to have different degrees of interest and curiosity with regards to issues of religion. Both the Stockholm and the Stavanger case showed examples of religious students who sometimes tended to dominate the conversations because they had something to contribute, while the others sat silent. This would be a complete reversal of the dynamics in classroom settings when discussions about religion was on the agenda.

According to the case studies, historical, religious, and political conflicts made their way into the classroom, and these contextual factors sometimes threatened to prevent the possibility of dialog. In the Stockholm case, the political and religious conflicts in the Middle East were especially reflected in the classroom. Many religious students had strong ties to their culture and their family in the home region, and a sense of loyalty inhibited them from sharing any personal religious perspectives. Conflicts between intrareligious groups were sometimes also apparent in the classroom.

In a similar way, these tensions produced in a globalized classroom could be reinforced by influences from political authorities and the media. In the London case, counter-terrorism laws and policy and media representations of religious extremism influenced pupils by making them self-censor their words, because they were worried that what they say might sound extremist. There were even teachers who raised concerns about opening up dialog in the classroom because they feared that the pupils might say things that they, as teachers, were expected to report to the authorities. The implication here was that immigrant children and their parents could feel excluded and that this could result in an increased emphasis on Britishness in schools. Under these counter-terrorism conditions and media influence, the possibilities for dialog did not improve. A rather general and media-driven Islamophobia was traced in all case studies, and the impact of the "aggressive" and "negative" media seemed to impact upon the Muslim pupils' self-confidence in the classroom.

Although curricula, as indicated above, had elements that supported dialogical approaches, several studies also suggest that the increasing emphasis on learning outcomes and attainment targets may put restrictions on dialogical approaches, which are seen as more process-oriented. Teachers saw this tendency toward an instrumental understanding of curriculum as an obstacle because they would have to justify the dialogical approach almost exclusively by referring to its contribution to subject knowledge. An examination driven syllabus does not seem to encourage dialog of a personal nature. The predominant emphasis on rigor and knowledge acquisition for exams leaves far less space within the curriculum for opportunities to develop the skills of dialog, both formally and informally.

Another curriculum aspect found in the London case study was that the legal requirement for an act of collective worship does not necessarily provide a space for religion-related dialog, due to limited curriculum time and other pressures. In Norway, the end of term church service before Christmas led to heated discussions every year, so even if this issue was brought into the dialog activities as a theme for conversation this was not necessarily constructive. However, some students perceived that the non-confessional attitude of the school contributed to a negative view of religion, which was also detrimental to a climate of open dialog.

Finally, although several of the values and aims mentioned in curricula were understood as supportive toward dialog activities, dialog was not always explicitly mentioned. This was the case in Sweden, and teachers therefore had no explicit support in the religious education curriculum in their efforts to create a safe space for dialog about personal religious views and life views.

Discussion

In the wider research on dialog between religions and world views within urban settings in Germany, Sweden, Norway and England, we have raised the issue of distinguishing between cause and effect. Is religion-related dialog mainly a product of good social relations or does religion-related dialog produce good social relations? A similar issue can be raised with regards to education, where the positive intentions related to dialog activities are often strong. This could explain the fact that case studies report limited attention toward the "positive effect" of contextual factors for the success of dialogical approaches. Perhaps there is an underlying assumption here that negative factors of a contextual character are reasons for introducing dialog, rather than just obstacles for its success. In the Stockholm case in particular, this factor makes a difference. Should the teacher be encouraged to improve dialogical approaches in order to achieve dialog between students with different religious and world view positions, or should the teachers acknowledge the fact that the context is not favorable to such strategies? It could be argued that, if the adults in society do not engage in religion-related dialog, how can children and young people be expected to do so? The importance of context points toward what Bråten calls "the sub-national level".[8] In comparing case studies from different countries, the regional or local level should also be considered. There are sometimes larger internal differences within the national level than between nation states.

We cannot answer this particular question here, but we want to underline the necessity of respecting the complexity of the particular practices in every educational situation. Nevertheless, it should be mentioned that there are studies which support the view that religion-related dialog can be helpful in improving difficult and conflict-ridden classrooms, both in the studies presented here and other literature.[9] In any case, the issue of context proves to be central and should be approached as a complex web of people's practices, values, and knowledge, which interact with the dialogical interventions considered in the present case studies. Dialogical practices in religious education are embedded in sociocultural contexts, and teachers, students, and researchers cannot have a comprehensive overview of them.

One element that belongs to the sociocultural context and is sometimes played out in school, is the loyalties held by students. They may have ethnic, religious, and world view commitments, which are part of what constitutes what we might call "background," and when these are in focus, they are relevant to teachers' planning and organization of dialog activities. By loyalty, we refer to the sense of belonging to a particular group and to the shared memories of group members which can make peaceful relations with others difficult. Dialog concerning culture and religion therefore seem to be intertwined. Altough it is not clear that religious education can contribute to reducing tension in such cases, even through the use of dialogical approaches, it may still be valuable for students to experience instances of safe space for dialog.[10] Earlier research by Nigel Fancourt, focusing on the relationship between dialog and conflict, suggests that there is "no evidence … that 'conflict' evoked dialogue or indeed that, dialectically, dialogue evoked conflict".[11] Here, Fancourt argues that the key issue is what happens once difference is identified in the classroom. It is possible to move directly to dialog about difference, but more often it has to be decided first what character the perceived difference has. If "disagreement" is found to be the meaning of difference it can develop into conflict or dialog. Although the outcome can be decided by the students themselves, the teacher's strategies also can be important and need to be adapted to suit the particular context.[12]

Dialog in religious education is always challenged by external factors, as exemplified by collective loyalties in the local community, but the present case studies have demonstrated that certain educational policies may also be seen as an obstacle to dialogical religious education. In the case studies, we find criticism of curricula for being too instrumentally orientated toward the achievement of learning outcomes. The claim is that this runs counter to dialogical approaches, because these are more focused on the personal and relational dimension of education. However, another finding takes a different view. In this case, teachers and students claim that dialogical approaches have contributed to improved subject knowledge. The dynamic can be described like this: by challenging students' stereotypes about religions and world views through personal encounters, learning obstacles have been removed. Thus, students have been helped to achieve deeper and more nuanced subject knowledge.

This may suggest that learning of subject knowledge goes hand in hand with learning about each other, achieving relational knowledge. The Hamburg case study underlines how dialogical pedagogies are placed in the middle of tensions between teachers' strategical choices in the classroom, oscillating between the process-oriented and the result-oriented. The discussion about dialogical approaches is therefore located at the center of

discussion about religious education teaching and learning, and thereby close to the broader educational debate. It becomes evident that the ambition of developing more religion-related dialog is not an issue for religious education specialists only, but for all who are interested in education. It has relevance to all of the three aims that Gerd Biesta argues to be at the core of education, namely qualification, socialization, and subjectification.[13]

What Biesta calls "subjectification," refers particularly to the aim of giving individual students a chance to develop personally as human beings. This aspect of dialogical approaches can be discerned, to different degrees, in all the studies reported. As with the issue of loyalties and possible conflicts, there are students who do not want to engage, or who do not appreciate engaging, in personal encounter with peers. Some see such encounters as outside the curriculum and therefore unnecessary, whereas others claim them to be superficial and artificial. Others are more open, but express concerns about whether there is a "safe forum" or "safe space." Some students appreciate that the classroom can be a safe forum for the discussion of controversial or personal issues, but others see this as a risky activity and keep silent. Here, the experiences of the Stavanger study, with its "small dialogues", seem to offer an interesting case. The effect of dialog was to build mutual trust in the classroom from the bottom-up and, in the course of this, the hegemony of a secularist position became visible to all, including those holding it. This did not remove all challenges, however, because the increased interest and interchange about religion tended to leave the "secularists" with less to contribute, thereby challenging teachers to reflect on how to proceed.

As the case studies demonstrate, religion-related dialog is not only conducted between clearly positioned students, it also makes individuals reconsider their positions and prompts others to think about what they believe. The personal dimension of dialog activities offered students the possibility to recognize different positions and try them out. An important question in relation to this is whether it opens up possibilities for individual identity formation or whether it hampers this by focusing too much on group-related identification. In the Stockholm case, it seems clear that the power of group-based identification dominated the classroom, even though individual students demonstrated intra-group differences. In London and Stavanger there was more variation, and many students found the dialog activities well suited for presenting their different ways of interpreting and acting out the "same" religious or world view identities. In doing so, they also opened a social space for individual and personal development. This shows how dialogical religious education can be dynamic and that this understanding of it includes an "aspect of instability and uncertainty".[14] In some cases, the didactic metaphor of bridge building is the most

appropriate because the difference and the distance dominates the under-standing of the actors, and the dialog needs to be established from both sides, before it can serve as a more permanent tool for communication.[15] In other cases the focus on difference and distance is not great and there is a readiness to enter into conversation with one another, but this encounter needs to be secured as safe and to include democratic procedures. Here the metaphor of the safe, public space is more appropriate.[16]

The use of dialog in religious education as a way to teach and learn about the diversity of religions and beliefs is significant in the present case studies and in other literature on dialogical approaches, as referenced here. Researchers tend to balance this instrumental perspective by underlining the complexity of dialog as well as the ethical and political dimensions of this approach. What seems to be less prominent is the attention to develop-ing skills for religion-related dialog among both teachers and students. Although this is often mentioned as a minor aspect, it can be argued that both students and teachers would benefit from acquiring dialogical skills or competences. It is possible that, in the same way that teachers seem to benefit from action research projects, because they develop their own teaching in a community of practice in partnership with researchers, some of the same effects could be experienced by students. The open negotiation of research issues, such as questions, method, theory and analysis, offers a meta language about the teaching and learning process, and this also may contribute to meta-learning on the part of students. In the future, such projects could even aim to equip students to organize dialogical activities themselves.[17] This could pave the way for making dialog between religions and world views something more than a teaching tool; it would also become a set of skills expected as one of the learning outcomes of reli-gious education.

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Notes

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