

## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# The problems and the perspectives of modern religious education in Swedish primary schools

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### ABSTRACT

Primary school religious education is important and understudied in modern educational practice. Classes on religious education are used to impart knowledge to pupils about the world's main religions. Knowledge about specific religions, or how to collaborate with representatives of different religions, is mostly absent. Unfortunately, teachers of religious education often do not use their classes as a tool for their students' moral and spiritual development. It is also one of the problems for Swedish schools and it has to be solved because Sweden is a very multicultural country with representatives of many religions; and one of the tasks of modern schools is to show how to be tolerant of others. This research aims to highlight problems and develop ways of teaching religious education in primary schools through theoretical literature analysis on the research topic. Also, we provide didactic exercises which teachers can use during religion lessons to diversify them and make it more accessible to students.

**Keywords:** primary schools; pupils; tolerance; moral and spiritual development; culture; religious education

## 1. Introduction

One of the main goals of modern primary education is the formation of abilities and social qualities of individuals. The modern world needs proactive, sociable people, who can actively participate in public life, and after graduating from school, adapt to rapidly changing living conditions. However, experience shows, that in various educational systems (the Swedish system is not an exception), children are left without the appropriate level of support and attention, as school education is often not ready to meet the individual educational needs of everyone in the conditions of globalization. And religious education in school could be a strong tool for it. The main goal of the research is to analyze the content, problems, and effective methods of organization of religious education in Swedish primary schools.

To determine the learning degree of problems, an analysis of scientific publications since 2000 was carried out. It was supported by the research system SöderScholar (internal library system of Södertörn University—Stockholm Sweden). This made it possible to search 256 databases including Scopus, Web of Science, and SAGE. The search was conducted in two languages—English and Sweden due to specifics of the chosen topic.

Key words used for searching are “education for sustainable development” (“utbildning för hållbar utveckling”), “religion education in primary school” (“religionsundervisning i grundskolan”), “history of

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religion education in Sweden” (“religionsundervisningens historia i Sverige”), and “history of education for sustainable development in Sweden” (“historia om utbildning för hållbar utveckling i Sverige”). The keywords were determined according to the goal of the research work and related to finding out the way of developing education for sustainable development (ESD) during religious education in Swedish primary schools (1–3 classes).

There is a short analysis of articles (what is published in English and Swedish), that deal with different aspects of research below. There were a few separated directions of research, in which there were illustrations.

- 1) Dealing with teachers’ preparation for ESD.
  - Teachers’ interests and instructional practices to action-orientation in education for sustainable development (SD): survey results showed that “teachers are little interested in action-oriented ESD they teach their students how they should behave in their everyday life in relation to SD issues or they engage them into actions towards SD issues.”<sup>[1]</sup>
  - Comparative analysis of system of preparing teachers for ESD in different countries (including Sweden)—Scotland, Canada, Australia<sup>[2]</sup>, and Germany<sup>[3]</sup>: it makes available insights into problems arising internationally, implications for teachers’ education for sustainable development and suggestions learnings for other countries.
- 2) Content, methods and tools for ESD.
  - Displaying ideas of ESD in curriculum for different types of Swedish schools (in gymnasium, for example)<sup>[4]</sup> or comparative practice of it (Sweden and Japan for example)<sup>[5]</sup>.
  - Role of digital tools for implementation of ESD ideas in learning process (geogames<sup>[6]</sup>).
- 3) Practice of ESD in primary school.
  - Functions of teachers for implementation ideas of ESD in primary school<sup>[7]</sup>.
  - Practice of teachers to implementation ESD in different countries (for example, Greece<sup>[8]</sup>).
- 4) Swedish practice of ESD.
  - How the international practice of ESD is adopted hybridizing with local socio-cultural tradition (Swedish example<sup>[9]</sup>).
  - Practice of ESD in different areas of teaching and in primary schools also<sup>[10,11]</sup>.
  - Implementation ideas of ESD during extracurricular pupils’ activities<sup>[12]</sup>.
- 5) Features of religious education (including in Sweden).
  - Teachers’ preparation for religion education<sup>[13]</sup>.
  - Background of the question<sup>[14]</sup>.
  - Swedish pupils’ attitude to religious education<sup>[15]</sup>.

So, as it could be noticed, that there is much research dealing with problems of religious education, religious education in primary schools, and educational potential of religious education for implementation ideas of ESD in primary schools. But there is no founded scientific research dealing with the history of religious education for pupils’ sustainable development (in Swedish schools also).

Also, the important question is “What are the problems with teaching religious education in primary schools?” Religious education in modern primary schools is a very important constituent of the Swedish education system and it has the educational potential to form the spiritual, moral, social, and cultural aspects of a pupil’s personality<sup>[16]</sup>. Experts in religious education and primary school education in Sweden. Crain<sup>[17]</sup>, Hartwick<sup>[18]</sup>, Kortt and Drew<sup>[19]</sup>, Puskás and Andersson<sup>[20]</sup>, Jackson<sup>[21]</sup>, Sitompul<sup>[22]</sup>, and Hakim and Ritonga<sup>[23]</sup> identified lots of issues in this area, but five of the main problems were: 1) insufficient preparation by teachers,

misunderstandings and a lack of effective teaching methods; 2) ineffective planning in the educational process; 3) poor access to educational resources (teachers do not know where to find interesting materials); 4) a lack of connection to religious education and context in other subjects (elements of religious education can be used in other lessons, for example, teachers could suggest a story with instructive content when a student is learning to read); and 5) a lack of a proper system for assessing students' knowledge and skills.

## **2. Findings**

### **2.1. What is religious education in Swedish primary schools?**

The steering document “Curriculum for the compulsory school, preschool class, and school-age Educare”, available from the Swedish National Agency for Education, outlines that:

Teaching in religion should aim at helping the pupils develop knowledge of religions and other outlooks on life in their society and other parts of the world. Using teaching, pupils should become sensitive to how people with different religious traditions live and express their religion and belief differently. Teaching should in a balanced way illuminate the role that religions can play in society, both in the pursuit of peace and resolving conflicts, to promote social cohesion and as a cause of segregation<sup>[24]</sup>.

In other words, during religious education, pupils should be given opportunities to:

Develop their ability to: analyze Christianity, other religions, and other outlooks on life, as well as different interpretations and use of these; analyze how religions affect and are affected by conditions and events in society; reflect on life issues and their own and other's identity; reason and discuss moral issues and values based on ethical concepts and models; search for information about religions and other outlooks on life and evaluate the relevance and credibility of sources<sup>[24]</sup>.

Also, based on the study program content, we should notice that few directions provide an adequate educational process level for primary school students—religions and other outlooks on life, religion, society, identity and life issues, and ethics.

If students try their best while studying religious education, they will:

Have very good knowledge of Christianity and the other world religions and show this by explaining and showing the relationship and general patterns in key ideas, documents, and concrete religious expressions and actions within the religions. Pupils can also apply well-developed and balanced reasoning about how questions of life are depicted in different contexts, and how identities can be formed by religions and other outlooks on life in a way that carries the reasoning forward and deepens or broadens it. Pupils can search for information about religions and other outlooks on life and use different types of sources in a useful way and apply well-developed and well-informed reasoning about the credibility and relevance of their sources<sup>[24]</sup>.

Primary school teachers should aim to explain the role of religion and faith in daily life and help pupils understand who they are i.e., identify themselves, which leads to understanding basic universal concepts and being tolerant of other people's beliefs.

The national syllabi for the Swedish school system state that teachers should offer religious education to 7–9-year-old students on topics such as:

Religions and other outlooks on life:

- Key ideas and documents in Christianity and the distinctive features of the three main orientations of Christianity: Protestantism, Catholicism, and Orthodoxy;
- Key ideas and documents in the world religions of Islam, Judaism, Hinduism, and Buddhism;

- Varying interpretations and practices in world religions in modern society;
- The main features in the historical evolution of world religions;
- New religious movements, new religiousness, private religiousness, and how this is expressed;
- Secular outlooks on life, such as humanism.

Religion and society:

- The relationship between society and religion in different times and places;
- The role of religion in some political events and conflicts from a critical perspective;
- Conflicts and opportunities in secular and pluralistic societies, such as over issues concerning freedom of religious expression, sexuality, and views on gender equality.

Identity and life issues:

- How different life issues, such as the purpose of life, relationships, love, and sexuality, are depicted in popular culture;
- How religions and other outlooks on life can shape people's identities and lifestyles;
- Rites such as baptism and confirmation, and their function in forming identity and a sense of community in religious and secular contexts.

Ethics:

- Daily moral dilemmas, analysis, and argumentation based on ethical models, such as consequential and deontological ethics;
- Views of the good life and the good person are linked to different kinds of ethical reasoning, such as virtue ethics;
- Ethical questions and the view of people in some religions and other outlooks on life;
- Ethical concepts which can be linked to questions concerning sustainable development, human rights, and democratic values, such as freedom and responsibility<sup>[25]</sup>.

Modern education offers effective approaches for effective work with primary school students during their learning, which could be used during religion classes. There are a few didactic models for the organization of students' learning, which could be used by teachers of religion in primary schools:

- VARK-model learning, which was proposed<sup>[26]</sup> in 1987, involves the presentation of didactic materials, taking into account ways, in which humans have learned new information: visual (pictures, videos, schemes, etc.), auditory (podcasts, songs, audiobooks, etc.), read or write (reading textbooks, writing notes in class and highlighting important details, creating presentations, etc.) and kinaesthetic (conducting experiments, doing "physical" activity, creating flashcards, etc.)<sup>[27]</sup>.
- Kolb's model suggested dividing students into four groups: accommodation (prefer to take a practical, experiential approach; they are suggested to new challenges and experiences, to carrying out plans); diverging (these students can look at things from different perspectives; they are sensitive, and they prefer to watch rather than do, tending to gather information and use imagination to solve problems); assimilating (students are less focused on people and more interested in ideas and abstract concepts); and converging (students can solve problems and will use their imagination to find solutions to practical issues).
- David Kolb also named four stages of learning: 1) concrete experience—learners encounter a concrete experience; 2) reflective observation of the new experience—learners reflect on the new experience in the light of their existing knowledge; 3) abstract conceptualization—reflection gives rise to a new idea, or a modification of an existing abstract concept; 4) active experimentation—the newly created or modified concepts give rise to experimentation<sup>[28]</sup>.

- Bell's model<sup>[29]</sup> is a five-step cycle, which consists of 1) prior knowledge (students can only understand what you are telling them if they can link it to something they already know); 2) presenting new material (recognizing the working memory limit; linking to prior knowledge; using a multi-sensory approach; giving students an advance organizer; linking abstract ideas to concrete examples); 3) challenge (set students tasks which are most likely to make their learning of the new material effective); 4) feedback (to show the student how to improve their knowledge); 5) repetition (allow students to develop long-term memories by revisiting the new material over time)<sup>[29]</sup>.

Using one of these models could make the learning process more effective and accessible for children. Also, if all these models are generalized, it's obvious that the effective educational process has three main stages: sensory perception; generalization of information; comprehension, and verification by practice.

The first stage—a perception of the educational material—is very important but difficult. Teachers must remember the “golden rule” of didactic and try to make the educational environment as accessible as possible. The “golden rule” of didactic by Ya. A. Comenius says, that “Everything should be presented to the external senses, as far as possible, namely: visible to sight, heard to hearing, smelled to smell, tasted to taste, tangible to touch, but if something can be simultaneously perceived by several senses, then imagine this object simultaneously to several senses.”<sup>[30]</sup>

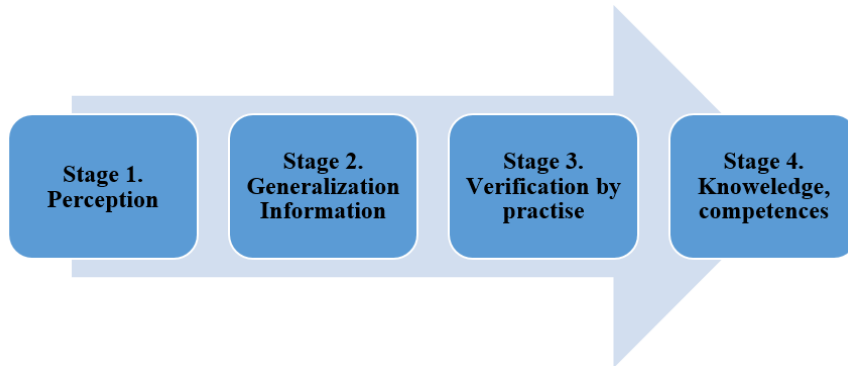
Research on improving first-grade students' sensory sphere is based on the achievements of well-known classic pedagogical scientists<sup>[31–37]</sup>. Retrospective analysis of their creative heritage allows us to state that scholars have identified the important role of perception in the pupils' learning and general development, paid attention to the formation of sensations' many types, the leading of which are recognized as visual-spatial, auditory (phonemic, musical) and tactile. There was no clear scientifically sound system for younger pupils' sensory education, but the accumulated information formed the necessary theoretical and practical basis for the study of psychological, pedagogical, and methodological ways of organizing the process of perception. This knowledge is very important for organizing religious education in primary schools. There are ways to control students' sensory activities and enrich them: printed and electronic textbooks and manuals, which are widely used as a powerful resource for the diverse development of perceptions, and ideas of pupils, changing the external organization of perceptual processes during religious education, personality-oriented and competency-based approaches. That is why during religious education in primary schools, teachers should use a variety of learning tools, for example, meetings with representatives of different cultures and religions, using different pictures and photos, excursions to local houses of worship, and presentations of artifacts.

Teachers could affect all senses by playing music, experimenting with smell (such as incense), considering icons, creating symbols by hand, and tasting special foods. These methods for teaching about different religions are the most suitable for 7–9-year-old children. At this stage, students get information, according to the curriculum of religion in primary school, through their senses—eyes, ears, skin, nose, and tongue. The second stage is the generalization of information. Pupils at primary schools need to analyze (synthesize) information and establish cause and effect interaction between some facts before they can use them in practice. At this stage, students “try to understand” new information (which they get during the classes) and connect it with their previous knowledge.

The third stage of religious education is practice. This stage has two phases: 1) students participating during classes (taking part in discussions and quizzes, carrying out tasks set by the teacher, making presentations, and completing projects); 2) students using their knowledge and competencies outside school.

The result of religious education is knowledge and practical skills, which they can use in ordinary life. If we talk about religion classes, students have to not only know about different religions and cultures but show

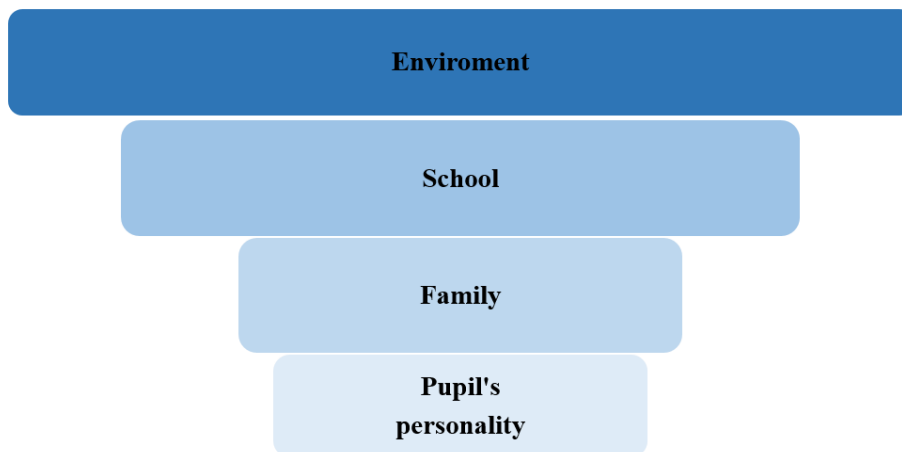
their understanding of the role of moral, spiritual, and social values in daily life with their family, friends, classmates, and so on. The religious education process could be present as a scheme for more effective perception (**Figure 1**).



**Figure 1.** Stage of learning religious education in primary school.

The process of religious education in primary schools is flexible and gives teachers an opportunity for activity and creativity. If teachers want to organize an effective process, the results will be knowledge about different religions and peculiarities of different cultures; the ability to use knowledge, and skills in practice and daily life; and the forming of flexible and tolerant attitudes to surrounding people and the environment. As for components of the effective educational process that must always be present in primary schools—the pupils’ knowledge, the influence of family, the school, and the pupils’ broader social environment.

At the same time, tolerance of attitudes between pupils is a necessary condition of their socialization (**Figure 2**).



**Figure 2.** The necessary components of religious education in Swedish primary school.

## 2.2. What teachers could do for improving the educational process?

When talking about the educational process in primary schools, we must consider the psychological, pedagogical, and age characteristics of pupils.

Primary school children like to dance, listen to music and sing songs, draw pictures, mold plasticine, invent and tell different stories. A variety of different types of paints, colored pencils, plasticine, sand (kinetic, colored, etc.), and other materials provide a wide range of possibilities for making the educational process more relatable for pupils.

There are examples of some educational exercises that teachers can use in different lessons (other than religious education lessons—depending on teachers' professional skills) and the realization of the main goals of religious education in primary schools<sup>[38]</sup>.

Task 1. Guess who?

Technique: drawing.

What you need: an A4 sheet of paper and colored pencils.

Task: choose one of your classmates and draw their portrait.

Action: pupils draw abstract-symbolic or metaphorical portraits of one classmate, imitate them, and then everybody tries to figure out who it is. Then the author of this portrait tells a little about something new about their classmate, without naming him. And the end, the classmate, who was in the portrait, expresses his opinion about it and adds (or adjusts) some facts about himself.

Such exercises help students understand each other better and become more tolerant. This is among the most important methods for strengthening bonds within a group, which improves the environment for the educational process.

Tasks 2. We help each other to know.

Technique: thread drawing.

What you need: different color threads, an A0 sheet of paper, and watercolor paints.

Task: create a collective thematic panel with a thread drawing.

Action: the task is carried out in a collective format for various topics about different religions and cultures (depending on the curriculum). At first, each pupil has ready-made schemes (images of objects) for working. Then he needs to lay it out with the thread. After that, they put it in the area of the general object (all cards have a number, and when children finished their work) and they have to see some religious or cultural objects, which they pick up together. Their homework could be to prepare some information about it.

This kind of educational task helps teachers set more interesting homework (thereby keeping pupils' interest in education), helps pupils discover something new about different cultures, and religions, and communicate with each other during the didactic process.

Task 3. Create it by yourself.

Technique: monotype.

What you need: watercolor paints, glass, an A4 sheet of paper, a sponge, and cotton buds.

Task: make a monotype of a cultural (religious) object in the native city.

Action: with the help of a sponge, apply paint to the surface with a smooth ball. Paint the little ones with a cotton swab. On top, lay the sheet of paper and "take" it. If necessary, add details.

Such exercises provide space for pupils' imagination and encourage pupils to find out more about cultural (religious) objects in their native city.

Task 4. Flexible world.

Technique: moulding.

What you need: colour modeling clay, a picture of Earth (drawn on an A0 sheet of paper).

Task: create a collective work from plasticine about world culture.

Action: accompanied by flute or harpsichord music, pupils close their eyes and imagine cultural objects that they can make from plasticine, and what exactly they want to see in their world. It is necessary to work with eyes closed so that pupils can express feelings and thoughts during modeling. When the molded object is finished, each pupil places it on a pre-prepared panel next to the objects of the other pupils.

Similar exercises make it easier for pupils to get knowledge about the world's cultures, and religions and understand their relation to them.

Tasks 5. Listen! What do you hear?

Technique: music expression.

What you need: recordings of music from different cultures.

Task: show me what you hear!

Action: pupils listen to short excerpts of music from different cultures. One of the pupils tries to show this music using their body and then all the other pupils try to copy the moves. After each excerpt, teachers reveal some interesting facts about the music, for example, its origin.

Music exercises like this not only allow pupils to get to know the music traditions of different cultures and religions, but also have a positive effect on the autonomic nervous system of pupils, stimulate thought processes, and stabilize communicative relations between adults and children.

Task 6. Let me tell you the story about ...

Technique: storytelling.

What you need: children's imagination and a topic for discussion.

Task: make up your own story about a person or events from a different culture or religion than your own.

Action: for homework, pupils make up stories about interesting facts or an interesting person from another culture or religion. Each pupil should present his story as he wishes.

Illustration of a story from their imagination is a very positive moment. Visualization of characters helps a pupil's imagination. Therefore, pupils should invent a story and illustrate it.

It should be emphasized here that teachers could mix different techniques such as storytelling and drawing. For example, when teachers talk about tolerance and communication, they could offer the beginning of the story, ask pupils to finish it, and include further tasks. It could be something like:

Once upon a time, there lived a Little Mouse, and he had two brothers and three sisters. The little mouse was very inquisitive, he was interested in everything: why are the leaves on the tree green, why are the trees tall, why is the sky blue. And why and how? Every morning, Mother Mouse, going to the field for food for the little mice, said that it was forbidden to leave the burrow by yourself. But one day, after the Mother Mouse left, the Little Mouse did not listen and decided to leave the burrow alone to see what the world outside was like.

Tasks:

- 1) Finish the story about the Little Mouse.
- 2) Why do you think the Little Mouse decided to leave the burrow?
- 3) Are there other animals around who help the Little Mouse in your story?
- 4) Choose and draw some of the things that happen in your story? Explain why you chose to draw those parts of your story.

There are many ways to make religious education in primary school more interesting and effective. A lot depends on teachers' creativity and their level of training.

### **3. Limitation of the study**

The findings of this research should be interpreted with some limitations. First of all, the article contains the results of the author's analysis. It means that it is a subjective view of the problem. It means the next stage of research could be to analyze the views of the educational process participants—government, school administrators, teachers, children, and their parents. Secondly, the analysis of the material is quantitative, and



the results of qualitative analysis will complement the study and make it complete.

#### 4. Discussion and conclusion

We have defined the role and main peculiarities of Swedish religious education for pupils' spiritual and moral development. We showed the content of it, a teaching model (that teachers could use). But there we showed only one of the effective methods, that help make lessons of Religion more accessible—didactic exercise. We find out that other ways of it could make research more complete and make the process of learning more effective.

This study presents the author's opinion about the role of religious education in Swedish primary schools—its peculiarities and its potential for pupils' spiritual development. There are a few important conclusions of this research. Firstly, there are a few principal problems in primary religious education—teacher training, the didactic and methodical content of lessons, etc. Secondly, the process of self-education, the influence of the family, school, classmates, and the surrounding society—all of these factors should be recognized for the successful organization of religious education in primary schools. Thirdly, teachers must consider the individual and age characteristics of primary school-age children (taking into account generally accepted norms). Fourth, the best way to organize a correct and effective process of religious education is, when designing a lesson, to take into account stages of educational materials' perception, generalization of information, and practice.

Religious education is an effective tool for moral development in primary schools and is very important, especially in modern society. This postulate has been experimentally proven by Afifa Khanam, Zafar Iqbal and Qudsia Kalsoom. Khanam et al.<sup>[39]</sup> make a conclusion that “with growing age, public school students left behind the out of school children and that of madaris. At the mid years of 7–11, school going students exhibited better moral reasoning than that of madrasa students and children without education. However, at the age of 11–15, the students having madrasa education exhibited the best increase in moral development than their competitors.”

The results of this research could encourage other researchers to find new effective ways of religious education improvements and solve the problems of modern religious education, that were highlighted by leading experts, such as 1) teachers' professional training; 2) more effective planning in the educational process; 3) poor access to educational resources; 4) a lack of connection to religious education and context in other subjects; and 5) a lack of a proper system for assessing students' knowledge and skills.

#### Conflict of interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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