



Children’s existential questions and worldviews: possible RE responses to performance anxiety and an increasing risk of exclusion

Christina Osbeck¹ · Katarina Kärnebro² · Annika Lilja¹ · Karin Sporre³

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Abstract

The aim of this article is to examine patterns in Swedish children’s existential questions and worldviews in 2020 in relation to patterns from 1970 and 1987, but also to point towards a further discussion of importance, about possible RE responses to these findings. The material, children’s texts, comes both from studies conducted by Sven Hartman and colleagues in the 1970s and 1980s, and from new empirical studies. The children’s responses are collected according to the same method, sentence completion tasks, in both cases. Theoretically, the article is anchored in both the tradition of Swedish worldview studies and the new international interest in these perspectives for religious education. Existential questions and worldviews are seen as interdependent in human beings’ life interpretations, which are continuously developing and are both sociocultural and existential in nature. The empirical findings show a strong and increasing focus on relationships, but also a recurrent focus on achievements, which relates to school as context and community. In relation to these findings, the article stresses the importance of RE responses, and discusses concretely what such responses might advantageously include. Among other things, the importance is stressed of an RE that offers the student greater awareness of her life interpretations, and encourages her to develop broader repertoires of frameworks, through which the student might have a better chance to be the author of her own life, which is inevitably a collectively shared life.

Keywords Religious education · Existential questions · Worldviews · Students · Pupils · Schools

✉ Christina Osbeck
christina.osbeck@gu.se

¹ Department of Pedagogical, Curricular and Professional Studies, University of Gothenburg, Box 300, 405 30 Gothenburg, Sweden

² Department of Education, Umeå University, Umeå, Sweden

³ Department of Applied Educational Science, Umeå University, Umeå, Sweden

1 Introduction

The basic question in each curriculum theory is the shift between the curriculum requirements for certain knowledge, skills and values and the child's own environment. [...] Through the history of education, we can see how the perception of this interaction swings like a pendulum between two points. On the one hand, a pedagogy where the child's studies are completely subordinate to a pre-determined teaching material, on the other hand, a teaching in which the child's interests and needs completely determine the structure (Hartman et al., 2004, p. 99, our translation).

A focus on the nature of established relationships between children's questions and educational responses is of importance both for educational research and for practice. It can be considered fundamental in education generally, as described above in the preface of a Swedish translation of the classic John Dewey text, *The Child and the Curriculum*. In religious education (RE) (Sw: *religionskunskap*), there is an additional reason for such a focus, since there is an aim to contribute to children's existential growth, human development (Grimmitt, 1987) or edification (Jackson, 1997). In a Swedish context, an existential-question approach (*livsfråge-ansats*) has, since the late 1960s, had a prominent position, at least in the written national curriculum.¹ Children's existential questions are not only a way into RE, of importance in motivating the students, but are in themselves part of the content of the subject. This gives rise to questions both concerning what kinds of questions children are dealing with, and how these questions can be understood, but also concerning what these questions reveal about contemporary society and challenges for education more broadly.

In Sweden, in the late 1960s, the RE researcher, Sven G. Hartman, started to conduct systematic empirical studies of children's existential questions and perspectives on life, partly due to large changes in the subject of RE that had been carried out during the 1960s. He continued to study children's questions, to a large extent using the same methodology, during the 1970s and 1980s, and into the new millennium. This article presents re-analyses of some of these early studies from the 1970s and 1980s, as well as new empirical studies conducted with the same methods—sentence completion tasks²—which gives opportunities for comparisons.

The *aim* of this article is to examine patterns in Swedish children's existential questions and worldviews in 2020 in relation to patterns from 1970 and 1987, but also to point towards a further discussion of importance, about possible RE responses in connection to these findings.

¹ "*Livsfråga*" is a Swedish concept that is hard to translate into English (e.g. Hartman, 2010). There are different solutions such as "vital issue" (Hartman, 2010), "question of life" (Falkevall, 2010), "life question" (O'Grady, 2009). In this article and the project that forms its context, "existential questions" is the term used.

² "Sentence completion task" refers to the task given to the children for them to respond to (Sw: satskompletteringsuppgift). In this article, below, the short-form "task" is also used.

2 Background: Swedish RE and its development

The subject of RE for compulsory school in Sweden is at present divided in three sub-areas: *Religions and other worldviews*, *Religion and society*, and *Ethics and existential questions* (Skolverket, 2022; see also Sporre, 2022; Sporre, 2023). While the content and the knowledge requirements vary for the different school years, the abilities that the education aims at are common to all years. The teaching concerning the area *Ethics and existential questions* is supposed to provide the students with the prerequisites to develop an “ability to reason about ethics, moral issues and existential questions from different perspectives.” (p. 188). The central content for the teaching in this area in Years 4–6 (10- to 12-year-old students) should be focused on:

Conversation about and reflection on...

... everyday moral issues on the basis of the students' own arguments and different religious interpretations. Such questions can, for example, be about responsibility, exclusion, violations, equality and sexuality.

... existential questions on the basis of the students' own thoughts and different religious interpretations. Such questions can, for example, be about what is important in life and different ideas about what happens after death. (Skolverket, 2022, p. 191, our translation)

Despite its focus on existential questions, the current curriculum can be perceived as being somewhat ambivalent when it comes to its understanding of existential questions as being the students' own questions. Some wordings could also be interpreted as stressing the students' capacity to identify such questions in various religions or worldviews. At present, it is possible to find RE curricula in other countries that are clearer about the nature of the students' existential questions. One such example is the L-E-R subject (*Lebensgestaltung—Ethik—Religionskunde*) in the Berlin-Brandenburg syllabus. The students' own existential questions are included in the content of the subject and become an integrated part of the studies (Sporre, 2023).

By making existential questions the hub of the subject, the Berlin-Brandenburg syllabus is closer to previous Swedish syllabuses, especially the one from 1980, when the subject was actually called “The Human Being's Questions When Facing Life and Existence: Religious Education” (*Människans frågor inför livet och tillvaron: Religionskunskap*). The background to existential questions becoming part of the RE syllabus was the rather rapid development of the subject in the 1960s from a Christian faith subject (*kristendoms-kunskap*) to a neutral, objective and plural subject (1962) that also included critique against religions (Skolöverstyrelsen, 1962, p. 217). Worldview (*livsåskådning*) became a central concept that was supposed to capture both secular and religious philosophies of life. However, the quick transformation created uncertainty regarding the purpose of the subject and a fear of the teaching being biased despite the attempt to make it neutral (Hartman, 2000a, p. 219). The situation called for action, and the curriculum of 1969 launched the existential-questions approach to the subject, where the idea was to regard such questions as a sort of common platform for all students, regardless of their personal convictions. The experience of having existential questions is something that is shared, even if these questions are answered in different ways, in relation to different religions and philosophies on life (e.g. Osbeck, 2013; Sporre, 2022). With such an approach, there is a need for knowledge about what children wonder about, which was investigated in the research conducted by, for example, Hartman (e.g. 1986).

3 Contexts of previous research

3.1 An increasing interest in worldview studies within RE

Internationally today, there is an ongoing discussion about the possibility of broader perspectives on the studies of religions under an umbrella concept such as “worldview education”. Arguments for the advantages of such a change can be found (Valk et al., 2020). These arguments are reminiscent of the ones that were put forward in Sweden more than sixty years ago, that it is important to get to know and make visible how all human beings have “views of life” that lead to “ways of life”, which affect relationships, coexistence and societies—socially, politically and economically. The strong influence of consumerism on the global society of today and what this may lead to cannot be ignored. Hence, systematic and interdisciplinary worldview studies can be considered crucial, which Valk (2010) has also proposed an elaborate model for. As in the Swedish RE context, existential questions have been linked to worldviews, with the latter as possibly offering answers to existential questions (e.g. Bråten, 2022), but have also been seen as parts of worldviews and the life interpretative process of the individual (van der Kooij et al., 2017). Moreover, the fruitfulness of distinguishing between organized and personal worldviews has been stressed (van der Kooij et al., 2013; cf. below).

3.2 Swedish worldview and existential questions research

The increased focus on worldviews in an RE context, gives reason to pay attention to the long Swedish RE interest in worldviews and worldview studies that extends at least from the 1970s and onwards. It seems possible to identify a development from a rather substantial and cognitive concept of worldview to a more functional concept of life interpretation, where the meaning-seeking human being is foregrounded. One of the early definitions of worldview was introduced by Anders Jeffner (1973), where a worldview includes: firstly, theoretical conceptions of the world, secondly, a central value system and thirdly, a basic attitude. In Sweden, especially in the theological research context, this definition has been quite influential, both in text-based and empirical research, but it has also been criticized for its cognitive orientation (e.g. Lindfeldt, 2003).

Despite being influenced by Jeffner’s definition, the empirical and child-centred nature of the research by Hartman and his colleagues led them to express doubts in relation to this definition (Hartman & Pettersson, 1980). As an alternative, they suggested the concept “personal worldview”, which can be understood as an experienced and lived worldview, a worldview in function. A personal worldview is related to both psychological and social resources, and is connected to life questions, questions that arise in human beings’ meetings with existence and the surrounding world (Hartman & Pettersson, 1980, p. 89). Existential questions concerns “the basic conditions for people’s lives and for life in general. An existential question is also an expression of a need to process and reflect on experiences of the world and on oneself in relation to the world and to life in general.” (Hartman & Torstensson-Ed, 2013, p. 20, our translation).

A central and recurrent theme in more recent approaches to worldview studies is that worldviews, to a large extent, should be understood as socially dependent, as they partly are to Hartman and colleagues. Often, these approaches have both drawn on and developed, and criticized, Jeffner’s approach (e.g. Gustavsson, 2013). One example of such an

understanding, far reaching in its contextual and cultural anchoring in everyday life, can be found in Osbeck (2006). Here, the function of bullying, as generating “life understandings” in peer practices at school, is described. Understanding of life, i.e. an understanding of how life works and what gives life value and meaning, is constructed collectively in what is protected and guarded—but also in what is neglected and rejected—in human communities.

3.3 Worldviews as sociocultural phenomena

A contextual and cultural understanding of worldviews can be understood in relation to the broader sociological and sociocultural theoretical landscape. For an understanding of children's life interpretations over time—existential questions and worldviews—two more specific perspectives are of relevance. Firstly, it is important to draw attention to the sociology of childhood tradition that, in line with the Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1989), highlights the recognition of children in their own right, as agents with their own voice (Christiansen & James, 2000), as “human beings”, rather than “human becomings” (Prout, 2005), with points of view that are important to bring to the table (Murriss, 2013) and as producers of culture in “interpretative reproductions” (Corsaro, 1997). Secondly, Thorleif Pettersson's development of Roland Ingelhart's theory for explaining value shifts is of interest. Pettersson (1988) stresses individual values as largely related to societal conditions during the historical period of one's childhood, but also to the specific contexts in which the individual grows up, such as the family or peers that come to constitute one's plausibility structure. Both these perspectives, especially the later, can be understood in relation to sociocultural perspectives on learning (Säljö, 2000; Tappan, 2006; Vygotsky, 1986; Wertsch, 1991).

3.4 Child and curriculum: What kind of questions to respond to?

The focus in this article, on children's existential questions, brings up the issue of possible responses from school and the RE subject, in line with the intentions of parts of the Swedish curriculum. However, there are indications that it is rather doubtful that an existential-question approach has ever, in practice, dominated Swedish RE. Over the years, students have repeatedly stated that they are interested in existential questions but not so much in RE (e.g. Skolöverstyrelsen, 1969; Jönsson & Persson, 2006). RE teachers may see the work with existential questions as time consuming (Löfstedt & Sjöborg, 2018), which may be even more stressful when teachers feel forced to spend a lot of time on knowledge requirements and assessment practices (Kärnebro, 2023).

With the concept pair “child and curriculum”, Dewey signals the importance of a dialectical simultaneity in this relationship. The perspective can be said to be stressed by Gert Biesta's trio of concepts: qualification, socialization and subjectification, in which he highlights three domains of educational purposes. Both socialization and qualification are central from a curriculum perspective, which does not mean that subjectification can be reduced to a child perspective. It rather refers to the responsive attitude of the child concerning the curriculum, which can relate to both qualification and socialization. The responses to children's questions should be given by both teachers and students. It is the teacher's responsibility to point the student towards the world, and towards the global society and its challenges, but it is the students' responsibility to engage with the curriculum they encounter and create meaning based on this (Biesta, 2022).

Previous research reveals what existential questions children frequently ask, i.e. what kind of questions the school can be expected to respond to. These studies, understood in a broad sense, have a long tradition in Sweden (e.g. Skolöverstyrelsen, 1969; Hartman & Pettersson, 1980; Ekström & Odencrants, 1980; Hartman, 1986; Dahlin, 1989; Eriksson, 1999; Hartman, 2000b; Osbeck, 2006, Hartman & Torstensson-Ed, 2013). On the other hand, there is no international research tradition with regard to this, which means that comparative studies are lacking.

According to the Swedish studies, the most frequent and recurrent existential issues that children are concerned about relate to their social relationships. With increasing age, the young people seem to focus on issues further away from themselves, via family and friends, towards the wider society (Hartman, 2000). Loneliness and community are themes that often arise. One of the areas specifically mentioned in the studies with children up to 13 years is exclusion and bullying (Hartman, 1986). Studies with older children have also shown the centrality of relationships (e.g. Dahlin, 1989; Eriksson, 1999; Hallgren, 2003). Moreover, from the perspective of teenagers, exclusion and inclusion can be understood as a question of “adjustment for the benefit of individual competition” (Osbeck, 2006), i.e. social inclusion can depend on adjustment. Certain perspectives are taught and assumed to be learnt and achieved, a pattern that is fed in school by the culture of performance (Osbeck, 2006, cf., for example, Löfgren & Löfgren, 2017). However, as indicated by Hartman’s definition of personal worldviews and existential questions, these phenomena are not only of a sociocultural nature but also of an existential nature—they are integral to our human life (Løgstrup, 2020; Tillich, 1957; cf. Falkevall, 2010; Gunnarsson, 2008).

4 Methodology

In order to analyse children’s written responses to sentence completion tasks as expressions of existential questions and worldviews—which is the aim of the article—an operationalization for such empirical work has been developed, drawing on the theoretical understanding presented above. In sum, we understand children’s existential questions and worldviews as parts of their contextually dependent life-interpretation process. They are constantly developing perspectives on life and existence, which can be expected to vary in space and time. Hence, to capture children’s life interpretations, both existential questions and worldviews, the focuses of analysis need to be broad. In this article, and the project to which it relates, there are seven such focuses or aspects of life interpretation, some of which relate to existential questions and some to worldviews. Firstly, and in line with Hartman’s previous analyses, the *content* in the children’s texts, what they are expressing, is focused on. Existential questions are questions about something specific and have a content. Secondly, and in line with what the tasks in Hartman’s studies often ask for, the *contexts* that the children point at as triggers of such questions are in focus. Thirdly, and in line with the aim of the project,³ attention is paid to the responses as expressions of *knowledge interest*. In order to capture broader life interpretations, analytical focuses common to worldview analyses have been added. Fourthly, and in relation to, for instance, Jeffner’s worldview definition, we focus on both what *values* are given priority in the children’s responses and,

³ The aim of the project (Swedish Research Council, Dnr 2018–03435) to which this study belongs is to generate new knowledge about children’s existential questions as educational concerns, both as expressions of their worldviews and as questions seeking knowledge that call for educational responses.

fifthly, what *basic attitudes* (*grundhållning*), such as trust, hope and despair, may emanate from the texts. Sixthly, we are trying to capture *perceptions of human beings* (cf. “view on humanity” in Valk et al., 2020; van der Kooij et al., 2013), as well as, seventhly, *perceptions of communities* generally, but especially concerning school (cf. “view on life, the world and humanity” in van der Kooij et al., 2013; Valk et al., 2020; and “conceptions of the world” in Jeffner, 1973).

4.1 Concrete empirical work: samples and material

The empirical material that has been analysed consists of written responses by 11- to 12-year-old children to tasks about the surrounding world, existence and life. The new material from 2020 is from ten socioeconomically varied schools, located in ten municipalities with a variation in population density and geographic location, during the academic year 2019/2020 (209 participating students, out of 291 students who were asked, in the project the Child & Curriculum, C&C, here Project C, tested and approved by the ethical review board Dnr 2019-01828).⁴ The older material consists of responses to the same tasks by the same age group of children in 1970 (114 students in the project Teaching methodology RE, UmRe, here Project U) and around 1987 (120 students in the project Children's life situation and life interpretation, Balil, here Project B). Consequently, the tasks used in 2020 are taken from previous studies by Hartman and colleagues. They are projective, in that the children are given stimuli where they are supposed to complete sentences about scenarios involving fictitious children, but in that process, are simultaneously supposed to reveal perspectives from their own lives. The same texts have been used over the course of years, but the accompanying pictures of children have been changed, meaning that the 2020 study also used new pictures, which were drawings, rather than photos, where the children are facing away from the viewer with only their backs visible. This has been done to encourage projection, rather than an interpretation of the picture. Four sentence-completion tasks have been used. They are about: (1) Anders, who is wondering, (2) Anna (called Eva in 1970), who feels good about life, (3) Hans who is anxious and scared, and finally (4) Mårten, who reflects about school, in relation to what it is good for and what you actually learn there.⁵ The three tasks about Anders, Anna and Hans are structurally similar, all

⁴ The data collection was done mainly before the Covid-19 pandemic reached Sweden and long before the Ukrainian war, which are two societal factors that could have affected the findings if the study had been done today in 2023.

⁵ The four sentence-completion tasks:

1. Sometimes it happens that you wonder about things that you can't really figure out. This is ANDERS. You can see how he feels. Right now, Anders is thinking about something that he has wondered about before, and which he really wants to understand more about. Anders is wondering about... You think about things like this when...
2. This is EVA/ANNA. Right now she feels so good about life. She feels really happy even though nothing in particular has happened, it is just an ordinary day. Anna feels like this because... Right now she thinks...
3. Sometimes you can feel anxious or scared although nothing in particular has happened to you. That is the case for HANS right now. He is just sitting and staring into space and feels scared. What is he thinking that makes him feel that way? He is thinking about... You think about things like this when...
4. Here MÅRTEN is sitting and thinking. He thinks about school. What is it good for, and what do you actually learn there? Right now he's thinking... He thinks...

using an open approach, even though they point the students in different directions, towards wondering/curiosity, happiness and anxiety. The Mårten task, which was only used in 1987 and 2020, is somewhat different, since it is less open, clearly directed towards specific experiences of school, i.e. what it is good for, and what you actually learn there. Moreover, while the previous students used paper and pencils, the Project C students responded on computers.

4.2 Concrete empirical work: analyses and ways to present findings

The students' responses to all four tasks have been analysed and coded seven times, separately for each of the seven focuses of analysis—the aspects of life-interpretation—introduced above. Three of the authors have coded the material, with particular responsibility for two to three aspects each. Within each aspect, various categories can be identified, and the same categories were used for the material from all three projects, for all four tasks. Concerning the aspect *content*, the categories used are mainly from previous studies by Hartman, with a few new additional sub-categories. For the other life-interpretation aspects, new inductively developed categories have been used in the analyses. In the process of analysis, the seven aspects, for each of the four tasks in each of the three material groups (with the exception of the Mårten task, where only comparisons between 1987 and 2020 are possible), in sum 77 outcomes concerning life-interpretation aspects,⁶ have been treated as variables, first in an Excel data sheet and later in SPSS. All the categories within the seven aspects have been given specific numbers, which means that all children in the three projects have been assigned numbers for the seven life-interpretation aspects related to each task. Since the life-interpretation aspects are not mutually exclusive, the same kind of category can appear in more than one aspect. Patterns can be identified within the students' responses and these patterns reinforce each other, which increases the trustworthiness of the analyses of the children's life interpretations—existential questions and world-views—understood as a whole.

The comparisons between the three projects, U (1970), B (1987) and C (2020), have been carried out based on the seven aspects and the categories within them, which have emanated from the analyses but also then been applied systematically. First, *for each task separately*, comparisons were made between the frequency with which a particular category, within a particular aspect, appeared in the coded students' responses, for each project (see the Tables 1–7 for vertical and horizontal [task and aspect] project comparisons). This is done because the responses are clearly affected by the situations in the tasks that the children are given, and the various categories show different frequencies in relation to these differences between the tasks. Then, in the second step, the comparisons over time have been done in relation to *each aspect as a whole*, rather than the individual tasks, in order to identify recurrent patterns in each aspect (see the Tables 1–7 for horizontal [task overarching] project comparisons). In a third hermeneutic step, recurrent patterns and changes over time, among the findings relating to *all the seven life-interpretation aspects*, are focused

⁶ There are seven focused life-interpretation aspects, to which attention is paid in the responses to the 4 tasks, i.e. $(7 \times 4) = 28$ outcomes concerning life-interpretation aspects. These analyses have been made for the 3 sets of material (1970, 1987, 2020). That would have meant $(28 \times 3) = 84$ outcomes concerning life-interpretation aspects but since there is no Mårten task in the 1970 material, the seven analyses of the life-interpretation aspects here are not $7 \times 4 = 28$ but $7 \times 3 = 21$ and the total amount is $((28 \times 2) + (21 \times 1)) = 77$ outcomes concerning life-interpretation aspects.

on. This general interpretation draws on the previous stepwise condensation of findings, and looks at general trends rather than specific frequencies.

The analysis of the first step is presented in the attached Tables 1–7, where for each category, the percentage of responses that were coded as relating to that category is given. Here categories that constitute less than 10% of the total category-coded responses in all three projects are left out. There are some exceptions to this, however, for example the categories concerning interest in “space & universe” and “climate & nature”. Here the frequencies are reported even when they are low, since the change in general societal interest in these issues over the course of years is quite obvious. This means that all categories are not shown in the table. For the most part, the same categories were used in the same way for each task in relation to each aspect. However, there is also one exception to this rule. The aspect *content* is analysed through different category systems. While the Hans and Anders tasks share the same category system, the other two (Mårten and Eva/Anna) have a category system that is specific to each of them. This is done in line with how content in previous studies by Hartman has been analysed.

The presentations of the findings in the text below constitute findings from the second analytical step. This draws on the first step, presenting frequencies of categories in percentages, but has a focus on overarching aspect patterns, illustrated with excerpts from Project C (2020) that have not previously been presented in published research.

5 Findings

The order of presentation of the findings for the seven life-interpretation aspects follows the understanding that the *content*, *context* and *knowledge-interest* analyses, which relate to existential questions, are more explicit in the children's task responses, which is why the findings regarding these aspects are presented first. The other four aspects (*values*, *perceptions of human beings*, *perceptions of communities*, *basic attitudes*), which relate to broader worldview perspectives, are more implicit in nature, which is why these aspects are presented after the first three.

5.1 Content

A recurrent pattern in the task-based content categories over the course of the years is the interest in “relationships”, both in the form of “warm and positive” ones as in the Eva/Anna task (U 10%, B 33%, C 23%) and in the fear of “loneliness” as in Hans (U 17%, B 26%, C 23%). Also, “achievements” in relation to “adults and schoolwork” is quite consistently present in the responses (e.g. Anders: U 5%, B 4%, C 4%; Hans: U 10%, B 4%, C 10%). While the focus on relationships is greater in the later material in relation to 1970, with a peak in the 1987 material, examples of categories where interest appears to have decreased are “evil in the world”, where in particular reflections on “war” stand out (Anders: U 13%, B 17%, C 2%). The category called “mystery of existence” especially “universe”—what Anders can be interpreted as wondering about—is also more frequent in the earlier material (Anders: U 8%, B 2%, C 2%). The nature of reflections concerning school in response to the Mårten task seems rather constant over time, mostly regarding “purpose & usefulness”, i.e. reflecting the formulation of the task (what school is good for, and what you actually learn there), but also “achievements”, a category that arises from the responses themselves (Mårten: B 9%, C 9%).

In the following excerpts from students' responses, the first shows the importance of "relationships" and the second the importance of "achievements".

Anna feels like this because...

...she is so happy that she has such kind friends and teachers. She feels happy that she is allowed to go to school and have such amazing friends. She is very happy. Today she and her friends will be together. They are going to go to Anna's house and play fun games, and many more fun things.

Right now she thinks...

...that she is lucky that she has friends, without them Anna would be alone. And she would not have anything to do in her spare time.

No. 27

Right now Mårten is thinking...

..if he is good enough. Imagine if the teachers think he is really bad at school. He wants to know everything but is also afraid of looking stupid. In school you mustn't be wrong because then you will be laughed at. He thinks that the school should take more responsibility so that you could be allowed to be wrong. Of course the teachers tell off those who laugh at you when you are wrong but once they have laughed the damage is already done. But at least you learn what you need to know. But still he wants to learn more, he always wants to learn more and more.

He thinks...

... that the school should be fairer. Last year his friend, who is one year older, got the next year's math book. But now that he's in the same grade as his friend, he doesn't get a better math book even though he's just as good.

No. 11

5.2 Context

Two of the tasks, Anders and Hans, explicitly ask about when the reflections in question occur. This aspect is here referred to as *context*. The other two tasks, which do not ask for this, did not generate a sufficient degree responses that were possible to code for context. The three most frequent response categories, in the Anders and Hans tasks, express that the reflections in question occur when "experiencing something that evokes thought" (Anders: U 53%, B 44%, C 46%; Hans: U 39%, B 46%, C 37%), "receiving a directed message (e.g. TV, music, question)" (Anders: U 22%, B 23%, C 3%; Hans: U 23%, B 19%, C 9%), and "when you are alone" (Anders: U 15, B 30%, C 36%; Hans: U 28%, B 29%, C 41%). The most common of the three, over time, is that such thoughts appear when "experiencing something that evokes thought" where "something" can be of different kinds. While direct messages as causes of reflections decrease over the course of years, being alone as the context for when the child thinks of something increases, and for the Hans task constitutes the largest response category in the 2020 material. How existential questions arise when you are alone is illustrated in the excerpt below, written from the perspective of Anders.

Anders is wondering about...

...whether he fits in.

You think about things like this when ...

...you are left out and alone.

No. 43

5.3 Knowledge interest

Another aspect that reflects the formulation of one of the tasks quite closely is *knowledge interest*. In the task, Anders is described as wanting to understand more about something. In two of the other tasks, the Eva/Anna task and the Hans task, the children are also presented as thinking of something. However, it is only in relation to the Anders task that there have been enough responses that it has been possible to code for knowledge interest, so that patterns of responses could be meaningfully interpreted. From the main categories, it is shown how interest in “international relationships (especially about wars)” has decreased (Anders: U 22%, B 22%, C 4%), while the interest in personal “relationships (how people relate to each other)” has increased (Anders: U 8%, B 31%, C 24%). Even if the tendency is small numerically, it is possible to identify that the larger category “nature and the surrounding world”, includes an interest in “climate & nature” in 2020 that was lacking in 1970 and almost absent in 1987 (Anders: U 0%, B 1%, C 13%). On the other hand, a decreasing interest in comparison to 1970 can be found with regard to “space & universe” (Anders: U 13%, B 3%, C 5%).

Anders is wondering about...

You think about things like this when ...

...how the earth is affected by climate change. He wonders if people will be able to live here in a few thousand years. But one thing he has given extra thought to is whether Sweden will be hit by tsunamis, and other natural disasters that do not normally happen, if humans continue to destroy our planet.

...you see this kind of thing on the news or when you have nothing to do.

No. 28

5.4 Values

The values indicated in the responses, i.e. what, in line with Nussbaum's definition (2001, p. 30) may be seen as notions of “what's worth pursuing”, are, primarily and quite consistently over time, “relationships” and being “high-performing”, both of which have been illustrated in the examples above. From the Anders task, “relationships” appear as more important in 2020 and 1987 in comparison to 1970 (Anders: U 8%, B 25%, C 19%). On the other hand, there are values that appear as stronger in 1970 such as “knowledge” (Anders: U 26%, B 18%, C 22%) and “meaning” (Anders: U 14%, B 6%, C 6%).

Anders is wondering about...

You think about things like this when...

...the meaning of life. What are you meant to do.

Maybe when he is alone and thinks like in the picture.

No. 67

5.5 Human being

In line with the previous pattern, the image of the human being that appears is a “relational”, and a “performance-oriented” one. While the “relational” image increases over time (Eva/Anna: U 11%, B 29%, C 32%), the “performance-oriented” portrayal is more constant (Eva/Anna: U 10%, B 8%, C 12%; Hans: U 13%, B 6%, C 16%). At the same time, there is a decrease in the two categories: the human being as “evil—harm others and do evil deeds”, which occurs mainly in the Anders task (U 51%, B 52%, C 20%), and Hans task (U 38%, B 16%, C 7%), and the human being as “cheerful”, which occurs mainly in the Eva/Anna task (Eva/Anna: U 61%, B 57%, C 47%). In the Mårten task, the two categories “curious” and “performance-oriented” dominate, and here it is quite clear that “performance-oriented” increases (Mårten: B 38%, C 64%), and “curious” decreases (Mårten: B 52%, C 4%). However, the number of responses that it is possible to code as expressions of images of the human being is low for this task.

Right now Mårten is thinking...

He thinks...

...I have to study to get a good job.

... Yep! I have to go to school to get that good job!

No. 30

5.6 Communities

The aspect *communities* has two analytical emphases. The emphasis is partly on what the responses reveal about a perception of the general community to which one belongs, like society. If the community in question, however, is school, there is also an emphasis on interpretations of school as a community. These two emphases are applied to three of the four tasks. Concerning the Mårten task, it is only school as a community that is relevant. The main result categories vary both among the tasks and among the years. While frequently recurring categories in the Eva/Anna task are that community is perceived as somewhere “where you build positive relationships” and “you belong in close relationships” (the two categories together: U 37%, B 44%, C 31%), a perception of community as somewhere “where you risk being excluded” is more common in the Anders and the Hans tasks (Anders: U 6%, B 21%, C 17%; Hans: U 38%, B 28%, C 25%). In the 1970 and 1987 material, this latter category is rather unusual in the Eva/Anna task, but appears, however, more frequently in the 2020 material (Eva/Anna: U 3%, B 0%, C 8%). In the Anders and Hans tasks, another frequent category is one where the community is “threatened (war, injustice, climate)”. This category is less frequent in 2020 than in both the 1970 and 1987 material (Anders: U 24%, B 32%, C 14%; Hans: U 23%, B 30%, C 12%).

The presence of school as community clearly increases over the course of years, especially when anxiousness is stressed, i.e. in the Hans task (U 10%, B 20%, C 28%). The tendency is weaker for Anders (U 14%, B 16%, C 20%), and less clear for Eva/Anna (U 20%, B 14%, C 22%). In the Hans task, the two most common interpretations of school as community are about somewhere “where you should achieve” and “where young people are excluded/teased”. While the achievement category is reasonably constant over time (U 9%, B 7%, C 11%), the excluded/teased category increases (U 0%, B 8%, C 12%). In the Mårten task, the two most frequent categories concerning perceptions of school as community

are as somewhere “where you learn and develop” (B 46%, C 50%) and “where things are unclear or not obviously meaningful” (B 20%, C 13%). The first one is the most frequent and also the one that increases from 1987 to 2020.

Even though school as a context to worry about usually appears in relation to the Hans task, anxiety about school is indirectly present in interpretations of Eva's/Anna's happiness over life, in relation to both performing: “where you should achieve” (U 10%, B 10%, C 15%), and having access to friends: “where young people are excluded/teased” (U 0%, B 0%, C 3%).

Anna feels like this because...

Right now she thinks...

... no one bullies her. It's going well at school. She has a lot of friends.

When she's in school.

No. 178

5.7 Basic attitude

The last aspect focused on is basic attitudes, which Jeffner (1973) exemplifies with trust, hope and despair, also distinguishing between a tone which is mainly positive and one which is mainly negative. While it is not possible to claim that the attitude indicated by a response reflects the basic attitude of the student in general, in many cases there are indications of an attitude that permeates a particular response, and it is this that is referred to here as a basic attitude. The attitudes that dominate are related to the task in question, so the attitudes in relation to the Eva/Anna task are, not surprisingly, more positive than the Anders and Hans tasks. While attitudes such as “options” (U 19%, B 20%, C 17%), “contentment” (U 21%, B 11%, 14%) and “gratitude” (U 12%, B 11%, C 16%) dominate in the Eva/Anna task, “fear” (U 27%, B 30%, 18%), “worry” (U 26%, B 31%, C 25%), and “sorrow, especially losses and loneliness” (U 23%, B 10%, 31%), are the most frequent ones in the Hans task. Among these “sorrow, especially losses and loneliness” seems to be the one that clearly increases over time, both in the Hans task and in the Anders task (U 7%, B 15%, 18%).

Hans is thinking about...

... that he wants to go and play football with the other boys, although he doesn't dare ask if he can join, so he wants the break to end, so that they can start the Swedish lesson. So he doesn't have to sit alone.

No. 144

5.8 Conclusions

In sum, we have seen how the life-interpretation aspects fall into two groups. The first one (*content, context, knowledge interest*) is more concretely and explicitly linked to the tasks themselves and to the responses of the children as expressions of their existential questions. The aspects in the other group are more implicitly expressed, and relate to *values*, a perception of existence where images of the *human being* and *community* are central, as well as *attitudes* as permeating such perceptions, i.e. aspects of worldviews. Together, these two groups reveal broader life interpretations and life-interpretation processes.

The current findings present a picture of children's life interpretations where relationships and achievements stand out recurrently, and have core positions as values. In relation to this, an understanding emanates of a human being in a community where one risks being excluded and lonely, where one risks being insufficient and thereby exposed. The comparisons over time indicate an increasing interest in relationships but also a decreasing interest in societal and global issues such as war. Neither can the earlier level of interest in space and the universe be seen among the responses in the 2020 material. Moreover, a slight interest in climate can be discerned in 2020 which cannot be identified in the material from 1970 and only on a very small scale in the material from 1987.

6 Discussion

The *aim* of this article has been to examine patterns in Swedish children's existential questions and worldviews today, in 2020, in relation to patterns from 1970 and 1987, but also to point towards the importance of a further discussion, regarding possible responses within RE in connection to these findings. In this final section, we discuss two central issues: firstly, what it may mean that the central existential questions and worldviews of students in middle school in Sweden concern relationships, fear of being excluded, and achievements, and secondly, to initiate a further discussion on possible RE responses to such issues.

On the one hand, the findings are not surprising at all. As shown in the presentation of previous research, relationships are the most recurrent issue over time, and exclusion is also mentioned in the Swedish curriculum as one of the central existential questions for RE teaching. On the other hand, it should also be noted that there are indications that relationships and loneliness, as themes for reflection, are stronger in 2020 than they were in the past, at least in the 1970s. However, one could also say that the students point towards the most fundamental characteristic of being human, that is, as the Danish theologian and ethicists K.G. Løgstrup stresses, our mutual interdependence.

Our life is simply created over our heads, such that it cannot be lived in any other way than that one human being, through trust that is either shown or desired, delivers themselves up to the other human being and thereby puts more or less of their life in the other's hands. By our mere attitude to one another, we take part in giving shape to each other's world. Through my attitude to the other person, I play a part in determining the breadth and colour that the other person's world has for them. I play a part in making it broad or narrow, light or dark, varied or dull—and not least I play a part in making it threatening or secure. This comes about not through theories and views, but through my mere attitude. This is why there is an unspoken, and one might say anonymous, demand on us that we take care of the life that trust puts in our hands (p. 17 f).

Life interpretations, existential questions and worldviews are not only sociocultural in nature. They are also existential, in that they deal with issues that are integral to life and existence.

The fact that, in addition to relationships, achievements constitute a central part of young people's life interpretations has not been emphasized very much in previous research. However, this fact is hardly surprising, if one considers that it is school that constitutes their everyday life practice. School is an arena where achievements and learning demands are stressed, demands that could become destructive. Nevertheless,

achievements and demands for achievements, such as responses to the “anonymous demand” mentioned by Løgstrup above, may also be what gives life a meaning. Performance appears particularly central when the school as context is emphasized in the task, which directs focus towards existential questions as socioculturally and contextually conditional (e.g. Corsaro, 1997; Pettersson, 1988).

The tendency in the 2020 material towards less interest in the surrounding world, in societal and global issues, is also a pattern to reflect on. Young people's existential questions and worldviews can be expected to have consequences for the communities and societies that we create together (e.g. Valk, 2010). It seems important, as Peter Kemp (2005) points out, to consider how the demands of the unknown and distant neighbour could become as concrete as the demands of the known and close neighbour. On the one hand, less focus on societal and global issues is a pattern that seems paradoxical since the world of today is much more global than it was fifty years ago. On the other hand, it could reflect a more individualistic culture and, in that sense, highlights the sociocultural nature of life interpretations, emphasized above (e.g. Corsaro, 1997; Pettersson, 1988). Life interpretations of this nature may also be interpreted as being reflected in, for instance, the earlier greater interest in space and universe (Buchardt et al., 2022), but also in the emerging interest in climate.

So, what possible RE responses could be considered in relation to these findings? What might a dialectical relationship between child and curriculum look like (cf. Dewey, 1966; Biesta, 2022)? In order to give the students the opportunity to deepen their existential questions and worldviews, attention must be paid within education to relationships and achievement. Concerning relationships—inclusion and exclusion, and how they appear among young people—there is empirical research and knowledge about this (e.g. Forsberg, 2019; Thornberg, 2020). It is reasonable to expect that young people in school should be given access to that information and have the opportunity to explore and discuss it. However, RE can also offer a response to existential loneliness, as it is in the position to offer students broad repertoires of narratives about the fundamental conditions of human existence that include issues such as exclusion and demands for achievement. Religions and other worldviews constitute a language about life, about existence, about what it means to be a human being in mutual interdependence. Through religious and life interpretative stories, the students may be given the opportunity to develop a language seldom met in everyday life, i.e. about being accepted despite unacceptable deeds and characteristics, about the presence and power of unconditional love (Osbeck et al. 2023).

In order to address frequent existential questions of students, the teaching needs to recognize achievement as a value. The distinction between intrinsic values and extrinsic values seems to be of importance. What difference does it make to give achievement extrinsic rather than intrinsic value? Achievement becomes a means to an end, not an end in itself. So, achievement might mean responding to ethical demands, making the other's world brighter, and thus finding life meaningful and creative. In order to contribute to society, to respond to the needs of one's neighbour, or to care for oneself, strong achievements are of great value. Also, in order to develop knowledge, such as in English, mathematics or RE, achievements are central. Knowledge is powerful and brings people nearer “to truth about the world we live in and to what it is to be human” (Young, 2013, p. 107). However, it is not the achievement in itself that constitutes value, but what can be achieved with the help of it. Teaching that makes it possible for students to realize these differences in the meaning of achievement have at least to some extent responded to existential questions of children.

It is the responsibility of the teacher and curriculum to meet the child where she is with her interests and her questions, but rather than allowing her to remain there, also help her to broaden these interests and questions. In line with Biesta (2022), directing focus towards the possibilities that school achievement gives, having a matter-of-fact attitude towards achievement, instead of giving the impression of that it is a character or status issue, is a way to point the student towards the world, towards the global society and its challenges. In relation to the identified tendencies towards less interest in societal questions, knowledge and meaning, and more interest in personal issues, Biesta's remarks seem to be of great value. If, in addition to this, the classroom can be established as a space where shortcomings are permitted, the practices within RE can be considered to respond even more to the existential questions of students.

Lastly, a difficulty in interpreting the findings occurs. From a collectivistic perspective, it seems disheartening that loneliness has increased. On the other hand, the students also express the idea that it is when we are alone that existential reflections are triggered. Solitude, a loneliness that is deliberate, implies a self-realization, providing opportunities to meet ourselves but also others—close and distant—in our reflections (Stern & Walejko, 2020). This implies perhaps that a little loneliness can also be of value, but how does one communicate such an idea to young people?

No matter how the student positions herself existentially, and in relation to what framework of meaning she re-presents herself (cf. Valk et al., 2020), RE could offer the student greater awareness of this framework (cf. Shaw, 2023), but also a broader repertoire of frameworks, which might work as alternatives and give the student a better chance to be the author of her own life (Sporre et al., 2022). An RE response to existential issues in general, and an experienced fear of being excluded in particular, could be an offer of existential development in the presence of alternative, collectively held, visions of communities that are both already here and not yet here (e.g. Grimmitt, 1987).

Tables 1–7: Category frequencies in percentages for each task and each life-interpretation aspect of the three projects from U 1970, B 1987 and C 2020^{1, 2}

	U: n = 93	B: n = 102	C: n = 140	Eval/ Anna n = 92	B: n = 108	C: n = 150	Hans	U: n = 101	B: n = 106	C: n = 145	Mårten	B: n = 100	C: n = 139
Anders	18	29	4	39	25	25	Evil in the world	42	36	19	Mårten	38	50
	13	17	2	35	20	42	War	13	20	2	* School as institution	22	27
	15	14	25	3	6	9	* To have a good time	8	10	14	* Purpose & usefulness	36	26
	12	14	14	10	33	23	Achievements	0	4	3	* Teaching & learning	9	9
	0	1	8				* Climate & nature	13	11	18	* Achievements		
	10	14	14				* Adults & schoolwork	10	4	10			
	5	4	4				Achievements	17	26	23			
	4	20	14				* Loneliness & peer relationships						
	39	13	18				* Loneliness & peer relationships						
	8	2	2				Mystery of existence						
							Universe						

	U: n = 81	B: n = 101	C: n = 149	Eval/ Anna n = 7	B: n = 7	C: n = 13	Hans	U: n = 93	B: n = 103	C: n = 153	Mårten	B: n = 1	C: n = 5
Anders	22	23	3	Too few coded responses			Hans	23	19	9	Mårten		
	53	44	46				* When you receive a directed message (e.g. TV, music, question)	39	46	37	Too few coded responses		
	15	30	36				* When you experience something that evokes thought	28	29	41			
							* When you are alone						

	U: n = 64	B: n = 95	C: n = 93	Eval/ Anna n = 10	B: n = 11	C: n = 10	Hans	U: n = 10	B: n = 9	C: n = 14	Mårten	B: n = 32	C: n = 23
Anders	28	10	28	Too few coded responses			Hans	Too few coded responses				81 (26 indiv)	78 (18 indiv)
	13	3	5				* To learn more about school subjects						
	0	1	13										
	13	2	8										
	22	22	4										
	8	31	24										
	5	5	16										

	Anders	U:	B:	C:	Eva/Anna	U:	B:	C:	Hans	U:	B:	C:	Mårten	B:	C:
	U: n = 87 n = 103	U: n = 128 n = 103	U: n = 86 n = 104	U: n = 27 n = 18	U: n = 23 n = 19	U: n = 10 n = 9	U: n = 11 n = 11	U: n = 7 n = 9	U: n = 27 n = 18	U: n = 59 n = 66	U: n = 0 n = 4	U: n = 54 n = 4	U: n = 59 n = 4	U: n = 0 n = 2	U: n = 56 n = 53
Anders	58 26 8 12 6 8	58 18 25 19 5 8	56 18 22 15 5 11	27 23 10 9 6 11	23 19 10 9 6 11	10 9 6 12 2 10	11 10 2 16 13	7 9	27 18	59 66	0 4	54 4	59 4	0 2	56 53
Values	* Existence & Relationships Knowledge Relationships Space & universe Climate & nature Character traits High-performing Other values Meaning Future	* Entertainment & Happiness Existence & Relationships Relationships Life Animals Character traits High-performing	* Existence & Relationships Knowledge Relationships Life Space & universe Climate & nature Character traits High-performing	* Existence & Relationships Knowledge Relationships Life Space & universe Climate & nature Character traits High-performing	* Existence & Relationships Knowledge Relationships Life Space & universe Climate & nature Character traits High-performing	* Existence & Relationships Knowledge Relationships Life Space & universe Climate & nature Character traits High-performing	* Existence & Relationships Knowledge Relationships Life Space & universe Climate & nature Character traits High-performing	* Existence & Relationships Knowledge Relationships Life Space & universe Climate & nature Character traits High-performing	* Existence & Relationships Knowledge Relationships Life Space & universe Climate & nature Character traits High-performing	* Existence & Relationships Knowledge Relationships Life Space & universe Climate & nature Character traits High-performing	* Existence & Relationships Knowledge Relationships Life Space & universe Climate & nature Character traits High-performing	* Existence & Relationships Knowledge Relationships Life Space & universe Climate & nature Character traits High-performing	* Existence & Relationships Knowledge Relationships Life Space & universe Climate & nature Character traits High-performing	* Existence & Relationships Knowledge Relationships Life Space & universe Climate & nature Character traits High-performing	* Existence & Relationships Knowledge Relationships Life Space & universe Climate & nature Character traits High-performing
Human Being	U: n = 37 n = 44	U: n = 20 n = 44	U: n = 110 n = 95	U: n = 61 n = 29	U: n = 11 n = 10	U: n = 8 n = 10	U: n = 11 n = 11	U: n = 7 n = 9	U: n = 27 n = 18	U: n = 24 n = 59	U: n = 18 n = 13	U: n = 57 n = 18	U: n = 42 n = 29	U: n = 5 n = 5	U: n = 21 n = 25
Anders	3 3 27 0 5 5	34 30 0 2 5 5	37 44 110 95	61 29	11 10	8 10	11 11	7 9	27 18	24 59	18 13	57 18	42 29	5 5	21 25
Human Being	* Relational Alone or exposed * Inadequate * Selfish * Creative * Evil - harm others and do evil deeds	* Relational Alone or exposed * Inadequate * Selfish * Creative * Evil - harm others and do evil deeds	* Relational Alone or exposed * Moral * Evil - harm others and do evil deeds * Performance oriented	* Cheerful Relational * Performance oriented	* Relational Alone or exposed * Moral * Evil - harm others and do evil deeds * Performance oriented	* Relational Alone or exposed * Moral * Evil - harm others and do evil deeds * Performance oriented	* Relational Alone or exposed * Moral * Evil - harm others and do evil deeds * Performance oriented	* Relational Alone or exposed * Moral * Evil - harm others and do evil deeds * Performance oriented	* Relational Alone or exposed * Moral * Evil - harm others and do evil deeds * Performance oriented	* Relational Alone or exposed * Moral * Evil - harm others and do evil deeds * Performance oriented	* Relational Alone or exposed * Moral * Evil - harm others and do evil deeds * Performance oriented	* Relational Alone or exposed * Moral * Evil - harm others and do evil deeds * Performance oriented	* Relational Alone or exposed * Moral * Evil - harm others and do evil deeds * Performance oriented	* Relational Alone or exposed * Moral * Evil - harm others and do evil deeds * Performance oriented	* Relational Alone or exposed * Moral * Evil - harm others and do evil deeds * Performance oriented

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