

Discourses of Religion and Secularism in Religious Education Classrooms

Karin Kittelmann Flensner

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 Springer

Karin Kittelmann Flensner
University West
Trollhättan, Sweden

ISBN 978-3-319-60948-5 ISBN 978-3-319-60949-2 (eBook)
DOI 10.1007/978-3-319-60949-2

Library of Congress Control Number: 2017944626

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Printed on acid-free paper

This Springer imprint is published by Springer Nature
The registered company is Springer International Publishing AG
The registered company address is: Gewerbestrasse 11, 6330 Cham, Switzerland

Foreword

This book is based on the research that formed the basis of my dissertation “Religious Education in Contemporary Pluralistic Sweden” that I defended in the autumn of 2015. Judging by the reactions in the aftermath of the dissertation, it seems clear that talk of religion arouses much emotion in our pluralistic and secular societies. This book focuses on questions about the discourses or different ways of talking about religion that emerge when the school subject of Religious Education is on the schedule, but it also seeks to make a contribution to the discussion about the role of religion in the public sphere and aims to problematise secularistic positions as neutral in relation to religious positions. It is my hope that the book can contribute to reflections about and greater awareness of positions taken for granted and the processes that construct and maintain “us” and “them”, especially in educational settings. The study that forms its basis was conducted in Sweden, a country that is often referred to as “the most secularised country in the world”. However, I believe that issues related to how to enhance democratic values such as freedom of speech and freedom of religion and how to manage education in increasingly pluralistic, but also increasingly polarised, societies are crucial in our time and are therefore not limited to Sweden.

I myself am a teacher, and I have been working in upper-secondary schools for roughly ten years. When working as a teacher of Religious Education I often experienced professional dilemmas in trying to reach all students who had various backgrounds and relations to the subject matter which I as a teacher had to deal with. I tried to fulfil the demands of the curriculum and syllabus while simultaneously striving to manage expectations from students with different relations to and opinions about religion and religions in a respectful and professional way. In my work, questions of how to operate in this minefield arose as did questions about why religion in some respect was such a sensitive subject. When looking for research concerning these questions, I found that there were very few studies that had looked into what happens in the classroom in general. There were even fewer studies that had taken an interest in what happens in the classrooms where various school subjects are taught and still fewer studies of Religious Education classrooms, and this became the starting point of this study. One way of approaching classrooms where

different school subjects are taught is through a lens that focuses on the interplay between subject content, students and teachers. The classrooms are affected by the articulations of teachers and students as well as by the subject of instruction (content). However, the classroom is also highly influenced by societal features and discourses in the society of which it is a part.

Disposition

This book consists of nine chapters. In the first chapter, the field and focus of the study are introduced, and the following one offers a presentation of sociological perspectives of the religious landscape in contemporary society, with an emphasis on religion and youth. Chapter 3 gives some perspectives on what a school subject can be and discusses assumptions of knowledge underlining different ways of organising and perceiving education. Religious Education is organised in very different ways with different goals in different countries, and in Chap. 3 different models of religious education are therefore outlined. In this chapter, the reader also is given an overview of the historical background and development of contemporary Religious Education in Sweden. This study is a classroom study, and in order to outline the current state of knowledge within this field, a review of classroom studies of Religious Education has been conducted and is presented in Chap. 4. In Chap. 5, the methodological and theoretical approaches of the study are defined. For a more thorough and detailed account of the theoretical and methodological considerations involved, I refer the reader to the actual thesis (Kittelman Flensner, 2015).

The results of the study are presented in Chaps. 6, 7 and 8 and focus on the discourses of religion, religions and worldviews that were articulated in the Religious Education classroom practice observed. In Chap. 6, it is shown how a secularist discourse was articulated in the Religious Education practice. This discourse was at some points challenged by a spiritual discourse, and in Chap. 7, this way of talking about religion, religions and worldviews is outlined and analysed. There were also articulations in the Religious Education practice observed that linked Sweden to a Christian heritage and which defined Sweden as a Christian country. The way that Swedishness was constructed is presented in Chap. 8. In Chap. 9, the study is summarised and discussed in relation to its implications for the subject of Religious Education in secular and pluralistic classrooms.

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