

Article

Funded Research in Relation to Curriculum Development—Tendencies in Religious Education in Sweden 2001–2019

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Received: 1 September 2020; Accepted: 30 September 2020; Published: 12 October 2020



Abstract: In 2001, the Swedish Research Council (VR) set up a new section to expand educational research. The section has now existed for almost 20 years without receiving much attention within research. During the same period, the demands on teachers to base their teaching on research have increased, e.g., through the revised Education Act, which can be understood as presupposing available relevant research and a research-based curriculum. In this article, the focus of funded research projects relevant to religious education (RE) during these years is explored. The resulting patterns are discussed against the background of published RE research and put in relation to a study of curriculum changes in Sweden during the same period. The overall aim of this paper is to discuss the relationship between RE research and RE curricula in Sweden. The study is conducted through content analyses of project applications and reports to VR, and of curricula. The research interest of the projects concerning ‘religion’ and ‘ethics’ are presented, and their possible contribution to curriculum development is also outlined. The absence of obvious research influence on current curriculum development suggests further research on this topic is required, since the legitimacy of the curriculum can be understood to be dependent on its being based on research.

Keywords: religious education; research; curriculum

1. Introduction

In 2001, the Swedish Research Council set up a new research section with a special focus on educational research. Previously, the most closely related section was in educational sciences as a discipline (pedagogik). The division of sections at that time was criticised, among other reasons for hindering the development of subject matter education research, which was seen as important for school development and practice (Askling 2006, p. 10). Research applications in subject matter education such as religious education (RE) could be sent to the board dealing with educational sciences, the board for religious studies or both. The likelihood was large that proposed RE research was neither considered to be science of education research nor religious studies research, and it was therefore hard to obtain funding.

The new educational research section (utbildningsvetenskap) was supposed to solve this problem, particularly as one of the subsections was in subject matter education research. Generally, one can say that the motives for the establishment of the new research section followed two main lines of reasoning. One, in close relation to what has been argued here, was the importance of safeguarding access to research funding for teacher education institutions, and the other concerned teachers’ opportunities to obtain funding for postgraduate education (Lundgren 2006, p. 8). Together these two lines indicated an ambition to strengthen the research foundation of teacher education and teaching practice. Both subject

matter research and research in disciplines such as, for example, pedagogy, psychology, sociology, and philosophy were noted as important in educational research (Lundgren 2006, p. 7).

The educational section has now been in existence for almost 20 years, but little has been written about this change. During the same period, the demands on schools and teachers to use research as a basis for their activities have increased. The Swedish Education Act from 2010 states that ‘education should be based on research and proven experience’ (SFS 2010, p. 800, our translation). The wording could be understood as presupposing that relevant research is available, as well as that the curriculum is based on research. Neither of these conditions can be taken for granted. In this article, we explore the focus of funded research projects of relevance to RE during these years. The resulting patterns are discussed against the background of what we know about RE practice in Sweden and put in relation to a study of curriculum changes in Sweden during the same period. All in all, the *aim* is to discuss the relationship between RE research and RE curricula in Sweden based on these two sources of data.

2. Knowledge about RE Practice from Empirical Research

2.1. A Background to the Situation 2001–2019

In order to understand RE practice between 2001 and 2019, the history of this area is important (e.g., Hartman 2000; Kittelmann Flensner 2015; Osbeck and Skeie 2014). In the 1960s, there was a rapid development with several changes to the national curriculum that transformed RE from a Christian faith subject (*kristendomskunskap*) to a neutral, objective, and plural subject (1962), which only a few years later was given the general name ‘knowledge of religion’ (*religionskunskap*) (1969).¹ In this regard, the curriculum is mainly the same today as it was then, but is now less unique in a Nordic context. Even though the teaching of the new subject was expected by the government to be objective and to be conducted without influencing the pupils in any direction, the content came primarily from the Christian tradition. Non-Christian traditions were also part of the content, as well as ‘... the currents that put the value of religious truths in question ...’ (Lgr 62, in Hartman 1994, p. 16). The fact that few textbooks met the objectivity goal led to uncertainty among teachers as to whether their teaching could be considered as neutral. This specific uncertainty, in combination with a general uncertainty about the purpose of such a school subject, had long-lasting effects on the subject teaching, hence the characterisation of teaching as affected by an ‘objectivity cramp’ (Hartman 2000, p. 219).

The rapid change in aim and conditions for the RE subject in the 1960s affected the direction of research, meaning that much research from the 1960s to the beginning of the 21st century has been on the *aim of the subject* and the possibility of finding common starting points for pupils (e.g., Osbeck 2006).

As early as 1969, the national curriculum stated the importance of children’s life questions. Different religious traditions could be dealt with as possible answers to such life questions, an approach that has also drawn critical comments, both for giving an inaccurate understanding of what a religious tradition is and of how life questions arise.² However, another recurrent perspective among RE scholars has been to underline the contribution of the subject to pupils’ life interpretations. Nevertheless, among school teachers, studies have shown how ‘learning about’ perspectives on RE have a much stronger position than ‘learning from’ perspectives on RE (e.g., Osbeck and Pettersson 2009).

Research patterns concerning the content of pupils’ life questions, i.e., what they actually wonder about, show social relationships to be a central theme. As the children grow older, they seem to lift their eyes further away from themselves and the family, to the peer group and the wider community (Hartman 1986; Hartman 2000; Hallgren 2003).

¹ The curriculum changes can be understood as related to broader secularisation tendencies in society in previous years (e.g., Lindfelt 2003, p. 46ff; Skogar 1993, p. 234). For a summary in English see (Osbeck and Skeie 2014).

² A more elaborated description can be found in (Osbeck and Skeie 2014).

2.2. The RE Situation 2001–2019

Empirical RE research after 2001 is also limited but can for the most part be described as being focused on what happens ‘before’ learning processes, that is, on conditions for teaching and learning, such as teachers’ and pupils’ knowledge and interest in the subject (Osbeck and Lied 2012a). There is therefore little information available about learning processes as they actually take place in the classroom. However, some information on RE practice can be found, for instance, in findings relating to national evaluations of Swedish school subjects, which involved tests for pupils and questionnaires for both pupils and teachers (e.g., Jönsson and Liljefors-Persson 2006). Comparisons between results concerning RE and the other subjects (civics, history, and geography) included in social studies have shown RE to have a comparatively weak position, in that RE has been the subject in which the smallest proportion of pupils have expressed interest, and one of the subjects that the teachers have said to be most demanding to teach (Skolverket 2004, p. 51). Concerning the three main sub-areas of RE—that can be referred to as *Religions, Life questions and Ethics*—the latest evaluation (Jönsson and Liljefors-Persson 2006) showed that pupils generally had a rather strong interest in Life questions and thought regularly about these issues, but that life questions did not seem to be very much on the teaching agenda. Concerning the area of Religion, the evaluation showed, for example, that the pupils’ knowledge about Christian festivals was better than their knowledge about festivals in Islam. In Ethics, the evaluation showed, in line with previous evaluations, that it was easier for pupils to support democratic values than to give arguments in defence of these values (Skolverket 1993, p. 174).

Gradually, the national evaluations of the 1990s and the early 2000s have been replaced by national tests in Sweden. In 2013, the first tests in the four social studies subjects were launched. These annual tests, carefully based on the knowledge requirements of the national syllabuses, show that the best results were in RE. According to the national agency, comparisons between the results in these subjects are difficult to make, however, since the syllabus³ requirements may differ in difficulty for the four subjects, i.e., better results may be due to lower requirements (Skolverket 2018). In addition, the negative effects on practice that such test results may trigger are given attention in research (e.g., Sporre 2019; Conroy 2013). However, there are also studies arguing for the importance of a school system that shows an interest in developing basic knowledge for all children, even in RE, where there may be some difficulty in establishing what this ‘basic knowledge’ is or should be (Osbeck et al. 2018).

In RE research and popular science publications 2006–2011, the focus mentioned above on the aim of the subject can be found. Here, texts written for RE teachers by researchers in religious studies or theology dominate. Nevertheless, studies that focus on what happens ‘in’ learning processes are rare (Osbeck and Lied 2012a).

Among the larger studies and doctoral dissertations during 2001–2019, it is possible to detect *three tendencies*. *Firstly*, there has been some empirical work stressing *contextual processes and informal processes* as being important for formal and ongoing learning. This does not mean that the importance of such processes has always been found to be taken into consideration in the formal teaching, but rather the opposite. For instance, multicultural schools have unique opportunities and resources for RE learning, opportunities that, however, can be neglected in favour of a ‘Swedish’ hegemonic norm (von Brömssen 2003, p. 311f). In this way, knowledge and traditions that pupils bring into the classroom may become invisible when boundaries between religious and non-religious knowledge are drawn (p. 329).

The fact that the composition of pupils in the classroom is a context that affects the teaching is a theme that reoccurs in RE studies. For instance, attention has been paid to the paradox of teaching in a factual and neutral way about a phenomenon that for many religious adherents and pupils is anything but neutral, but is rather emotional and vital (Holmqvist Lidh 2016). For pupils who position themselves within a religious tradition, the school RE teaching may alienate them from their

³ In this article, the terms curriculum (läroplan) and syllabus (kursplan) are used, where the curriculum includes both general, non-subject-specific sections and the syllabuses (kursplaner) for the individual subjects.

own tradition. They may feel that the teaching lacks an experiential, emotional, and here-and-now dimension. Instead, there is a risk that religious people may be stereotyped in teaching as people who all act in the same regulated way. RE practice appears in these studies as sensitive encounters where much is at stake. The lessons may be transformed into occasions for abuse, but they can also become arenas for increased mutual understanding in a multireligious and global society. Other studies have stressed how pupils' life understandings and life interpretations are shaped by informal contexts in school that interact with their formal RE learning without attention necessarily being paid to this. For instance, victimisation (*kränkning*) may function as a learning tool in re/constructing a hegemonic life understanding, where life is seen to be about adaptation in order to achieve competitiveness, which is perceived to give value and meaning. There is a risk that such a perspective will be strengthened by an RE where the standard and supposedly objective textbook describes a religious history full of abuse of power (Osbeck 2006). Furthermore, studies of life interpretations in the school context more generally, i.e., not only in RE, show how religion can appear as contradictory and is often discussed in a pluralistic and post-secular context where some issues are sensitive in a way that means that they are not raised in the classroom (Risenfors 2011).

Secondly, there have been *more classroom studies* conducted during this period. One example of this is Karin Kittelman Flensner's thesis (2015) in which she identifies as hegemonic in RE practice a secularist discourse through which religion and religious people appear as historical and outdated. This means that the study to some extent questions the idea of RE as one of the subjects that strongly contributes to tolerance, respect, and openness in the Swedish school system and suggests that, on the contrary, the subject carries a risk of constructing believers as less enlightened and depicting religions through essentialistic categorisations, as ready-made packages. The study brings critical awareness of the importance of and impact of hegemonic discourses in RE practice (cf. Osbeck and Lied 2012b; Osbeck et al. 2017).

Thirdly, studies during the current period have given *insight into new RE practices*, or RE connected practices, that have emerged during this period. One such example is Berglund's thesis (Berglund 2009) in which she describes Islamic religious education (IRE) as lived classroom experience. Based on her ethnographic work, she stresses how the subject, on an overarching level, can be interpreted as contributing to connectedness between pupils and both the Islamic tradition and Swedish society. Nevertheless, she stresses the importance of not perceiving IRE as a homogenous phenomenon, since its content and form vary so much. The construction of the subject seems largely to depend on the teachers. The teachers do not only transmit the tradition, but rather translate its content.

Another theme connected to this category of research concerns the launching of the optional subject 'life competencies education' or 'life skills education' (*livskunskap*) in Sweden. Since one important aim of education in Sweden is to promote certain values, and it may be difficult to know how to do this, more distinct lesson-based work has developed during this period (e.g., Aldenmyr 2012). These lessons have covered a multitude of educational practices from creative arts to meditation and mindfulness training, anti-bullying programmes, drugs and alcohol education, sex education and other programmes overlapping with health education, such as those for improving mental health or providing pastoral care for pupils. The content of 'livskunskap' and RE can be said to overlap to some extent, even if the two subjects have hardly ever been discussed in relation to each other. In research on 'livskunskap', critical international perspectives concerning the 'therapeutisation' of education have been stressed, i.e., how ethical and political issues are being replaced by an individualistic health perspective (Aldenmyr 2012; see also Zetterqvist and Skeie 2014). The research raises questions about the place and role of values in education, the role of external providers of services in compulsory school, and the use of 'religious techniques' like meditation and yoga in schools in general and especially in the religiously neutral and objective classroom.

In sum, it appears that the aim of the Swedish RE subject since its introduction in the 1960s has been a dominant theme in research, and that the life interpretative approach to RE has had a strong position in the national curriculum among scholars and also among pupils. However, there are reasons

to believe that teachers have had a stronger interest in knowledge-oriented teaching, a learning 'about' approach to RE, which is also an approach stressed in the national curriculum, in addition to the life interpretative, learning 'from' perspective. Furthermore, RE seems to have a rather low status among pupils and teachers, and in addition may have lower requirements in the curriculum than the other social studies subjects. Research has shown how current conditions, contexts, and informal learning processes in school are important to consider in relation to RE teaching when taking an interest in what pupils actually learn in school. Learning in religion, ethics, and life can go beyond what is intended by teachers and has been shown to be affected by the development of religious pluralism, secularisation, consumerism, and increased competition. It is not always easy for teachers to be aware of these tendencies and make use of them. Moreover, research makes us conscious of new RE practices such as those in independent religious schools and those related to new independent, optional subjects. Quite interestingly, it seems that the demands for neutral and objective teaching are often not seen to be as important to consider in a 'life skills subject' as in a 'religion subject'.

3. Material and Methods I—Funded Research of Relevance to RE

The main empirical study of this article concerns the research projects funded during the 19 years that the section for educational research has been in place. During the period 2001–2019⁴, 820 applications have been funded. In order to identify applications of relevance to RE, the truncated search terms 'relig*' and 'ethic*' were used and searched for in a register ordered from the Swedish Research Council (Vetenskapsrådet, VR) that included all the funded applications for the educational section (utbildningsvetenskap). The search concerned the presence of these terms in the headings and the abstracts of the applications. Altogether, this resulted in 41 items (20 'relig*' and 21 'ethic*'—from now on, 'religion' and 'ethics'). The applications and research reports, if existing, for these projects were ordered and received from the Swedish Research Council. Two of them had the same heading, with the same project leader, and one seemed to be a continuation of the other, and therefore these two 'religion' projects were treated as one, giving a total of 40 cases. As described above, the Swedish RE subject has, since the 1960s, included religions, ethics, and life questions. For this reason, both 'religions' and 'ethics' were relevant as search terms. The search could also have included terms such as 'values', 'world views', and 'life questions', but in order to limit the study, we decided not to use these. The sample, as it is, included some projects focusing on values and life questions. However, there were projects that could have been of interest that are missing due to this limitation. Among the 40 projects, 16 projects were excluded at an early stage. This was because religion and ethics were used in these projects in a sense that was quite far removed from the sense in which they are used in religious education, i.e., teaching and learning about religion and ethics. In the three 'religion' projects that were taken away, 'religion' was a background factor in educational projects where something else was studied. In the 13 'ethics' projects removed, 'ethics' mainly referred to research ethics (7), professional teacher ethics or ethics in school policy generally (3), or ethics as a background factor or a peripheral aspect of what was actually being studied (3). A total list of all the remaining 24 cases can be found in the Appendix A Table A1. It may also be noted that these 24 projects made up 3% of the total of 820 funded projects in the educational section during this period. Among the 24 projects of the final sample, 19 were project grants, three were grants for planning processes, one was funding for a postgraduate programme, and the remaining one was a grant for a post-doctoral position.

For this sample, two kinds of analyses were conducted. Firstly, in order to understand the projects and their research interest in relation to 'religion' and 'ethics', the research question concerned what 'religion' and 'ethics' meant in these different projects. An inductive content analysis was conducted

⁴ 2001–2019 is the period in which information about funded research from the educational section at VR was available. The result from 2020 was not available at the time of writing as the decision had not yet been announced. It is this period that guided the choice of time period for the other materials, i.e., published research and curricula.

with the purpose of generating categories (Braun and Clarke 2006). Separate analyses for the projects related to 'religion' and to 'ethics' were carried out. Secondly, an analysis was made focusing on the projects' possible contributions to curriculum development. The categories were more speculative here and more interpretative in relation to the material. In both cases, hermeneutical close readings were conducted with the aim of finding content patterns and categories through a continuous shifting between parts and wholes.

4. Funded Research on 'Religion' and 'Ethics' 2001–2019

4.1. The Projects and Their Focus on 'Religion' (R) and 'Ethics' (E)

Among the projects with a focus on 'religion', five categories were identified: 'Religion—RE as a knowledge field with a specific content' (R1); 'Religion—RE as both a knowledge field and an arena for socialisation' (R2); 'Religion—RE as an arena for socialisation' (R3); 'Religion—Religious movements affecting society and school' (R4); 'Religion—as connected to values and different educational processes' (R5). In most of the projects, the knowledge interest in religion also meant an interest in the subject RE (categories R1–R3), even if they differed concerning how content-oriented the projects were. In some projects, RE was primarily an arena where the learning process in focus in the projects concerned things other than religion, here socialisation processes (R3). In the remaining two categories, where RE as a school subject was less central, other contexts for learning about religion were more in focus (R4), and there were also projects where religion was brought up since it related to value issues of interest (R5).

One project was identified where religion meant RE with a clear content focus without referring to a specific context for teaching and learning (R1: Project/P-Naelsund 2001, 2002). Here, the research interest was in young people's interpretations of and meetings with narratives, fictions, and religious traditions. The idea was that there are qualities in such content that will evoke existential questions. In most of the RE-focused projects, RE was viewed both as content and as an arena for socialisation (R2: 8 projects). One example of this was Kittelmann Flensner's project (2016), which examined how contemporary conflicts in the Middle East are handled in classroom practices. Here, specific knowledge and content, in RE among other things, is taught and negotiated at the same time as the RE classroom becomes an arena for socialisation concerning, for instance, diversity, tolerance, and respect—or their opposites. There were also projects where the RE content and knowledge processes seemed to be less in focus and RE appeared largely as an arena for socialisation processes (R3: 4 projects), for instance, concerning development of femininity and masculinity (P-Todd 2010). The category where religion mainly meant knowledge processes in contexts other than school and the RE subject contained one single project (R4: P-Olsson 2007). Here, the main research interest was in influential European Muslim movements as knowledge producers, and their impact on Muslim pupils, especially concerning issues that might be controversial, such as gender equality and evolution. Among the two projects where religion occurred as related to certain value issues (R5), one of them concerned the general tension in the curriculum between the importance of plurality and the importance of the fundamental values for the school to draw on (P-Almén 2001). The other project in this category focused on tensions that are revealed when the different political, social, and cultural practices in which young people construct their democratic values are explored in relation to school practice, teaching, and learning (P-Amnå 2001).

Among the ethics projects, a variation was also found regarding what 'ethics' meant in the projects, which gave rise to the names of the three categories: 'Ethics—a knowledge field with a specific content' (E1); 'Ethics—a knowledge field inherent in multidisciplinary knowledge areas like sustainable development' (E2); 'Ethics—inherent in teachers' teaching' (E3). Here also, the variation was described as related to different degrees of content/subject orientation. Only one project concerned specific content in ethics as a knowledge area in RE (E1: P-Osbeck 2014). Most projects related to ethics since they focused on knowledge areas where it was obvious that ethics was a central and inherent element

(E2, 6 projects). Here, the most common areas concerned sustainable development. The inherent dimension of ethics was shown in how learning about sustainable development involved personal stances, responsibility, and actions. In these projects, ethics was explicitly mentioned (e.g., P-Östman 2004). In the last category (E3), ethics was viewed as being present in teachers' teaching, for example, because teaching demanded an understanding of and a respect for human dignity and equal value (P-Fjellström 2007) and because the teacher had the task of transmitting certain fundamental values in a time of change and globalisation (P-Fränberg 2001).

4.2. *The Projects' Possible Contribution to Curriculum Development (CCD)*

Against the background of an understanding of how religion and ethics appeared in the projects, they were then studied in relation to their possible contributions to curriculum development. The 24 projects were categorised into four different contributions that these projects could make to curriculum development. We chose to formulate them openly, adding questions in relation to them. One might say that the relevance of these categories as possible curriculum contributions is related to how specific one considers that national curricula and syllabuses should be—and perhaps curricula must be rather specific in order to have an impact on practice in a meaningful way. The short names for the four categories of possible contribution to curriculum development (CCD) are: 'central content in the subject' (CCD 1); 'subject matter teaching and socialisation as relational' (CCD 2); 'subject matter learning in other practices' (CCD 3); 'tensions in the curriculum' (CCD 4).

The first category and related questions concerned the research projects' possible impact on the content of the RE subject (CCD 1: 9 projects). Should syllabuses advocate, or warn against, particular content in the subject? If central themes and texts are identified as beneficial, for instance, due to their potential to evoke existential questions of relevance (e.g., P-Naeslund 2001), should such findings also affect the content of the syllabus? If central perspectives and knowledge areas are shown to be lacking in the curriculum, such as the importance of moral sensitivity in ethics, should such perspectives be included (P-Osbeck 2014)? If central knowledge areas, such as sustainable development, are shown to be multidisciplinary and are at risk of falling between stools, should these areas be included in several syllabuses of relevance? In that way ethics would appear to be an area where one needs specific subject matter knowledge, for example, concerning sustainability (cf. P-Östman 2007), in order to conduct an analysis in ethics. Should syllabuses signal that certain areas might be particularly controversial and therefore need to be handled with awareness and wisdom, such as the conflict between faith and science (Olsson 2007), or the tension between religion as public and religion as private (P-Sjöborg 2013), or issues with current political tensions, for instance, in the Middle East (P-Kittelmann Flensner 2016)?

The second category and questions concerned the fact that several research projects were about socialisation processes that take place in RE (CCD 2: 5 projects). Should syllabuses concerning subjects like RE pay attention not only to content issues but also, and simultaneously, to socialisation processes, so that these two aspects of learning are shown in the curriculum, as they are in research, to be intertwined (e.g., P-Larsson 2017)? To learn RE is, for instance, simultaneously to learn what a 'right' future citizen means (P-Rabo 2010).

The third category and questions concerned the relationship between RE as a learning practice and other learning practices where relevant knowledge was constructed (CCD 3: 7 projects). Should syllabuses make reference to practices that may greatly affect pupils' learning, for instance, concerning their understanding of religion and ethics, so that teaching can make use of and take into consideration these perspectives? Concerning pupils' understanding of religion, their family practices are, of course, relevant (e.g., P-Puskás 2014, 2018), and generally, the questions that children raise in relation to teaching are found to be of importance (P-Sporre 2018).

The fourth and final category and questions concerned tensions in the curriculum and syllabuses shown through research (CCD 4: 3 projects). Should curricula explicitly address such tensions or strive to solve them through revisions? One tension that manifests itself in different ways concerns the relationships in the curriculum between pluralism and specific fundamental values (e.g., P-Almén 2001).

In sum, one can say that the analyses of funded research projects between 2001 and 2019 in Sweden pointed towards possible contributions to curriculum development that concerned the content of the subject, the relation between knowledge and socialisation in RE, the impact from learning practices outside school, and, finally, knowledge about tensions in the curriculum.

5. Material and Methods II—Curriculum Development

The research projects covered in this study were granted funding during a period when two curricula for compulsory school were in force. When the period started in 2001, the ‘Curricula for the compulsory school system and voluntary school forms’, Lpo 94 and Lpf 94 were in effect, with the revisions from 2000. In 2011, a more comprehensive reform was made when the ‘Curriculum for the compulsory school, preschool class and school-age educare’ (Lgr 11) was launched. This was also the one that is in force today, even if changes are being drafted at the moment.

In order to analyse changes between these curricula, we chose two foci. Firstly, we focused on general characteristics of these two curricula and put them in contrast to each other, and secondly, we chose to use a previously applied tool for the description of curriculum development in RE (Hartman 1994). While Ulf P. Lundgren described three curriculum codes that have dominated the Swedish school system, a classic, a moral, and a rational code, Sven G. Hartman maintained that in order to accurately describe the development of RE syllabuses, these codes are insufficient (1994, p. 24). Here, the relationship between the content and the teaching needed to be in focus, and Hartman distinguished between *proclamatory* and *dialogical* curriculum codes. A proclamatory curriculum code is characterised by a focus on teaching and on quantities of teaching hours. The basic precondition for successful teaching is conceived in terms of a concentration on the conditions for the teacher to teach, rather than on conditions for a pupil to learn. From this perspective, teaching is expected more or less automatically to fulfil the goal, and pupils will learn. The main agent here is the teacher (Hartman 1994, p. 24f). In contrast, the focus in the dialogical curriculum codes is interactive teaching, teaching where teacher and pupil are engaged in a continuous dialogue, both acting as speakers and listeners, sharing participation in a common educational process (Hartman 1994, p. 26). Since the concepts can be understood as capturing a fundamental aspect of different ways of teaching but also of different curriculum perspectives, we chose to use this analytical tool to work with the relevant curricula. As previously, the work draws on hermeneutical close readings and a continuous shifting between parts and wholes, but here clearly focused on the two concepts of proclamation and dialogue.

The analyses were conducted in order to fulfil the overarching aim of the article, i.e., to discuss the relationship between RE research and the RE curricula in a Swedish context, where the Education Act states that education should be based on research.

6. Curriculum Development 2001–2019

6.1. General Characteristics of the Two Curricula

The *curriculum of 1994* constituted a clear break with previous curricula in Sweden, in that it was much more subject-specific than previously. The Swedish compulsory school in its current form had its beginnings in the 1960s and clearly drew on a progressive pedagogy where dismantling of disciplinary boundaries was central (Hartman 2012). RE became, from the 1960s, a part of the groups of subjects that were supposed to ‘inform’ or ‘orient’ (orientera) students regarding the surrounding world (Ecklesiastikdepartementet 1962, p. 1336; p. 1321). Interdisciplinary teaching was argued for, based on the assumption that children would find it more meaningful (Skolöverstyrelsen 1969, p. 16) and easier to learn (p. 43). Such teaching was thought to be both more multifaceted (p. 43), as well as more concrete and linked to the pupils’ experiences (p. 171f), and, in addition, contributing to a more holistic working situation. In the curriculum of 1980, the ‘informing/orienting subjects’ were divided into two so-called ‘blocks’, where one of them was supposed to give information about society and the other about nature. All ‘informing subjects’ had common aims, but the descriptions of goals

were specific to each of the subject-blocks 'social studies' and 'science studies'. In addition, there were specific content formulations for each individual subject. In the curriculum of 1994, there was a break with this tradition of using subject-blocks. Instead, specific syllabuses for each subject were presented and the curriculum stressed, among other things, that pupils should have 'opportunities for deeper studies in subjects' (Skolverket 2006, p. 13; an English translation of the 1994 curriculum).

With the curriculum of 1994, it was also clear that management by objectives was now implemented. Both the general curriculum and the syllabuses were written as 'goals to attain' and 'goals to strive towards'. In comparison to previous curricula, Lpo 94 was rather brief when it came to specific content. Furthermore, the curriculum of 1994 was the first one, in its description of the school's democratic socialisation task, that made central and explicit the fundamental values on which Swedish society is based and that school activity should be carried out in accordance with (Skolverket 2006, p. 3). It also stipulated as previously that teaching should be non-confessional.

The work to design the new *curriculum of 2011* for both primary and secondary schools was initiated and supported by a political aim to clarify both goals and knowledge requirements for teaching in schools (cf. SOU 2007, p. 28). An overarching goal with Lgr 11 can be said to have been the control of teaching in schools with the aim of improving the results in Sweden (Skolverket 2009). In connection with this curriculum change, national tests in far more subjects than previously were launched in Sweden, with tests in RE from 2013.

The curriculum of 2011 followed the development of Lpo 94 by being a subject-specific curriculum. The syllabuses in general have a structure with three parts: abilities, central content, and knowledge requirements. This means that content had a more explicit status than in the curriculum of 1994. Simultaneously, the general parts of the curriculum have developed so that certain perspectives, in addition to the fundamental values, are emphasised. These are an historical, an environmental, an international, and an ethical perspective. Furthermore, the five abilities that RE teaching is supposed to help to develop are to:

- analyse Christianity, other religions, and other outlooks on life, as well as different interpretations and use of these,
- analyse how religions affect and are affected by conditions and events in society,
- reflect over life issues and their own and other's identity,
- reason and discuss moral issues and values based on ethical concepts and models, and
- search for information about religions and other outlooks on life and evaluate the relevance and credibility of sources (Skolverket 2018a, p. 218f).

It is possible, in some respects, to consider these abilities as a kind of rephrasing of what were described in Lpo 94 as the 'goals to strive for'. Here there was also an emphasis on reflection on life on its own and with others, and on knowledge of Christianity and 'other religions and other outlooks on life', but generally the approach was different, which is shown below in the curriculum analyses focused on proclamation and dialogue.

6.2. Proclamation and Dialogue

The syllabus for RE in Lpo 94 emphasised that religions and beliefs are studied as a basis for pupils' own positions by 'widening and deepening their experience and conceptual world' (Utbildningsdepartementet 1994, p. 38). This purpose should be seen in the light of the premise that the teaching should 'promote the development of pupils into responsible persons and members of society' (Skolverket 2006, p. 5). Studies in RE are, according to the first goal in the syllabus, thought to be able to contribute to the development of moral, human, and social responsibility in children and young people.

Shortly thereafter, the importance of the content of the subject was emphasised, since it was stated that the pupils should develop knowledge of religions and life views in order to gain an objective and comprehensive basis for their own reflection and to access tools 'in the form of traditions, languages

and symbols' (Utbildningsdepartementet 1994, p. 38), which are important for those seeking meaning in life.

Religions and beliefs are presented here not only as knowledge-carrying, but also as important to use within the context of the search for where the pupils are, here and now. That search is about the desire for meaning, but it is also about developing an understanding of other people's ways of seeking meaning and about respecting each person's individuality.

These descriptions seem to express a focus on pupils' learning that is characteristic of a dialogical curriculum code, where reflective and active engagement is perceived as central to the educational process. Such a basic conception of the content of RE also, to some extent, reappeared in Lgr11, although this was not the general perspective presented in the curriculum.

In Lpo 94, some 'goals to strive for' were stated, for example, that pupils 'reflect on, develop and deepen their knowledge of religious, ethical and existential issues as a basis for their own position' and that they 'deepen their understanding and respect for other people's positions on religious and ethical issues, and denounce the oppression of people for the sake of their religion or view of life' (Utbildningsdepartementet 1994, p. 38). The first goal was the development of personal reflection and the second was the development of ethical responsibility in relation to fellow human beings. In both cases, the endeavour that was intended is based on the assumption that increased knowledge of religions and views of life can contribute to personal as well as moral development. Both these goals may be interpreted as expressions of a *dialogical curricular code*.

As mentioned above, it is possible to consider the abilities in Lgr 11, in some respects, as a kind of rephrasing of what were described in Lpo 94 as the 'goals to strive for', since they highlighted reflection on life on its own and with others, and knowledge of Christianity and 'other religions and other outlooks on life'. However, there was no mention of the pupils' own positions being given space. Instead, there was an emphasis on the ability to analyse, for example, the place and role of religions in society, and on source-critical considerations in arenas where religions and views of life are highlighted. As several authors have pointed out, the image of the purpose of religious knowledge may have been more clearly expressed than it was in Lpo 94, but at the same time, the new description of this purpose was more or less liberated from an emphasis on an ability to reflect on and talk about religion in personal terms and to develop one's own position (Björilin 2011; Selander 2011). The same applied to the knowledge requirements, which had a clear focus on analytical and conceptual abilities (Franck 2017; Osbeck 2017).⁵

In sum, this supports an interpretation according to which RE in Lgr11 may be characterised as expressing a *proclamative curriculum code*. This is certainly a characterisation which can be said to hold for the structure and the content descriptions in Lgr11 generally. The focus in this curriculum, and the development over the course of years, is on measurable teaching and teaching outcomes rather than on educational processes where pupils and teachers share an active, dialogical engagement.

7. Concluding Discussion

In the 21st century, the importance of an education and teaching based on research has been increasingly stressed, internationally and also in Sweden. One example of this is that, in 2005, the former Director-General for the Swedish National Agency for Education was commissioned by the government to examine the opportunities for school leaders and teachers to learn from research in relation to their educational activities. The report indicated that the driving forces to keep abreast of what is happening within research and to draw on this knowledge when developing one's work

⁵ There are some indications that the described curriculum development in the direction of more analytical and less personally reflexive skills will be changed in a revised version of the RE syllabus, which the Swedish government decided will be implemented on 1 July 2021. The change will, for years 4–6 and 7–9, include 'discussions', 'analysis' and 'reflection' on moral issues and life questions based, for example, on 'pupils' own thoughts, arguments and religious interpretations' (Skolverket 2019).

were less powerful among teachers in comparison with health care professionals and especially in comparison with farmers ([Utbildnings- och kulturdepartementet](#)). Another example of this emphasis is that, in 2010, the Swedish Education Act was changed so that education was required by law to be 'based on research and proven experience' ([SFS 2010](#), p. 800, our translation). Furthermore, one of the reasons behind the development of an educational research section within the National Research Council was to safeguard research funding for teacher education institutions and opportunities for teachers to gain postgraduate education. It is obvious that opportunities for and demands on teachers and teacher education to draw on research have increased during this period. It is much more unclear how the expanded possibilities for research have affected the RE knowledge field and how one can understand the relationship between research and curriculum. Can Swedish curriculum development be said to be based on research?

The overall aim of this article is to discuss the relationship between RE research and the RE curriculum based on analyses of funded RE research and changes in the curriculum. Such a relationship can be imagined in different ways. As always, one must ask the question about which factor affects the other, or if a possible correlation can be due to a third factor affecting both. In this case, societal currents may be such a third factor that affects both the direction of research and the curriculum. From the empirical material in this study, we can see that two of the first funded projects addressed the school's commission to teach fundamental values, which had recently been formulated in the curriculum of 1994 (P-Almén; P-Frånberg). Societal currents influence both curriculum makers and researchers, but the identified relationship can also be interpreted as an example of how the curriculum affects research. Such an impact, where political policy affects the research agenda, is not uncommon and is not unproblematic (e.g., [Arnot et al. 2007](#); [Dahlin 1989](#), p. 4). It can be seen as particularly problematic when research takes political policy (curriculum) as a given and draws on that. In such cases, the relationship between understanding and developing education is at risk of becoming circular. Research draws on policy to be relevant and policy can in turn refer to research findings in order to underpin its perspective. It is of course possible for curriculum and research to be related in a more critical way, for example, when critical analyses of curricular perspectives are carried out (e.g., P-Osbeck). However, this still means that curriculum perspectives are given a central position in the scientific discourse and research-based reasons for such a focus may be lacking. In relation to the direct impact of research on the curriculum, there are few examples in the material. One such example may be Olsson's project from 2007, which examined challenges from religious movements towards school when it came to truth claims, for instance, concerning evaluation processes. In the curriculum of 2011 for upper secondary school, a new content area was presented, where different views about the relationship between religion and science were studied. However, this may also be understood as an example of how a third factor, the societal debate, affects both.

The exploration of funded research during the period in question (2001–2019) shows that even if the new section for education research was intended to expand educational research, the distribution of funding to the RE knowledge field has been rather small. A total of 24 projects of relevance to RE were identified, which was about 3% of the total number of projects (820). Another observation is that few of the RE projects were directly focused on specific content areas, how these were being taught and learnt, and what was central in these processes. This is in contrast to subject matter research in mathematics and physics, where teaching and learning of concrete content like subtraction or Newtonian mechanics are repeatedly studied (e.g., [Kullberg and Skodras 2018](#); [Ingerman and Booth 2018](#)). The limited amount of RE research, little replication research, and the rather broad and socialisation-oriented character of the research conducted can be understood as providing a weak foundation for RE curriculum development and change. At the same time, the existence of a certain amount of RE research that combines a content focus with a socialisation focus might perhaps have been expected to have consequences for curriculum development, which does not appear to be the case. The idea of separating socialisation and knowledge in the curriculum through the traditional and current division between general curricular aims and subject matter issues in syllabuses should perhaps be reconsidered. Also, the consequences of the

current subject-structured curriculum for central interdisciplinary knowledge areas like sustainability development can be reconsidered on the basis of research. Furthermore, one might have expected that the sociocultural turn in educational research, identified and described above in both the section on published research and on the funded projects, would have had some impact on the structure of the curriculum, so that other central learning practices related to subject matter would be addressed in the curriculum. Here, however, the described curriculum development from a more dialogical to a more proclamatory code points in the opposite direction.

The current article cannot possibly answer all the questions that arise when considering the relationship between RE research and the RE curriculum. Instead, the article must be seen as a starting point for further explorations and discussions about the importance of national curricula being based on research if they are to maintain their legitimacy in a school system where teaching is expected to be based on research.

Author Contributions: Conceptualization, C.O. and O.F.; methodology, C.O. and O.F.; software, C.O. and O.F.; validation, C.O. and O.F.; investigation, C.O. and O.F.; resources, C.O. and O.F.; writing—original draft preparation, C.O. and O.F.; writing—review and editing, C.O. and O.F.; project administration, C.O. and O.F. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Appendix A

Table A1. Current projects and the presented categories concerning knowledge interest in ‘religion’ (R1–5) and ‘ethics’ (E1–3) and possible contribution to curriculum development (CCD1–4) *.

Year	Kind of Grant	PI and Project Title	Knowledge Interest ‘Religion’ (R)	Knowledge Interest ‘Ethics’ (E)	Contribution to Curriculum Development (CCD)
2001	Project	Erik Amná: Youth learning democracy: Comparative studies in dynamic learning processes	R5		CCD3
2001	Planning	Edgar Almén: Basic values in school: Between identity and pluralism	R5		CCD4
2001	Project	Gun-Marie Frånberg: Questions pertaining to fundamental values in the New Teacher Training Program: a study of ethical and moral dilemmas in a changing world		E3	CCD4
2001	Project	Lars Naeslund: Meanings of existential issues in school life	R1		CCD1
2003	Project	Roger Fjellström: Love as the core value in teachers’ professional ethics and moral education		E3	CCD4 ^o
2004	Project	Leif Östman: Encounters with nature and environmental moral learning: a multidisciplinary study of educational practices for sustainable development in the perspectives of environmental education, ethics and history		E2	CCD3
2005	Planning	Susanne Olsson: The religious other: School book images in a multinational and religio-political perspective	R2		CCD1
2006	Project	Lena Tibell: Visualization as a communicative tool in science and science education		E2	CCD1
2007	Project	Susanne Olsson: Negotiating knowledge: European Muslims between competing worldviews	R4		CCD3
2007	Postgraduate education	Leif Östman: National School of Research on Education and Sustainable Development		E2	CCD1
2007	Post-doc	Anders Sjöborg: Silence, conflict or exoticism? Views of religion and religious education among senior high school students and teachers in multicultural Sweden	R2		CCD1
2010	Project	Annika Rabo: Future citizens in pedagogic texts and in education policies. Examples from Norway, Sweden, Syria and Turkey	R3		CCD2

Table A1. Cont.

Year	Kind of Grant	PI and Project Title	Knowledge Interest 'Religion' (R)	Knowledge Interest 'Ethics' (E)	Contribution to Curriculum Development (CCD)
2010	Project	Leif Östman: Teaching and learning processes concerning argumentation within Education for Sustainable Development (ESD)		E2	CCD1
2010	Project	Sharon Todd: Images of femininity and masculinity in the classroom: a feminist philosophical inquiry into the subjects of religion, science studies, and Swedish	R3		CCD2
2010	Planning	Geir Skeie: Teaching and learning about values and beliefs in plural contexts—a Doctoral Programme in Educational Sciences	R3		CCD1
2013	Project	Anders Sjöborg: Teaching religion in late modern Sweden: Professionalism on the borders between public and private	R2		CCD3
2014	Project	Tünde Puskás: Cultural heritage, tradition and religion in Swedish preschool practices	R2		CCD3
2014	Project	Christina Osbeck: What may be learnt in ethics? Varieties of conceptions of ethical competence to be taught in compulsory school		E1	CCD1
2016	Project	Karin Kittelmann Flensner: Global conflicts with local consequences—Learning and arguing about Middle Eastern conflicts in Swedish classrooms	R2		CCD2
2017	Project	Anna Larsson: Controversial issues in social studies education: a comparative study in subject didactics	R2		CCD2
2017	Project	Leif Östman: Manners of teaching about controversial sustainability issues and students learning	R3		CCD2
2017	Project	Johan Öhman: Teaching global equity and justice issues through a critical lens		E2	CCD1
2018	Project	Karin Sporre: The child and curriculum. Existential questions and educational responses	R2		CCD3
2018	Project	Tünde Puskás: The didactics of death—Dealing with a sensitive issue in everyday preschool practice	R2		CCD3

* The short names of the categories are: 'Religion—RE as a knowledge field with a specific content' (R1); 'Religion—RE as both a knowledge field and an arena for socialisation' (R2); 'Religion—RE as an arena for socialisation' (R3); 'Religion—Religious movements affecting society and school' (R4); 'Religion—as connected to values and different educational processes' (R5). 'Ethics—a knowledge field with a specific content' (E1); 'Ethics—a knowledge field inherent in multidisciplinary knowledge areas like sustainable development' (E2); 'Ethics—inherent in teachers' teaching' (E3). 'Central content in the subject' (CCD 1); 'Subject matter teaching and socialisation as relational' (CCD 2); 'Subject matter learning in other practices' (CCD 3); 'Tensions in curriculum' (CCD 4).

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