

Article

Art as a Medium in Heterogeneous Learning Groups: First Findings of an Empirical Study

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Abstract: Working with art is considered to have a special potential for heterogeneity-sensitive learning processes. It should pick up on elementary experiences, open up emotional access and diverse learning paths, and serve different learning types, strategies, and levels. In the heterogeneity-sensitive didactics of religion and art, however, these assumptions have not yet been empirically proven, and, in general, theoretical designs dominate in the heterogeneity-sensitive didactics of religion. In our contribution, we explore the question of how art processes enable heterogeneity-sensitive learning processes in religious education and help to reduce social inequality. For this purpose, we evaluate the first results of our qualitative empirical study on heterogeneity-sensitive learning processes with art in religious education (hekuru, which is based on subject didactic development research). There are initial indications that, contrary to widespread opinions, the thesis of a generally easy accessibility of art proves that needs have to be differentiated, and that special milieu sensitivity is advisable.

Keywords: heterogeneity; learning with art; religious education

1. Introduction



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Increasing cultural and religious pluralization, the growing number of non-religiously socialized students, and the joint teaching of students with and without disabilities are challenges for religious education (RE) (Lindner and Tautz 2018; Jochimsen and Knauth 2017; Anderssohn 2016). There is a need for heterogeneity-sensitive learning processes that take diversity and difference into account, but at the same time also promote learning together. Heterogeneity-sensitive learning has to be based on a differentiated intersectional notion of heterogeneity that is sensitive to difference theory and open to a constant reflection of its immanent tensions. In addition to that, heterogeneity requires a multi-perspective, meta-reflexive engagement with antinomies and the boundaries they entail (Kumlein 2015). Heterogeneity not only has to be differentiated with regard to cognitive prerequisites and learning types; “difference” and “inequality” must be distinguished as well (Walgenbach 2017, p. 48). “Difference” refers to horizontal processes of heterogeneity, such as religion, culture, and lifestyles, while “inequality” refers to vertical stratifications, such as social inequality (Warwick-Booth 2013) or cognitive differences. While inequality must be dismantled, difference is perceived as an enrichment to be maintained. It should be noted that heterogeneity in learning groups is not just found but is systemically and interactionally generated through practices of “doing difference” (Balzer and Ricken 2010, p. 62). This corresponds to the concept of enlightened heterogeneity introduced by Grümme into the discourse on RE (Grümme 2017, pp. 91–97).

If one follows Krekel’s definition, “social inequality” exists whenever certain social differentiations entail that individuals or groups are permanently favored while others are disadvantaged (Krekel 1992, pp. 16–17). It arises not only due to natural differences such as skin color or gender, but rather in socially anchored distinctions and evaluations (Unser 2016, p. 81). With reference to Bourdieu, Alexander Unser argues that “social

inequalities in society are reproduced” ([Unser 2016](#), p. 82) in schools because certain students are privileged, and others disadvantaged, since teaching presupposes skills that are acquired primarily in socially privileged families through socialization processes. Since school education implicitly presupposes certain basic knowledge, techniques, and, above all, means of expression that are the privilege of the educated classes, there arises, according to Bourdieu, a fundamental inequality of opportunity ([Bourdieu and Passeron 1971](#), p. 39; [Unser 2016](#), p. 82).

Currently, in German discourse, more attention is being drawn to the gap caused by the narrowing of socio-cultural milieus in RE, which is still too strongly oriented towards the bourgeois middle class ([Grümme and Schlag 2016](#), p. 14; [Unser 2019](#); [Vieregge 2020](#)). In addition to its focus on the middle class, RE is often based on emphatic conversations about beliefs, which tend to be linked to the interests of girls.

Based on this, the question arises as to how the diversity of students can be taken into account in RE and how learning processes that allow heterogeneous opportunities for students to connect can be initiated. In the inclusive didactics of religion in Germany, great potential is attributed to working with art ([Gärtner and Hans 2018](#); [Kammeyer 2014](#); [Gärtner 2018b](#)). Due to its sensual, holistic, and experiential orientation, art is thought to offer alternative forms of access to a cognitive- or verbal-oriented RE ([Kalloch 2014, 2015](#); [Konz 2016](#); [Gärtner and Hans 2018](#); [Gärtner 2018a, 2018b](#)). It is believed to provide a variety of learning opportunities for students with heterogeneous backgrounds and challenges because it opens up alternative ways of articulation and communication on a visual, tactile, mimetic, and bodily level ([Sabisch 2013](#), p. 280; [Ripper 2011](#); [Hornák 2018](#)). Since the polysemy of art offers subject-oriented, individual learning occasions, it is assumed that students with different religious socializations will also be picked up at their learning level.

So far, however, no sufficiently empirically founded concepts for heterogeneity-sensitive learning with art in RE have been developed, and there are hardly any empirical findings from the didactics of religion and art ([Gärtner and Hans 2018](#)). Although heterogeneity is a central concept in the didactics of religion, until now there have mainly been only basic theoretical drafts, general guiding principles, or methodologically oriented practical suggestions that have not been empirically evaluated. Finally, RE teachers have to possess adaptive teaching competences ([Loffredo 2017](#), pp. 28–32) to work with art. However, these necessary competences have so far been neither comprehensively conceptually differentiated nor empirically evaluated. There are initial studies on the attitudes and subjective theories of (religious) teachers concerning inclusion and heterogeneity ([Möller et al. 2018](#); [Hußmann and Welzel 2018](#)). Surveys on subjective theories about working with art in RE have yet to be conducted ([Burrichter 2015](#)).

In the following, we would like to explore whether art actually does provide particularly heterogeneity-sensitive teaching processes. The conditions for successful learning are explored as well as the competences that teachers require. After having outlined the aims, design, and method of the empirical research project, our first findings and observations will be presented and discussed.

2. Aims

This paper is based on a qualitative empirical project which focuses on the extent to which art enables heterogeneity-sensitive learning processes in RE. We proceed from the assumption that reception- and production-oriented work with art in heterogeneous learning groups in RE initiates adaptive learning processes. The empirical study investigates to what extent this enables learning for students with different worldviews, religious beliefs, or cognitive prerequisites.

The results obtained should enable insights into the extent to which the heterogeneity-sensitive potential of art, which is assumed in the didactics of religion, can be empirically demonstrated, as well as the potentials and limitations that arise from dealing with art in heterogeneous learning groups. The following research questions are derived from this interest:

1. To what extent does learning with art in heterogeneity-sensitive RE initiate religious learning processes for all students?
2. Which interaction and action processes of teachers and students, as well as among the students and with the works of art, are helpful for heterogeneity-sensitive RE processes on the level of deep structures?
3. Which subjective theories and competences do teachers possess, or which should they possess, in order to successfully initiate heterogeneity-sensitive religious learning processes with art?

The chosen research method of didactical design research ([Prediger and Link 2012](#); [Gärtner 2022](#); [Prediger \(2019\)](#) with reference to [Bakker 2018](#)) aims at research results in the form of local theories on the questions presented. A second objective is to achieve design results in the form of repeatedly tested teaching settings.

Therefore, to answer these questions, the study develops exemplary learning designs with art which are tested, evaluated, and improved in iterative procedures. Thematically, our chosen subject is “Developing notions of suffering and death”. By dealing with art, the students get to know different Christian interpretations of the anthropological experiences of suffering and death. In doing so, we build on the students’ notions and concepts. During the lessons, the students learn about the theological concepts of the passion and death of Jesus Christ as well as the resurrection. The subject matter is thus both student-oriented and content-focused.

3. Method

3.1. Ethical Approval

This research project took place in a classroom setting and, with the theme of the death and resurrection of Jesus, we chose a classical theme that is firmly anchored in the framework guidelines of RE. When selecting the artworks, special care was taken to ensure that no disturbing or violent images were presented. The students were able to decide for themselves to what extent they wanted to bring personal experiences into the pictorial approaches. Their parents were informed and had given their consent, as did the students. If necessary, reactions at home could be collected in this way. In addition, the teachers were trusted persons who were asked in advance about the students’ possible previous experiences. Two children who had had a bereavement in the family were thus exempted from the lessons after consultation with the parents.

3.2. Videography, Interviews, and Pre-Post-Tests

In order to analyze teaching processes at the micro and macro levels, different types of qualitative data are collected: videography of the lessons, pre-post-test (students’ perceptions of the subject matter before and after the lesson in the form of voice messages), students’ written work results from the lessons, and semi-standardized guided interviews with teachers and, in some cases, with students. The videography serves above all to provide insight into the analysis of the deep structures of the teaching process. In order to analyze the adaptive actions of the teachers, we compare the written lesson plans with the actual teaching processes. The pre-post tests are taken by the students before the first lesson and after the last lesson of the series. With the help of a didactically demanding situation, the students have to explain both the Christian and their own view of the death and resurrection of Jesus. We use voice messages and avoid a written survey to give the students a low-threshold approach to the task. Due to different learning paths and preferences, the students can still use written notes for the recording.

In addition to information about the learning group, the interviews with the teachers focus on the teachers’ subjective theories about heterogeneity and dealing with heterogeneous learning groups in RE. Furthermore, their attitudes towards learning with art and to the subject of suffering, death, and resurrection are also collected.

3.3. Survey and Evaluation Method

3.3.1. Didactical Design Research as Research Approach

The Analytical Framework of the study is formed by didactical design research (Prediger and Link 2012; Gärtner 2022; Prediger (2019) with reference to Bakker 2018). This model integrates a theory-oriented research process (cf. Figure 1, bottom part) and a practice-oriented design process (cf. Figure 1, upper part). Both these dimensions of the process are iteratively interconnected with each other and process-oriented, and they lead to local theories.

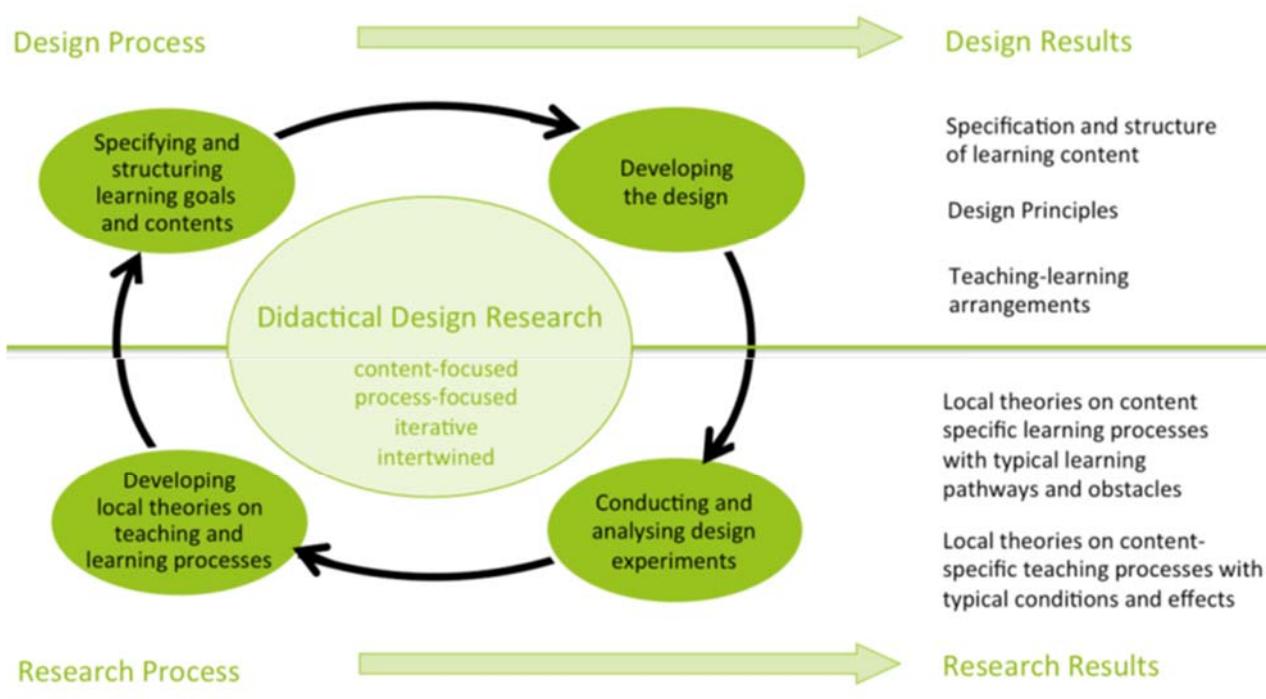


Figure 1. Research Group: “FUNKEN”—working areas in content-specific didactical design (Hußmann and Prediger 2016, p. 35).

The research process starts with the specification and structuring of learning content (cf. Figure 1, top left corner). This leads to the development of the design (cf. Figure 1, top right corner), containing a special teaching–learning arrangement to be tested in design experiments (cf. Figure 1, bottom right corner). The empirically conducted and analyzed material leads to local theories on teaching–learning processes (cf. Figure 1, bottom left corner). They are once again tested and elaborated in another cycle.

These are the four characteristics of this research approach.

- **Intertwined:** Didactical design research identifies problems that exist in practice, reflects on them theoretically, designs possible approaches to practice, and puts them to the test. In this sense, theory and practice are inseparably intertwined.

- **Iterative:** The developed designs are tested and assessed in different practical situations. The results of the particular cycles lead to the modification of teaching–learning arrangements and the research on these settings. This also means continuous reflection on the theoretical basis and on the leading (local) theories, which are also modified during the iterative process of the research.

- **Process-focused:** In the course of this research, the epistemological interest is not exclusively focused on improved learning results and learning outcomes. Didactical design research focuses equally on ways of learning and learning processes as on typically discernible processes, learning obstacles, and learning opportunities.

- **Content-focused:** The current understanding of didactical design research draws on the learning content, which is specified and structured from a content-specific didactic point of view.

We have divided hekuru into two sub-projects. Here we distinguish between the reception of artworks in RE (P1) and the creative production of one's own artworks in RE (P2).

3.3.2. Sample and Field Access

In total, we explore teaching and learning processes and results in twelve school classes. The learning groups that are chosen are taught in confessional-cooperative RE, which in practice is usually characterized by plural intra-religious and sometimes inter-religious perspectives. In this way, religious heterogeneity in the sense of difference is reflected. This is also found in the confessional-cooperative research team, whereby the specifically confessional perspectives can be taken into account both in the planning and in the evaluation. In addition, the chosen learning groups are characterized by cognitive heterogeneity. The learning subject described is found in the core curricula for comprehensive schools in North Rhine-Westphalia in grades 7–10. In the process of growing up, young people have to face the task of finding their own ways of dealing with suffering and death in their own lives, as well as in social and global contexts. Therefore, this research project focuses on the upper grades 9–10, so that the students are 14–16 years old and have already gained some life experience by themselves.

For this project, in order to compare the environments of the schools, we approached comprehensive schools in the Dortmund area and neighboring cities. The acquisition of schools was particularly difficult due to the coronavirus pandemic. We obtained access to some schools through personal contacts. This research takes place in three iterative cycles (cf. Figure 2). In the first place, we developed the research design and practical solutions, which were tested and assessed in two classes. The results of the first cycle led to the modification of teaching-learning arrangements.

	Sub-projekt 1: Reception of Artworks in RE		Sub-projekt 2: Creative Production of Art in RE	
	Responsible Person	Number of Classes	Responsible Person	Number of Classes
1. Cycle: Design Development	Researcher/ Teacher	1	Researcher/ Teacher	1
2. Cycle: Testing, Modification	Teacher	2	Teacher	2
3. Cycle: „Consolidation“	Teacher	3	Teacher	3
Total		6		6

Figure 2. Sample and cycles of hekuru.

In order to take the heterogeneity of the learning groups into account, teaching material was developed that allows diverse possibilities for differentiation. Internal differentiation through various forms of cooperative learning was taken into account, as well as different working materials for the respective lessons. These can vary in length, the amount of text, the complexity of the tasks, and the learning pathways addressed (such as writing, drawing, seeing, etc.). The allocation of the different working materials is in the hands of the teacher.

3.3.3. Qualitative Content Analysis

The collected data are analyzed with the help of content structuring qualitative content analysis (Kuckartz 2014; Kuckartz and Rädiker 2019). In the first cycle, the pre-post survey, learning outcomes and key teaching sequences were transcribed and coded. In the second cycle, in addition, we collected and coded data from interviews with the teachers. First, we separately coded the different data sets and analyzed them along the survey dimensions “fitting processes in the classroom”, “learning outcomes and learning processes of the students” and “subjective theories of art and adaptation of the teachers”. Additionally, codes were refined on the basis of the literature and supplemented by categories for the content of the learning object. In summary, our approach can be described as deductive–inductive. The code system will be consolidated after the third cycle. We expect a certain degree of saturation after this cycle. However, the iterative procedure of didactical design research allows further cycles if needed. Subsequently, the analyses of the survey dimensions will be related to each other in order to capture the learning and teaching processes in their deep structure and the fitting processes on the visual structure. This is achieved with regard to several interaction processes: between teachers and students, students and students, and students and artworks. In addition, possible inherent tensions and processes of creating difference (“doing difference”) are examined. At the end of the evaluation, there is an in-depth individual case interpretation based on selected, contrastive individual cases, which are perceived in their specificity and questioned as to their exemplariness by comparing them with the analyzed data (Kuckartz and Rädiker 2022, p. 174).

4. First Results

As our project is still in the survey phase, the following section presents and discusses initial hypotheses that can be derived from the first and second survey cycles and will be tested in the further proceedings of the project. Our initial hypothesis was that working with art is considered to have a special potential for heterogeneity-sensitive learning processes. It should pick up on elementary experiences, open up emotional access and diverse learning paths, and serve different learning types, strategies, and levels. This assumption, which is widespread in didactics as well as in inclusive RE, does not seem to be fully substantiated: art opens up approaches for the students, but the assumption of a generally easy accessibility of art proves to be less evidential.

4.1. Learning Process

4.1.1. Motivation

Particularly in the phases of art analysis and interpretation in P1, some students were cognitively and motivationally overwhelmed. It is not free creative tasks that motivate students with learning difficulties. On the contrary, the students felt insecure. In P2, weaker learners were unsure about the possibility of creating their own photo project. They wanted a very clear assignment (“I need a framework, so to speak, on which one can then build and modify” S_027b) and example pictures for the photo work. Regarding the teaching process, it was confirmed that the open and visual, creative tasks planned as low-threshold tasks had a higher learning hurdle than assumed. At the same time, such tasks were useful overall, even if they required more individual assistance. They could produce more experience-based learning outcomes, and the students seemed to deal with the topics in a more subject-related manner.

On the one hand, during the learning process in P1, it was difficult to connect the different tasks of the students with each other. The idea was that the lower and higher achieving students should learn from each other. In particular, students who were not very interested or motivated participated little in the joint evaluation. Most of the time, neither the students nor the teachers made a connection between the individual results of the individual and group work. This means that the basic idea that students learn from each other can hardly be realized. This may lead to the problem of “doing difference”,

since students who are less motivated or less able to learn (who may have already worked superficially in the work phase) cannot gain much new knowledge from the lesson.

On the other hand, the assumption that art initially has an activating and motivating effect on the students can be confirmed. In P2, the easy accessibility to creating art could be observed: most students engaged excitedly in a photo project. For some, however, insecurities had to be cleared up at first, but they gained confidence through exchanges with others in the group work. A polaroid camera in particular attracted great enthusiasm when they were asked to produce a photo on the theme of "suffering". In addition, it was observed that a photo shoot at an extracurricular learning location promoted self-directed, individualized, and cooperative learning.

It became obvious at some points that less verbal and creative tasks appeal to some students. For example, a student who was otherwise hardly willing to perform eagerly carried out the task of depicting a situation of suffering as a comic in P1. Likewise, some students who were less strong in writing were able to contribute well to an oral discussion on the design of a still image when working in groups in P2.

4.1.2. The Role of the Teacher

Even though art provides its own access points for students, the importance of the teacher in the learning process should not be underestimated. Teachers determine to a great extent whether the impulses of the students are taken up and deepened, and especially whether religious patterns of interpretation are introduced. Uncertainties about the content of the theological subject matter also contributed to the fact that the students' statements were not taken further and led into a deeper theologizing. The second cycle in particular showed that the success of this task was highly dependent upon the teachers' engagement and the way they conducted discussions. It became clear that it is the task of the teachers to make the time spent on creative tasks useful. The allocation of differentiated learning tasks was also problematic in its practical implementation. Here, primarily the learning performance, or in some cases organizational reasons such as the seating arrangements, were taken into account, but not individual preferences or different (visual, auditory, etc.) learning types. Time management has proven to be particularly important; if teachers do not keep this in mind, learning processes cannot be completed. The important role of the teacher in bringing the different contributions of the students into meaningful conversations is evident.

4.1.3. Learning Types

Our observations and the learning outcomes (cf. Section 4.2) showed clear quantitative and qualitative discrepancies between the students' written and oral participation. Some inattentive students with weaker oral abilities were clearly stronger in the cognitive-written domain, and vice versa. For example, two students who were very reserved in class showed through their written work that they had developed a perspective of hope. They also described the meaning this hope has for themselves. Here, it becomes clear what extremely complex, multifactorial, and heterogeneous learning situations adaptive learning and teaching must consider, and that these cannot be differentiated solely along the categories of "low achievers" and "high achievers" or "illustrative-creative" and "abstract-conceptual" approaches.

4.1.4. Relation to the Lifeworld of Students

In P1, it was difficult to establish connections to the personal life conditions and questions of the students. Most of the students see "suffering" as an abstract quantity and not linked to concrete situations. Some students made personal references in the post-tests, but had not brought them into the lessons before.

In P2, a stronger personal preoccupation with the topic of suffering was recognizable; their interest in theological questions was awakened. To the surprise of the teachers, the students expressed very personal experiences of suffering (e.g., bullying, parental violence,

violent death of a classmate). They interpreted Jesus's death on the cross as exemplary for suffering in the world and a perspective of hope that goes beyond it, whereby it was observed that they resorted to affirmative sentences ("feel-good messages") from the everyday world, such as, "one should leave the bad behind and look forward" (S_002b).

4.1.5. The School Building as a Hierarchically Coded Space

The effect of the learning space, which unconsciously shapes and contributes to the learning process, should not be underestimated either. The classroom is specifically coded and prefigures a learning atmosphere in which a specific student–teacher habitus is set. A certain hierarchy is rehearsed, which can contradict learning with equity through art processes. It turned out that, on the one hand, students in P2 tended to be ashamed to physically stage themselves in the classroom (e.g., in the form of still pictures) in order to prepare the photo staging. On the other hand, when the photo shoot took place at locations chosen by the students outside school, a relaxed atmosphere could be observed and the students had no inhibitions about posing in front of the camera. One student expressed the following: "Um (...) yes, in the classroom I would never actually take a picture somehow. Um (...) Yes, the thing is, it's kind of too forced for me from the feeling partly because I know it's my job, I have to do it now, um, there's no way around it. (laughs)" (S_024b).

4.2. Learning Outcome

In addition to the learning processes, the first explorative findings also emerged with regard to the learning outcomes. Overall, in both sub-projects the learning outcomes were weak when measured against the intended learning goals, namely, to develop differentiated interpretations of suffering and death in a Christian horizon. The comparison of the voice messages in the pre-post-test shows that the students' Christian interpretations of suffering and death are often constant or only slightly changed. Sometimes students use superficial theological phrases. Occasionally, Christian interpretations of suffering and death are absent altogether. Since the learning paths in both sub-projects differ, we initially consider the learning outcomes separately.

4.2.1. Sub-Project 1

In the retrospective reflection, a teacher expressed satisfaction with the learning process, since the students had learned central concepts and (theological) terminology (Stations of the Cross, Passion, etc.). Closely connected to this, some students showed an increase in their general knowledge of Christianity, mainly the story of Christ's death and his resurrection, which they confirmed themselves in their feedback. In the end, they were able to correctly reproduce and historically classify content related to the narrative of the death and resurrection of Jesus. However, the design envisaged other goals in the planning. According to this, the students should, for instance, be able to perceive suffering and contingency in their own lives, as well as in the lives of others. They should interpret the death of Jesus on the cross as a place of focus of all human suffering and explain that the resurrection of Jesus signifies hope for the healing of all suffering. We expected that high-achievers would interpret the death of Jesus on the cross as a consequence of his advocacy for those who suffer and explain that the healing of suffering involves both one's own actions and the hope of divine redemption.

Therefore, there is a relevant discrepancy between the learning outcome of the design and the actual knowledge acquisition and literacy. Furthermore, the learning goals indicate that resurrection in this design is interpreted entirely in terms of an eschatological hope for salvation. However, our observations and the learning outcomes made it clear that this is not easy to connect to the diffuse idea of a continuation of life after death that is prevalent among some students. The students' interpretations always referred to Jesus and possibly to life after death for people today, but rarely to life right now. The perspective that the whole setting is about suffering today did not carry through from the learning design. Therefore, the connection to one's own life remained slightly behind.

4.2.2. Sub-Project 2

The learning results of P2 show that the students perceived and interpreted resurrection for themselves less as an eschatological hope of redemption, but rather referred to perspectives of hope for suffering today. Several students expressed the wish to study biblical texts and Christian ideas of the afterlife more intensively in further RE. Based on the personal statements and the questions and elementary experiences brought in by the students in the lessons, the question of theodicy, the question of the exclusivity of salvation in view of the diversity of lifeworlds, as well as the topic of sin, crystallized as relevant for the students in the first survey phase. For example, one student dealt with the issue of “guilt”. He interprets his drug abuse as sin. From this he derives the consideration of whether help and redemption must be earned, whether repentance is not required beforehand, and whether the resurrection is really granted to all people. Christologically, the interpretive pattern of Jesus’s vicarious death is relevant for him. His painting is entitled “Without Sins”, and he explains, “We only wanted to say that God is with us, but also with our sins, that he takes them away, so to speak”, but only if one stands by one’s own offenses, “repents of the deeds”, and apologizes (S_004b). Thus, in contrast to P1, a strong personal involvement with the topic of suffering and hope was recognizable; the content-related learning gain with regard to Christian patterns of interpretation of death and resurrection was less pronounced.

5. Discussion

In the following, some selected observations are discussed and connected. In doing so, we are guided by the broad lines that the first findings have revealed.

5.1. Social Inequality

In our project, inequality is to be reflected upon with particular regard to social inequality, since working with art can have social implications and reinforce social inequality. The first study results give reason to consider the heterogeneity dimension of social situations in particular.

It must be brought into question which milieu-conditioned world view (Schnurr 2011, p. 6) and which aesthetic taste is addressed in the lessons. Aesthetic learning in RE has so far been thought of as being functional only for lower performance levels. The uncertainty of the students in the case of free learning tasks can possibly be caused by the fact that, on the one hand, they cannot anticipate what the teachers expect, and, on the other hand, that specific image competences are queried (in P1), and that these can only be assumed for a few students from well-educated homes. From this point of view, socialization favors or hinders the “cultural fit” insofar as, for example, artistic literacy is fostered in early childhood in educated households by parents reading picture books to their children or, later, by visiting museums, while intensive contemplation and discussion of artistic depictions is rather unknown to others. The photo project in P2 requires a certain self-confidence to put oneself in the limelight with one’s ideas and thoughts. In the classes observed so far, some students felt unsettled by the open, creative tasks. They expressed the need to be given examples of the photos to be created in order to understand what is expected of them. At the same time, students from all milieus are influenced by the visual communication structure in new media such as TikTok or Instagram, which require specific literacy and competences. Young people’s photo socialization mostly takes place in social networks and is shaped by young people’s self-dramatization and identity negotiation processes. Photo art thus offers low-threshold approaches for students from all backgrounds. At the same time, this low threshold seems to be a challenge when it comes to initiating deeper artistic discussions. The photo productions of the first groups of students showed how strongly they rely on the image skills they have acquired from social media. They reproduced a specific “Instagram style” with recourse to current image stocks of global and stereotyping media culture (Schnurr 2013, p. 79). In many cases, they resorted to “clichés”, such as the motif of the sunset or the path, and classical symbols such as the candle, cross, or gravestone. The

crux of the problem in P2 was to move from an everyday worldly preoccupation to a theologically deepened artistic engagement.

Ansgar Schnurr critically notes that the overcoming of stereotypical views pursued in art education presupposes a great deal of alterity tolerance from the students in order for them to openly engage in experimental perceptual situations without reservation and to question their own fields of vision again and again (Schnurr 2011, p. 6). Schnurr emphasizes that this can only be assumed for a few students and advises us to think in a more differentiated manner about the addressing of certain milieus and the fading out of other milieus through unifying pedagogical theories (Schnurr 2011, p. 6). When the students had to comment their photos, they often formulated affirmative sentences (“feel-good messages”) in P2. These sentences can be read as milieu-specific, identity-relevant statements about their worldview and affiliations (Schnurr 2013, p. 73). In terms of heterogeneity pedagogy, this raises the question, as it does with the produced images, of the relationship between the affirmation of the existing and the promotion and expansion of the world view in the learning process.

In the course of further research, it will be necessary to reflect on the extent to which the students’ photographic style and the visual language used in it prove to be a viable means of expression for them, or to what extent their repertoire can and should be expanded through an engagement with other visual and symbolic language.

5.2. Learning Outcomes

In the interpretation of the learning outcomes, it must be brought into question to what extent the learning settings were at least partially successful. The learning outcome, evidence of which we collected in the pre-post-test, was rather low. To discuss these results, it is helpful to consider adaptive teaching–learning theories. In the horizon of these theories, the question of the success of teaching proves to be challenging, for whether adaptive learning is successful “depends, on the one hand, on which normative assumptions are made with regard to the indicators of success—and this depends on the context and discourse. On the other hand, due to the multidimensionality of heterogeneity, one and the same lesson can be adaptive with regard to a certain target dimension, but have no or even non-intended effects with regard to other targets” (Hertel et al. 2016, pp. 72–73). In this respect, the learning growth (mainly in the area of theological literacy and increase in knowledge) can be interpreted as successful for students who had no prior knowledge and thus had different learning prerequisites than those assumed.

In the interpretation of the results from P1, the collaborative approach between the teachers and researchers proved to be revealing, as the teachers were clearly more satisfied with the learning outcomes than the research team. The teachers focused more on non-intended learning outcomes. For example, they see the learning outcomes of religious education as being mainly in the area of literacy and at the level of factual knowledge. They focus on cross-sectional tasks of learning and less on interpretations saturated with the life experiences of students.

The students worked with very different art pieces, such as medieval altar retables, contemporary works of art, and a Stations of the Cross specially made for young people. The difficulties here were not so much in the choice of art, but rather in the transition from analysis to interpretation. This means that students are able to describe the artworks and attribute meaning to their individual elements, but that they are hardly able to perform an interpretation of the whole artwork that considers the previously named partial aspects. Here, above all, we discerned a breaking point between analysis and interpretation, which allowed us to confirm previous studies (Gärtner and Brenne 2015, pp. 79–110; Gärtner 2018a). Some students, especially lower achievers, struggle to overcome this breaking point, whereas verbally and cognitively stronger students manage this interpretation task more easily. This could be one reason why in P1 it was more difficult than assumed to create a bridge between Jesus and life today, even though the chosen pictures and the coronavirus pandemic have established a connection between the bible and everyday life.

With reference to the elementarization model of the didactics of religion, the results indicate that the connection between the “elementary experience” of the students and the “elementary structure” and “truth” that find expression in art must be focused more precisely. Teachers cannot delegate the task of making personal connections between the subject matter and the world they live in to the students; the students need suggestions and support for this. In the reception of artwork (P1), the pictures can in a certain way take over the function of making the “elementary structure” and “truth” accessible through visual language. In addition, they hold the potential to build a bridge to the students’ lifeworld and experiences, which, however, has to be initiated by the teachers. In creating art (P2), on the other hand, the opposite problem becomes visible. Here, the students are touched by their “elementary experiences” and can express themselves creatively and artistically. In contrast, the teachers have to take up the “elementary experiences” expressed by the students more strongly and consolidate them by offering broader theological interpretations and orientations. Due to the lack of religious socialization experienced by many students, no basic knowledge can be assumed. The “elementary structure” and “truth” must be introduced by the teacher so that the learning processes may contain a religious dimension. In the future, the extent to which a stronger integration between elements of picture interpretation and elements of art practice could help to connect the subject of learning with the lifeworld of the students will have to be examined.

5.3. School as a Place for Formal Education

School is a reflection of society, and in this respect orders of difference and hierarchies are inscribed in school processes at all levels and can counteract heterogeneity-sensitive learning processes. The student–teacher interaction is also rehearsed and inscribed in the classroom behavior, which makes real face-to-face learning difficult, especially as the teacher will end up being the one who assesses. Moreover, spatial perspectives, such as classrooms and extracurricular spaces, as well as interactions concerning artistic practices and artworks prove to be crucial to the deep structure of teaching processes and cannot be dealt with on the level of the heterogeneity-sensitive visual structure of teaching alone. Regarding the importance of the place of learning, one hypothesis that arises primarily from P2 is that alternative learning processes are more likely to occur in out-of-school places because they are coded differently and break the student–teacher hierarchy. A prerequisite for creating art seems to be the decoding of the school space, the teacher–student hierarchy implemented in it, and the social orders of difference inscribed in the institution of school (Dirim and Mecheril 2018, p. 39). Art can break down the orders of difference inscribed in the places of learning and the teacher–student habitus practiced here to a certain extent by providing imaginative spaces, “third spaces”, as Homi Bhabha (Bhabha 2000, p. 56) calls them. Nevertheless, fitting processes in the classroom remain co-determined by the place of learning, which mostly unconsciously influences the interactions. However, out-of-school places of learning are not neutral either, and this must also be didactically reflected upon. In places such as museums, parks, and cemeteries, students also draw on the socially available knowledge of the use of the space (Hausendorf and Schmitt 2013, p. 15) where not all students have habituated a spatial routine.

6. Limitations

Overall, the first cycle was overshadowed by the coronavirus pandemic. Collaborative work between students could not be carried out to the desired extent, and performative and creative work was hampered. The students’ facial expressions were often obscured behind their masks. This particularly affected the deep structures of the lessons, which we could neither differentiate nor observe. At the same time, however, we were able to refer to the pandemic situation in the topic “Dealing with Suffering and Death” through our choice of images and strengthen the connection between the lifeworld and the classroom. The second cycle continues to be influenced by the pandemic, with a little more freedom. Nevertheless,

masks, loss of time due to coronavirus tests, and fixed seating in the classroom remain obstacles in lesson delivery and evaluation.

In addition, it should be noted that videography of lessons and the presence of researchers in the classroom create an unnatural teaching situation for students and teachers. It is possible that cameras inhibit the students in their immediate vicinity, especially when it comes to personal topics or expressive tasks. The same applies to teachers, who may react with nervousness to the prospect of being observed. In addition, some teachers explained that they were unaccustomed to adapting and implementing lesson plans planned by others, which created further insecurities in their teaching.

In some classes, the teachers had only taken over the learning group shortly before the start of the project. They were therefore not yet able to build up much of a relationship with the students. In some cases, the learning groups had recently been reassembled, so that there were boundaries between the students that may have created inhibition thresholds. Since at least two cycles are still to be carried out, didactical design research offers the opportunity to focus particularly on overcoming these limitations.

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