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A Double Bypass? Tracing How the Aims of Religious Education Are Negotiated Across Different Dimensions of the Curriculum in Norway

Nils H. Korsvoll

ABSTRACT

Religious education (RE) across Europe is drawn between promoting intercultural education and fostering national community. Examining the national curriculum and three RE textbooks in Norway, I find that the former stresses common identity while the latter emphasize plurality and intercultural education. My observations join extant research on the different dimensions of the curriculum and furthermore show how priorities in national curricula may be circumnavigated in what Oddrun M. H. Bråten calls *bypasses*. However, classroom studies from Norway find that national identity is important for RE teachers, thereby demonstrating a *double bypass*, if you will.

KEYWORDS

Religious education; dimensions of the curriculum; textbooks; Norway

Religious education (RE)¹ is understood and approached differently in different arenas, by different actors and according to different interests.² Norwegian RE has for some time been caught between the at times conflicting aims of facilitating diversity and promoting common, national values.³ Indeed, this tension is well known across Europe, where arguments for maintaining a public RE vacillate between European integration on the one hand and fostering national identities on the other.⁴ Following the further diversification of European society and growing concerns regarding religious conflict and terrorism in the 2000s, there was a marked emphasis in European policy and debates, most notably in the OSCE's Toledo Guiding Principles from 2007, on RE's role in promoting civic virtues, couching it in so-called "citizenship education."⁵ However, the need to also acknowledge cultural and historical significance quickly became apparent, promoting RE as "intercultural education" instead,⁶ for instance in the Council of Europe's *Signposts*.⁷ Against this backdrop, I look at the national curriculum and some textbooks to explore what aims these see for

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Norwegian RE and then map how potentially different aims are negotiated across these different dimensions of the curriculum.

Norway has a centralized, national curriculum,⁸ and textbooks are typically written in close alignment with it.⁹ Studies show that Norwegian teachers in turn expect textbooks to follow the national curriculum and often base their teaching on the books rather than consulting the national curriculum.¹⁰ In his survey of RE textbook studies from Norway, Njål Skurnes further notes that authors, broadly speaking, strive to adhere to and promote the aims and values laid down in national legislation and curricula.¹¹ However, Annika Hvithamar recently argued that Danish RE textbook authors often perform something of a balancing act, alternating between their own aims for RE (as intercultural education) and the national curriculum's (as a conveyor of a common, Christian heritage).¹² I am interested to see whether I find something similar in Norway, comparing how the aims of RE are discussed in a selection of textbooks and in the national curriculum.

Theoretical framework and approach

Some time back John Goodlad and Zhixin Su launched their influential model of the four “dimensions of curriculum,” these being societal, institutional, instructional and ideological, to describe the different aspects, interests and players that are involved in shaping education.¹³ For example, the societal dimension constitutes the “sociopolitical process of determining goals and, usually, the subjects to be studied,” while the institutional curriculum is “that of a school or college (...) specified by the state or province, and modified by the school board, after varying degrees and kinds of input from school personnel and lay citizens.”¹⁴ Since then, Roger Dale introduced a further distinction where he maps the international, the national and the local levels in formulating and interpreting education policy.¹⁵ Oddrun M. H. Bråten in turn combined these two models to explore Norwegian and English RE,¹⁶ and has since explored the inclusion and positioning of nonreligious worldviews in RE.¹⁷ Recently, Bråten and Geir Skeie also used her model to discuss how the didactic concept of “big ideas” was translated in “core elements” in the new Norwegian curricula.¹⁸ I use her framework to examine the differences and map the interactions between textbooks and national curriculum, and in so doing I find what Bråten calls *bypasses*—cases where an idea or a priority moves from one dimension or level to another without following the formal sequences of the education system.¹⁹

My examination consists of a close reading of the introduction, or *purpose clause*, of the national RE curriculum and of the prefaces to three RE

textbooks. Norwegian primary and secondary education is currently undergoing an (other) extensive curricular reform.²⁰ The new RE curriculum²¹ is being phased in, starting in the autumn of 2020, and scholars have hastened to explore how it recasts the subject.²² Here, however, I examine the outgoing curriculum (RLE1-02), since the textbooks currently circulating were written according to that. More specifically, I have looked at the pre-faces of the teacher's edition of three of the RE textbooks that were written to RLE1-02, for pupils between 10 and 13 years old: *Vi i Verden*²³ (ViV), *Vivo*²⁴ (Vivo) and *Inn i livet*²⁵ (Iil).²⁶ There are no comprehensive surveys or public records of the use and distribution of RE textbooks in Norway,²⁷ but these three were found to be the most used textbooks in a 2011–2012 survey of middle school RE teachers in the five northernmost counties of Norway.²⁸

This a hermeneutic analysis, where I draw out principles and ideas that the respective texts communicate.²⁹ Ideas can be communicated implicitly, so in my analysis I refer to a set of ideal-types of what is considered the aim of RE. They are not accurate nor comprehensive representations but serve as convenient typologies when reading the curriculum and the textbooks. I borrow the ideal-types from Heid Leganger-Krogstad's identification of four main approaches to RE, which she termed the (1) existentialistic philosophical, (2) social ethical, (3) phenomenological and (4) text-oriented theological approach.³⁰

In the first approach the individualistic perspective is dominant, while the collective perspective is dominant in the second. The phenomenological approach and the text-oriented theological approach (approaches 3 and 4) give priority to human understanding on the basis of a common cultural history.³¹

The first two approaches build on what she calls a functionalist understanding of RE, in which the aim of the subject is to develop and improve either (1) the individual pupil or (2) society.³² Thus, they approximate the civic emphasis in RE as citizenship education, which I mentioned at the beginning. The latter two approaches, which Leganger-Krogstad call substantialist RE, instead teach religion in and of itself, either as (3) phenomena in the world or as (4) a common, cultural background.³³ The third approach then approximates the stricter religious studies stance concerning RE, voiced by, for instance, Tim Jensen.³⁴ Proceeding to the analysis, I first identify discussions of the aims of RE in my sources and then consider these against the four ideal-types.

Aims according to the RE curriculum

Norway implemented a common, integrative RE subject in 1997, replacing a segregated, denominational RE.³⁵ This was in response to the growing

diversification of Norwegian society and in line with the above-mentioned European trend toward citizenship and intercultural education.³⁶ At the same time political and social forces in Norway fought, and still continue to fight, for RE to preserve and promote Norway's "Christian and humanist heritage."³⁷ Consequently, Christian heritage is emphasized also in the integrative RE subject:

The Christian faith and traditions have characterised European and Norwegian culture for centuries.³⁸

This priority of Christianity and Christian heritage provoked civil lawsuits and appeals to both the UN Human Rights Committee and the European Court of Human Rights in the 2000s.³⁹ Their subsequent rulings against the Norwegian government did engender several curricular revisions,⁴⁰ but the fundamental aims from the 1997-reform remain.⁴¹

Importantly, these include also some functionalist aims for Norwegian RE. Teaching should be "objective, critical and pluralistic," and the subject "a meeting place."⁴² Furthermore, RE shall "help the pupil learn to talk with other people," and it is "intended to bring all pupils together."⁴³ All of these belong within a social ethical approach to RE, expressing a social and civic aim. Then, there are phrases that appeal to an existentialistic philosophical approach, saying that RE is important for pupils to "understand their existence" and for "understanding and interpreting our lives."⁴⁴ Indeed, Bengt-Ove Andreassen has criticized the curriculum for unduly promoting religion as "a resource for human development and spiritual growth."⁴⁵ Still, the sociaethical approach takes up more space in the introduction here. In fact, following the curriculum revisions in 2008, Skeie noted that Norwegian RE had taken yet another step away from facilitating personal growth and toward addressing social or public aspects of religion.⁴⁶

At the same time, the curriculum sets out to teach and promote Norway's "Christian and humanist heritage,"⁴⁷ which several scholars argue presents and promotes an essentialising and culturalist view of religion.⁴⁸ The drive behind this, they argue, has been a (perceived) threat of moral relativism and dilution of identity in the face of cultural globalization.⁴⁹ Describing Norwegian RE in 2003, Skeie aptly observed the result of the emphasis on heritage:

RE is intended to contribute to the integration of socio-cultural diversity through establishing a common pool of knowledge about the Norwegian cultural heritage, mainly as it is shaped by Christianity. This knowledge is considered an important part of a common identity in the majority population, and a tool for integration on the part of minorities.⁵⁰

Lars Laird Iversen points out how this approach is problematic because it conceives identity as something static and permanent, based on distinct

religious traditions and/or groups. It has, he argues, produced an RE curriculum that is “deeply culturalist.”⁵¹

There are several passages in the introduction to RLE1-02 that communicate this culturalist tendency. For instance, the curriculum recounts how religion has “contributed to moulding individuals, communities and society,” and expresses that religions and worldviews are “an important precondition for understanding and interpreting our lives.”⁵² This almost identitarian approach to RE, then, does not in and of itself make the curriculum culturalist. Yet, it becomes so when the foundational position given to Norway’s “Christian and humanist heritage” is combined with the aim that RE is “a generally educative subject [that] shall form the basis for a common platform (...) and as a frame of reference.”⁵³ It may not be the intention, but RLE1-02 thereby compare best with Leganger-Krogstad’s fourth, text-oriented theological approach, where a (proposed/supposed) common cultural history is taken as the basis for advancing both personal growth and communal values.⁵⁴

Aims according to RE textbooks

Textbook research is an expanding field.⁵⁵ Scholars are starting to explore how textbooks are products where political, pedagogical, social, commercial and a range of other interests meet.⁵⁶ Equally important for my analysis, studies continue to observe that textbooks have a significant impact on how RE is taught in Norway.⁵⁷ For this article, I have consulted the teacher’s edition of the three, chosen textbooks, because the teacher’s edition is a *paratextual* instrument—addressing teachers and relaying the authors’ intentions and proposed interpretations.⁵⁸ Within these, I examine the prefaces, as the authors here explain and introduce their intentions. A preface “has as its chief function to ensure that the text is read properly. (...) the fact that its location is introductory and therefore monitory (this is why and this is how you should read this book).”⁵⁹ In many cases, it can be used as a manifesto.⁶⁰ Of course, Gérard Genette adds, there is no guarantee that a reader will agree with or even read the preface,⁶¹ and indeed my review of classroom studies later on in the article suggests that this is often the case.

Main themes and observations

All three textbooks first and foremost stress their endeavor to provide a variety of teaching methods and work exercises. They emphasize that RE should engage and motivate pupils, and *Vi i Verden* also adds that it should be fun.⁶² Now, although perhaps self-evident, engaging and fun

teaching is not an explicit goal in the curriculum. Yet, studies and projects with RE teachers have found that precisely engaging pupils, and therefore acquiring and developing a wide range of pupil-active working methods, is a primary concern.⁶³ Indeed, although teachers rarely have explicit criteria for choosing textbooks, Skurnes found that the first thing they look at is the suggested classroom activities, then price, availability and appropriate age-adaptation.⁶⁴ The emphasis on fun and enthusiasm in my three textbooks may then be addressed to teachers as potential customers, rather than a fulfillment of the curriculum.

The prefaces also link their fun and motivating exercises to the five basic skills on which all Norwegian curricula are based.⁶⁵ Since 2006, all Norwegian curricula have been written within a framework of five basic skills.⁶⁶ In fact, the textbooks' discussions of the five basic skills are the most extensive segments in the prefaces of all three textbooks where they engage with the curriculum. The content and priorities of RLE1-02 more specifically, however, is another matter. In general, these are an underlying presence in all three textbooks, but their explicit role in the prefaces vary considerably. *Vi i Verden* quotes the curriculum in full, but without further comment to or interpretation of it (pp. 10–3). In *Vivo* it can be detected as the implicit organizing principle behind the book's organization, but there is no explicit mention of it (pp. iv–v). I find it notable that the textbooks express a greater concern for covering and accommodating the five basic skills than for explicitly including and addressing the knowledge aims or the introductory clauses from RLE1-02.

Inn i livet includes the knowledge aims from the curriculum in their proposed teaching schedule, but again only as an organizing principle (pp. 18–9). *Vi i Verden*, where the knowledge aims are towering in their directly quoted, uncommented presence, opens with a statement that “covering all of the curriculum” is one of two main challenges that they want to help the teacher with (p. 6). This perhaps again addresses teachers as customers, but why is there almost no discussion of the curriculum and its content? Maybe the curriculum is simply considered a given for teachers, requiring no further introduction or comment? Or, the authors want to leave room for local planning and curricular work.⁶⁷ However, when *Vivo* presents some suggested annual teaching plans these are also based on various pedagogical principles, and not the curriculum's knowledge aims (p. xvi). In short, none of the textbooks point to RLE1-02 to discuss or expand on the aims of RE.

Instead, all three textbooks include a larger discussion of and emphasis on philosophical dialogue as an approach or pedagogical exercise in RE.⁶⁸ For *Vi i Verden*, it is a *leitmotif* throughout the book, directing how it addresses and deals with different topics and traditions (p. 8).

I will not go into the specifics of philosophical dialogue here, but all three books stress that it is both an activity that fosters individual reflection and growth, and that it is a collective exercise that stresses encounters and exchange across different views and opinions.⁶⁹ In other words, this key activity is cast very much in terms of Leganger-Krogstad's two functionalist approaches to RE; the individual, existentialistic philosophical and the collective, social ethical.⁷⁰ This emphasis and language suggests that the authors of all three books see RE firmly within the civic aims of citizenship education.

Indeed, to a certain extent they also say so. *Vivo*, for instance, opens by explaining that the Latin *vivo* means "I exist": "for instance in the meaning of being alive, of being together or how one leads one's life" (p. iv).⁷¹ The first subclause here is existentialistic, while the two following are collective, social. The last could be read within a heritage or identitarian discourse, but the previous two clauses suggest otherwise. *Inn i livet* lists its primary aims as bringing together all pupils, presenting material they can recognize themselves in, and to engage all pupils (p. 8). *Vi i Verden* proposes that the subject be "a meeting place" that stimulates personal growth and ethical development in a shared community (p. 8). In all three textbooks these foundational aims are not argued or explained, but simply stated.

Another common feature is that there is no mention of Christian and humanist heritage in the prefaces, except noting that Christianity is to be prioritized quantitatively.⁷² Rather than addressing common heritage or values, the textbooks are concerned with ensuring appropriate and diverse representation in RE.⁷³ *Inn i livet* discusses RE in light of the growing religious diversity in Norway and underlines how important it is that the subject reflects this. The authors also ask teachers to include other, relevant religious traditions or worldviews in their teaching, if they are not covered in the textbook.⁷⁴ Another important concern in both *Inn i livet* and *Vi i Verden* is the protection of pupils and their families against participation in religious activities or exercises that conflict with their faith or worldviews. *Inn i livet* even introduces the legal and curricular framework for this right of reservation (p. 10), while *Vi i Verden* suggests thorough planning and communication with parents: "We point out possibilities and challenges, while the textbook is organised in such a way that parents can easily follow the teaching and ask for reservation when necessary" (p. 6).⁷⁵ Again, these discussions rest on a collective, civic approach to RE, placing them within Leganger-Krogstad's social ethic category.

In sum, the national curriculum features as an underlying factor in the prefaces of all three textbooks, but their explicit discussions of it, however,

concern mainly the five basic skills and developing varied learning activities. Regarding the broader aims of RE, all three textbooks express a functionalist understanding, raising both existentialistic philosophical and social ethical approaches to RE. Notably, and in contrast to the curriculum, there is no mention of heritage or belonging to certain cultural traditions, be they Christian, humanist or otherwise. Moving on, I discuss this discrepancy between RLE1-02 and the textbooks and propose that it is a bypass, as I mentioned in my introduction, whereby certain aims or ambitions for Norwegian RE has jumped different dimensions of the curriculum.

Discussion—bypassing “Christian and humanist heritage”?

Goodlad and Su’s formulation of different dimensions of the curriculum argues that the form and content of education is not determined by the formal documents conventionally called the curriculum alone. Rather, it exists and is created in different arenas and in different versions according to the concerns and interested parties operating in their respective dimensions.⁷⁶ Applying this to Norwegian education, Geir Afdal demonstrates how the formal, national curricula are very much part of the societal domain. They are the product of extensive socio-political processes, being also sensitive to any shifts in these, while their reception and execution in schools belongs to another set of domains.⁷⁷ Among others what he calls the “perceived curriculum”:

In a Norwegian context this would also be the domain of textbooks and other resource material. Textbooks are important interpreters of official curricula, and will influence the teachers’ perception of curricula.⁷⁸

I noted above that textbooks are generally considered to follow the curriculum, so why the complete absence of “Christian and humanist heritage” in the prefaces of my three RE textbooks? “Sometime a domain is ‘jumped’,” Goodlad remarks.⁷⁹ Or, to use Bråten’s term, a dimension can be bypassed.⁸⁰

I propose that the prefaces to the three RE textbooks, although different in several ways, unite in relying more on ideas and priorities hailing from academic, international fora and debates on RE.⁸¹ For instance, in Robert Jackson’s *Signposts* (2014) RE is conceived of and promoted as intercultural education, including many civically oriented aims, which include

cultivating appropriate attitudes, against a background of upholding certain values, including tolerance, respecting the right of others to hold a religious or non-religious stance, human dignity and civic-mindedness.⁸²

Although concerned not to promote a reductive understanding of religion,⁸³ the document clearly places the aims of RE within the two

functionalist approaches. For instance, a large section promotes a dialogical format for teaching RE. This may of course aid the formation of the individual, but the stress in the text remains on the collective, social ethical aspects of dialogue.⁸⁴ This emphasis on RE as intercultural education then mirrors the functionalist aims expressed in the RE textbook prefaces in Norway, suggesting a relation between these two dimensions of the curriculum that bypasses the identitarian or culturalist sections of the formal, national curriculum (RLE1-02).

Signposts, and other public reports or white papers, are of course formal documents and can be considered part of the institutional dimension. However, behind them are extensive informal processes and trends that reach beyond the formal structures of national education policy.⁸⁵ *Signposts*, again, is indeed an effort to draw on and rally a wide range of RE educators and researchers across Europe.⁸⁶ Hence, it is perhaps only natural that the attitudes of Norwegian textbook authors more closely resemble *Signposts* than the political and social compromises in the national curriculum.

Discussion—bypassing intercultural education?

As I noted earlier, textbooks are often influential in teaching, especially for RE in Norway.⁸⁷ Yet, when observing the RE that is actually taught in Norwegian classrooms studies have found that teachers typically stress precisely common cultural heritage and identity, in line with the national curriculum and contrary to the focus in the textbooks. Teachers that have been interviewed repeatedly bring up tradition and culture as central to RE, “which was basically a view of ‘Christianity as Norwegian cultural heritage’.”⁸⁸ Soundings that Bråten did among pupils furthermore show that they here mirror their teachers.⁸⁹ In her book, Bråten gives a thorough summary of an interview with an RE teacher who considered her main aim to pass on (Christian) cultural heritage and to introduce it to pupils from other backgrounds.⁹⁰ This sentiment recurs in several Norwegian studies on the attitudes and motivations of RE teachers.⁹¹

Moreover, a closer look at textbook studies shows that their influence on teaching is not as strong as I initially stated. While most Norwegian RE teachers do make extensive use of textbooks, they often do so grudgingly.⁹² In one study, RE teachers said that they use textbooks, even if they are not much help.⁹³ Another study found that RE textbooks are often used for factual content and assignments, but not for introducing or framing the material.⁹⁴ Norwegian RE teachers report that they feel a significant gap between what they do in the classroom and what the

curriculum, as communicated through textbooks, stipulates.⁹⁵ Judging from the continued emphasis on a common Norwegian and Christian heritage, this seems to be the case also here, where teachers do not necessarily ascribe to or adopt how textbook authors conceive of and communicate the aims of RE.

Why? Skeie has pointed out that many Norwegian RE teachers were educated before the 1997 reform and are therefore trained according to Norway's earlier, theological and text-oriented RE.⁹⁶ Moreover, many teach in local communities that they know well and where they are often active in local Christian congregations.⁹⁷ While careful not to proselytize, their dated education and perhaps also emphasis on the local, traditional community may lead to identitarian or heritage-oriented teaching. Bråten has suggested that such motivation may interact with and be compounded by the fact that general education in Norway, including RE, historically was part of a monocultural nation-building project.⁹⁸ The curriculum's identitarian understanding of heritage and RE furthermore reflects attitudes and expressions in the public discourse,⁹⁹ and Norwegian studies find that parents also stress a common, Christian heritage as one of the main reasons for a public RE.¹⁰⁰ So, while the textbook prefaces show a bypass from an international discourse, where RE is cast as intercultural education with significant civic aims, the attitudes and activities in the instructional dimension suggest that the textbooks are in turn bypassed by teachers and parents who understand the subject in light of a discourse that emphasizes a common, Christian heritage.

Conclusion—a double bypass

This article traces how different conceptions of the aim of RE manifest themselves and are negotiated between different dimensions of the curriculum in Norway. Textbook authors discuss social ethical and existentialistic philosophical aims for RE, which hail from a wider, international discourse among educators and academics on RE as intercultural education. This international discourse then reaches the perceived dimension of the curriculum through a bypass, circumventing the national RE curriculum and its assertion of a common "Christian and humanist heritage." However, looking at reports from the instructional dimension, there appears to be yet another bypass, whereby many Norwegian RE teachers see the subject as an arena to maintain and promote a common, Christian heritage. Hence, the gap causing these two bypasses does not seem to be between a national and an international level, nor between the formal versus the perceived curriculum, but rather between

academics and educators on the one hand and wider society, including RE teachers, on the other. My observations suggest a difference not according to levels or necessarily arenas here, but according to what frames of reference and frameworks the different actors couch their understanding of RE in.

Notes

1. This article was developed within the RE Research Group at the Department of Teacher Education at the Norwegian University of Science and Technology (NTNU). I want to thank especially Oddrun M. H. Bråten and Geir Skeie for valuable advice and recommendations at several stages of my work.
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 17. O. M. H. Bråten, “Worldviews in Norwegian RE,” in *Challenging Life: Existential Questions as a Resource for Education*, eds. K. Sporre, G. Skeie, and J. Ristiniemi (Münster: Waxmann, 2018), 157–76; O. M. H. Bråten and J. Everington, “Issues in the Integration of Religious Education and Worldviews Education in an Intercultural Context,” *Intercultural Education* 30, no. 3 (2019): 289–305.
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- community or society at large (Bråten, “Comparative Studies in Religious,” in *Religious Education*, 41).
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