

# **Researching Classroom Processes and Outcomes in Religious Education**

## **The Need for Intervention Studies**

This chapter considers the reasons for doing empirical research on classroom processes and outcomes in Religious Education in general and in reference to the research projects carried out at Tübingen in particular. In this second respect, it also serves as an introduction to the chapters describing a number of Tübingen projects following this chapter. These projects were selected for presentation in this volume because all of them make use of a similar design and can be described as intervention studies. This design has not been used very often in the field of religious education before and will therefore also be explained in the following. This design allows for certain insights which appear to be especially promising for advancing the understanding of teaching and learning in Religious Education, concerning different topics and a variety of educational aims.

From the perspective of religious education, however, decisions about research cannot be justified alone by arguing for certain research designs or methodologies. Such decisions must also be based on considerations concerning the contents and the aims of Religious Education. In the present case, two kinds of content areas and educational aims play a special role in this respect – interreligious education and values education – an emphasis which also needs to be explained below.

## **1. Reasons for researching classroom processes and outcomes in Religious Education**

The starting point for the present volume is the interest in researching classroom processes and outcomes in Religious Education. The reasons behind this interest stated in the introduction to this volume refer to a number of considerations which will be rephrased, expanded and explained from my point of view in this section.

First, Religious Education takes place in the context of state-sponsored schools, at least in most European countries. This is the typical situation in these countries, even if there also are, for example, religiously sponsored schools in some European countries which may imply a different context for the subject of Religious Education. The existence of the subject Religious Education can be explained by historical reasons, referring, for example, to the historically close relationships between church and state in Europe or to the role of the churches in founding and maintaining schools since the Middle Ages. Today, however, historical references are not considered sufficient for justifying Religious Education as part of the cur-

riculum. Instead, the existence of a school subject Religious Education necessarily implies the claim that there is something which can be learned in this subject, not unlike other subjects taught at school.

Learning outcomes are seen as the decisive rationale for having schools and for mandatory participation on the side of the pupils. In contemporary debates on education, claims concerning learning outcomes increasingly tend to be subjected to critical scrutiny and empirical testing. From this perspective it is not enough to formulate convincing aims. One must also ask and investigate empirically if these aims are actually reached or, what should never be excluded as an unwanted possibility, if they are in fact not reached. Taking the actual effects or outcomes of teaching and learning into consideration has therefore become a major expectation for all school subjects. Even if Religious Education, due to its special field of contents, may be viewed as a special case, the subject should not be seen and treated in isolation from the other subjects at school. Consequently, researching the reality of Religious Education in terms of classroom processes and outcomes is in the best interest of this subject itself. This does not imply that everything in Religious Education is measurable – in fact, I myself have argued that very valuable elements or dimensions of this subject cannot be tested (cf. Schweitzer 2008). Yet I am also convinced that what actually can be measured in Religious Education should indeed be measured and tested – for the sake of improving teaching and learning and thus, ultimately for the benefit of the children and adolescents to whom Religious Education is offered. Researching classroom processes and outcomes should not be viewed and put to use as an end in itself but in accordance with educational aims and criteria.

Second, the academic discipline of religious education has the task and responsibility to capture and describe, among others, the reality of Religious Education in order to give guidance and support for future improvements. This task can only be fulfilled in a responsible manner on the basis of research results concerning the quality of Religious Education as realised in its actual practice. It would therefore not be advisable for this discipline to refuse or to fail the standards of contemporary research on teaching and learning. As can be seen from the discussions on the quality of Religious Education which sometimes is referred to as “good Religious Education” (cf. Was ist guter Religionsunterricht 2006) there are many different possible criteria involved in assessing this quality – criteria referring to contents, aims, interests, interaction, relationships, experiences, etc. Yet there seems to be no doubt that asking about the learning outcomes achieved in Religious Education is at least one indispensable perspective in this context (for the German discussion on competences and standards see, among others, Fischer and Elsenbast 2006; Rothgangel and Fischer 2008, Sajak 2012). Religious Education would not be “good” if there were no outcomes that can be clearly identified and appraised. The presupposition for asking about outcomes in this way naturally is that such outcomes are not independent from how classes are taught. This is why, in addition to the question about outcomes, the actual teaching and learning processes in the classroom need to be studied as well – and one may add that studies like PISA have often been lacking

in this respect. Of course, there also are many other factors involved beyond the classroom which influence learning outcomes, like, for example, individual presuppositions or social backgrounds. Yet since these factors can hardly be influenced by the school, teaching and learning processes in the classroom remain a primary field on which disciplines like religious education should focus. It is here, if at all, that future improvements may be achieved. Researching classroom processes and outcomes in Religious Education therefore belongs to the core tasks of religious education as an academic discipline. It does not just fall prey to pressures from outside but is based on the development of the discipline itself.

Third, as can be seen from current research in educational psychology, general educational research has recently made important and very visible contributions to the understanding of teaching and learning (for a widely used summary cf. Helmke 2014). These contributions refer to both classroom processes as well as outcomes. It is not equally clear, however, how this understanding from general educational research can or should translate into subject-oriented didactics or, in our case, into teaching Religious Education. In the German religious education discussion, for example, several attempts have been made to take up ideas like “situated learning” by using concrete situations and their demands as starting points for processes of teaching and learning (for example, Obst 2008). Yet while this suggestion has received both, theoretical approval as well as critical responses, it has not been researched empirically in the field of Religious Education so far. In other words, paradoxically, the attempts to make use of empirical results from general education for purposes of improving teaching and learning in Religious Education have themselves remained purely theoretical, i. e., without empirical backing in research from Religious Education itself. At the same time, researchers in general education as well as in subject-oriented didactics have argued that different domains in terms of content areas require specific approaches and that both perspectives, the perspective of general education or educational psychology on the one hand and the perspective of subject-related didactics or, in the present context, of religious education on the other, are needed in order to guide and support improvements in teaching (cf. for example, the discussions in Meyer et al. 2008). Without empirical research on classroom processes and outcomes, religious education as subject-related discipline will not be able to fulfill its tasks in this kind of cooperation.

Sometimes critics of this kind of reasoning have argued that especially the outcome-oriented approach would imply to adapt Religious Education to the pressures of educational testing and to sacrifice the special character of this subject on the altar of global economic competition. It is certainly true that empirical research on education should never be carried out uncritically. Studies like PISA have an economic and internationally competitive background which can be seen from the fact that they were introduced by the OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development; cf. OECD 2001). At the same time, however, such studies cannot be reduced to only economic motives. They also include genuinely educational goals. At least it is possible to frame or re-frame the studies from an educational

perspective (cf. Baumert 2002). It would be quite difficult to maintain that, from the perspective of the philosophy of education, it does not matter if pupils actually acquire or develop certain competences or not. What remains questionable, however, is any attempt of viewing teaching and learning exclusively through the lens of possible outcomes. Such views must be rejected as reductionist. They do not do justice to the basic educational insight that, in education, outcomes and processes always belong together and that good quality must consequently refer to both, outcomes as well as processes. This is one of the reasons why the dual focus on classroom processes as well as on outcomes has been chosen for the present book.

At least in some countries, Religious Education is taught on the basis of theology, not in the sense of presenting theological dogmas in the classroom but in terms of using, for example, theological anthropology as a guideline in shaping the subject. Critical concerns with outcome-oriented research can also be formulated from this perspective. To make it more concrete: is there a contradiction between a Christian view of children and youth on the one hand and the question about learning outcomes on the other? In the German discussion such questions have been discussed at length by drawing on the relationship between human achievements or performance which are graded in school and the meaning of divine grace (cf. Nipkow 1979). Should Religious Education, even as a school subject, not make divine grace its guiding model and, consequently, abstain from all attempts of identifying or grading learning successes? Given the plurality of theological and religious traditions and points of view there is no general theological or religious answer to this question. From my own Lutheran point of view, the answer is a guarded "No". In this perspective one has to carefully distinguish between faith which cannot be taught on the one hand, and faith-related contents on the other which should be taught and can be learned (cf. Schweitzer 2006). In the introduction to his Small Catechism, for example, Martin Luther holds that no one can or should be forced to believe but that even non-believers can and even must be familiarised with the contents of the catechism (cf. Luther 1976, Preface). Accordingly, faith depends on grace but teaching and learning are worldly matters – to the degree that Luther, in ways that must be considered quite questionable today, suggested harsh punishments in case the pupils were not willing to learn. From my own understanding of Religious Education, this means that there are clear limits to empirical research – grace-based faith is not a possible object of scholastic achievement and respective empirical research or grading. Yet at the same time, from an educational as well as from a theological point of view, there are learning outcomes which can be tested in Religious Education. Even more, they definitively should be tested because, just like all human action, teaching is fallible human practice and should be improved by using whatever means are available for this purpose. Not doing so would also be irresponsible vis-à-vis the children and youth for whom Religious Education is provided.

## 2. Topics of research: The example of interreligious education and values education

Decisions concerning research in religious education cannot be based exclusively on the choice of certain methodologies or research designs. Quite the opposite holds true. Methodologies have to correspond to research questions which arise from the theoretical discussions in religious education. A focus on empirical research does not provide answers to the question what should be taught in Religious Education. Intervention studies, for example, always presuppose a certain research design but they also presuppose content-related decisions as well as defined aims which are guiding the work with such topics.

In other words, empirical approaches must be in line with the character of the contents and aims of the school subject to be studied. Otherwise it would not be clear how the research is related to the specific curriculum domain of Religious Education. In this section, the reasons for the topics chosen for the Tübingen research projects presented in the following chapters are therefore explained in their own right, at least in brief, in order to show that research on classroom processes and outcomes can be meaningfully combined with other ways of determining the meaning of Religious Education. It is, of course, not possible here to go into the details of the question what the Religious Education curriculum should encompass today. Yet some general observations may still be of help in the present context.

Two topics or areas of teaching and learning have been of special interest in the context of the research projects based on intervention studies at Tübingen: interreligious education on the one hand and values education on the other hand. These content areas or topics were chosen for a number of reasons.

First of all, both topics are of special interest in terms of the contemporary situation in Germany as well as in other Western societies. Expectations concerning values and values education have come to be the most important motives for being interested in Religious Education, for example, in the field of politics (cf. *Ethisches Lernen* 2014; from another Tübingen project cf., Schweitzer, Ruopp and Wagensommer 2012). From the perspective of religious education and theology, this development may appear questionable. Some theologians have even rejected the term values altogether because it does not fit with theological anthropology. Yet it would not be advisable for religious educators to deny all expectations concerning values – unless one is prepared to accept the consequence of people considering the subject irrelevant (cf. Schweitzer 2014a). Moreover, in the increasingly multi-religious societies of the present, the religious basis of values and of value systems has rightly received growing attention (cf, for example, Joas and Wiegandt 2005). The different religious traditions are expected to contribute to living together in peace and mutual respect or tolerance.

There are similar developments concerning interreligious education. In this case, religious educators themselves have been very active in developing approaches for a kind of Religious Education that does justice to the changing religious landscape

in general and to the need for mutual understanding between the different religious traditions. Consequently, there is a whole body of recent literature concerning interreligious education and specifically the question how Religious Education can become more effective in this respect (cf., for example, Hull 1984; Jackson 1997; Nipkow 1998; Lähnemann 1998; Schambeck 2013; Schweitzer 2014b).

The work of the two Tübingen institutes of Religious Education includes a strong emphasis on Religious Education in vocational schools and training contexts (cf. in this volume pp. 385–393). In Germany, Religious Education is part of the standard curriculum of these schools which are attended by pupils either doing a so-called dual training, partly in school and partly in practical fields of employed work, or by full-time school pupils who are expecting to receive practical training after the end of their time at school. In either case, the vocational context adds an interesting dimension for interreligious education which actually is not only of importance for Religious Education in vocational schools but for all schools. As has become more and more evident in our work, knowledge of other religions and the ability to work with members of different religions are increasingly important presuppositions for being successful in a number of work situations. Two examples studied by the Tübingen institutes which make this especially evident are related to the training of future kindergarten teachers on the one hand and of future caregivers on the other (cf. Schweitzer and Biesinger 2015; Merkt et al. 2014). Kindergartens often are the first places where children with different religious or non-religious backgrounds come together. Working with such diverse groups of children clearly requires special competences which are not part of the traditional training for this field and which, consequently, are still often lacking. Situations of caregiving, be it in hospitals or retirement places, also are increasingly multi-cultural and multi-religious, both in terms of the caregivers and the recipients of care. Given that central Europe had huge waves of immigration in most countries beginning in the 1960s it is to be expected that a growing number of immigrants are now reaching the time of retirement or, due to their age, are in need of care. Consequently, there also is a growing need for special competences concerning different religious affiliations and backgrounds. Clearly, interreligious competences are in high demand, not only for general educational and societal reasons but also for specific professional contexts. Religious Education can therefore acquire additional importance in the training of personnel.

At the same time – and this is the third reason for the focus of the projects on these topics – very few empirical studies are available which identify the effects of Religious Education in this respect and which could therefore guide the future development of Religious Education.

Especially this last point – the lack of pertinent studies – deserves at least some more comments. In the case of moral education, there is a broad research tradition mostly based on the Kohlberg-model of stimulating the development of moral judgment (for overviews see Oser and Althof 1992; Lind 2003). It is probably not claiming too much to say that no other model has inspired more empirical research

in the field of moral education. However, most often today, this model is considered dated. It has been criticised in respect to the underlying theory with its assumption of ascending moral stages which are considered inappropriate in relationship to the realities of moral life and action. Moreover, it has been argued that the exclusive focus on cognitive aspects is too narrow in order to capture the moral dimension or domain in its actual complex structure, for example, concerning moral feelings or emotions (from the perspective of religious education cf. Naurath 2007). Yet there can be no doubt that Kohlberg and his followers have been very effective in applying quality research designs to teaching in school. Even if Kohlberg's theoretical model must be broadened, this model has nevertheless served as a background for numerous studies in many countries around the world. However, Kohlberg never studied Religious Education or its effects on moral development. Among others, state schools in the United States where Kohlberg lived and worked, do not offer Religious Education. In addition to this, Kohlberg's appreciation of religion was rather limited in that he considered religion as something beyond morality (cf. Kohlberg 1981).

Looking beyond Kohlberg into the general field of values education it has to be stated that, at least in most cases, the demand for values education has been more a question of public rhetoric than of empirical research. Especially concerning Religious Education, there is very little empirical research about the effects of values education in this subject or about pupils' possible interest in lessons related to values in general (cf., as a handbook, Naurath et al. 2013). No data are available concerning the outcomes of specific units of Religious Education in this field.

Concerning the second topic, interreligious education, it must be called quite surprising that, in spite of the growing interest in interreligious education, there are very few studies that offer empirically based insights on the effectiveness of this approach. There are two major handbooks on interreligious education, one in German (edited by Schreiner et al. 2005) and one in English (edited by Engebretson et al. 2010). In either case, the lack of empirical studies on the effects of interreligious education is equally obvious, as much in general as in respect to Religious Education. Most of the research on interreligious education has been analytical or theoretical. It is based on historical and theological or hermeneutical analysis, most of all of different religious traditions and belief systems – a task that certainly will remain indispensable in the future as well. This does not justify, however, that so few studies have become available that can be considered truly evaluative in that they were designed to show both, possible educational success but also possible educational failure or at least point out unresolved problems. Most of all the studies by Carl Sterkens (2001) and by Hans-Georg Ziebertz (2010) have to be mentioned here as earlier examples of empirical research in this respect. Both of these studies were carried out as so-called intervention studies in which certain teaching units were used with a number of school classes and the learning results were tested empirically. In both studies – and this is important for our own work at Tübingen as well as for future research in general –, the results were quite mixed and certainly not identical with the intended outcomes. In other words, not all of the aims connected

to interreligious education could be reached with all of the pupils who took part in the respective lessons. In some respects, no effects could be found at all.

In sum, the current situation concerning research on the effects of interreligious education as well as of values education in Religious Education must be called very preliminary if not unsatisfactory. Yet good intentions are no sufficient basis for teaching. Nor are the so-called “good experiences” often quoted as apparent proof of Religious Education doing its job. This is especially true if the ones quoting the “good experiences” are identical with those who invented the particular approach or are advertising it to others – a situation that still seems to be fairly typical of the religious education discussion.

### **3. The design of intervention studies and its usefulness for Religious Education**

In order to answer our questions about the effects of teaching units on interreligious education and values education realistically and in a valid manner, we decided to work with a classic so-called intervention design. Intervention studies are considered to yield reliable insights on possible effects of educational approaches or teaching units. They have also been used in other fields, like psychology or medical research whenever there were questions concerning the effects of a so-called treatment or intervention in the sense of a specific program of therapy or education (cf. the discussions in Hascher and Schmitz, 2010).

Intervention studies have remained rare in the field of religious education. Very few studies of this kind have become available so far. At least for the German speaking area and probably beyond, the first intervention study in Religious Education was conducted by Fritz Oser (Oser 1988) who, following Kohlberg’s lead, wanted to find out if what he calls religious judgment can be effectively supported in its development by certain kinds of Religious Education. Concerning interreligious education, the only three existing studies have already been mentioned above (Sterkens 2001, Ziebertz 2010, and our own, Schweitzer, Bräuer and Boschki 2017 and in this volume, p. 209–244). That the number of intervention studies has remained so limited, in spite of the weight of the educational issues in question, can most likely be explained by two observations. First, intervention studies are rather demanding in terms of the actual research process. Second, such studies require a methodological expertise which is rarely found with researchers in religious education. In other words, intervention studies in religious education presuppose interdisciplinary cooperation so that the expertise of psychologists or other empirical researchers becomes available.

Intervention studies in the present context presuppose three things:



- First, certain lessons that will be taught as a teaching unit to a certain group of pupils. This is called the *treatment*.
- Second, a group of pupils who do not participate in these lessons and who do not receive the treatment. This is the *control group*.
- Third, a number of *measurements* especially at the beginning and at the end of the intervention that show if the abilities or competences and attitudes of the pupils have really changed in the process of intervention / teaching. In recent times, an additional measurement some time after the treatment is recommended in order to probe for more long-term effects.

An intervention study then typically looks like this:

*Table 1: Basic design of an intervention study*

	t <sub>1</sub>	treatment	t <sub>2</sub>	t <sub>3</sub>
Experimental group	x	treatment	x	x
Control group	x	–	x	x

The basic design described in Table 1 allows for the evaluation of the impact, for example, of a certain teaching unit but as mentioned above, it can also be used in other fields of research. In the field of teaching and learning, including Religious Education, however, there often are additional questions. In many cases, the question is not only about a given topic like interreligious relationships or certain aims like fostering interreligious openness and competence but there also are different possible approaches to teaching and teaching strategies that could be suitable. For example, in the case of interreligious education, one may think of lectures by teachers or of study projects carried out by the pupils more or less independently from the teacher. Or one can think of different teaching strategies, for example, concerning the ways in which a topic is approached, more abstractly by emphasising theoretical concepts or more based on the pupils' prior experience with encountering followers of different religions, to only mention some of the alternatives. Given the demands of empirical evaluation it seems important that decisions concerning competing approaches to teaching a topic or different teaching strategies will not only be based on the experiences reported by teachers but on empirical evidence as well.

This is important because the experience-based arguments in favor of a particular approach have often been limited to the teachers' own personal experience. Just like in all cases of this kind, this basis remains very subjective and will tend to be distorted. In any case it cannot be generalised. So far, different teaching strategies or pedagogies for Religious Education have mainly been developed and defended theoretically (cf. Grimmitt 2000). No systematic comparative evaluations based on empirical research concerning such pedagogies have become available so far.

In order to go beyond personal experiences which can be challenged as being too subjective and cannot be generalised concerning the suitability and effectiveness of certain teaching approaches in the field of interreligious education, and in order to

complement the theoretical analyses provided in the literature, we added another aspect to the design of the intervention studies. We broadened the basic design of an intervention study in order to be able to compare the effects different treatments – or, to use the language of teaching and learning, in order to be able to compare the effects of different approaches or strategies of teaching. Consequently, different teaching units were developed and put to use in the Religious Education classroom so that their actual impact could be evaluated comparatively. Table 2 shows that, with this expanded design, comparisons can refer to the relationship between an experimental group and the control group but also to the relationship between – in this case – two experimental groups.

*Table 2: Expanded design of an intervention study comparing the effects of two different treatments / teaching strategies*

	t <sub>1</sub>	treatment	t <sub>2</sub>	t <sub>3</sub>
Experimental group 1	x	treatment 1	x	x
Experimental group 2	x	treatment 2	x	x
Control group	x	–	x	x

Accordingly, the treatments or teaching strategies used in our intervention studies had to be clearly different in order to make systematic comparisons possible. Moreover, the differences between the teaching strategies were related to different approaches to teaching Religious Education.

- In the case of interreligious education, the two treatments or teaching units differed in that one was based on a general topic (“Religions and Violence”) while the other was related to the future profession of the pupils taking part in the present project (“Islamic Banking”). In this case, we wanted to find out if the relationship to a professional context for which the pupils in the vocational schools are being trained, would work in the sense of connecting the topic to their experiences and to their lifeworlds. It is often assumed that this kind of experience-related or situated learning is more effective than abstract types of teaching and learning. Moreover, it is assumed that pupils will be more interested in a topic if they perceive a clear connection to their personal or professional lifeworlds.
- In the case of values education, the two treatments or teaching units differed in that one referred to “capital punishment” while the other was about “happiness”. In addition to this, both units were administered in two varieties, in the first case with an emphasis on the religious background and in the other case on the ethical background. In this study, our main interest referred to how pupils would react to the different units. More specifically, we wanted to find out which version of the teaching unit would be of more interest to them, the one with religion or the one with ethics as main emphasis. The background for this question was the question if it is true that older pupils tend to lose their interest in explicitly religious topics while they find ethical topics of more interest.

More detailed descriptions of these projects as well as of another study can be found in the chapters following the present one.

In addition to the design described so far, intervention studies presuppose the possibility of reliable measurements. The design can only work if it is possible to measure both, pupils' abilities before and after the treatment. This is the point where the need for a model of interreligious competence arises. Without such a competence model which gives a theoretical background to individual measurements, it will not be possible to make valid claims about possible increases of abilities triggered by the treatment. Unfortunately, opposed to other subjects which were included, for example, in the PISA studies (mostly language, mathematics, science) for which such competence models have been developed on the basis of extensive empirical research, there are no competence models generally accepted in religious education (see the discussions in the literature quoted above, p. 9–13). There is an ongoing and mostly theoretical discussion, for example, about interreligious competence but there is no majority agreement in the discipline. As described below in the chapter on interreligious learning, the respective project made use of a number of suggestions from the literature. Yet it remains an important aim for future research in religious education to become clearer about the competences to be acquired in this subject.

Concerning competences in this case, it is important to point out that there is a difference between the need for competence models in the context of empirical research on the one hand and the suggestion that all teaching in Religious Education (or in other subjects) should always be competence-oriented on the other. The demand from research is inevitable – competence models are the basis for reliable and valid measurements. Yet if competence-oriented teaching is really to be recommended for Religious Education is an open question. No studies proving the advantages of this approach are available yet.

Finally, I would like to emphasise that my plea for empirical research should not be confused with what has been called teaching for the test. The intervention studies include a certain amount of testing but the tests are quite different from the tests used in schools for purposes of grading the pupils. The research based on intervention studies described above as well as in the chapters following the present one are aimed at improving the teaching in Religious Education by making available new and reliable information on the effectiveness of different teaching strategies. This is in line with longstanding demands of religious education. What is new, however, are the empirical ways in which this aim should be achieved.

## 4. Conclusions

This chapter is mostly about intervention studies and their usefulness in Religious Education. Yet one should not lose sight of the more general question why classroom processes and outcomes should be studied in Religious Education. There are

no good research methods *per se*. The question always is about the fit between certain methods and the research questions for which they are chosen.

In the case of teaching and learning in Religious Education, however, intervention studies may be considered especially promising at this point. This expectation is based on the observation that a whole number of competing approaches or pedagogies have been suggested for this subject while, at the same time, there is no comparative research available that could help teachers in deciding which approach they should use in what situations. It can be argued, however, that “good teaching” presupposes considered choices, as far as possible on the basis of empirical evidence.

If it will ever be possible to achieve something like “evidence-based” Religious Education is a different question. Personally, I am not sure if it would even be desirable. Successful teaching also requires abilities of decision-making in complex situations that can never be reduced to fully standardised procedures which would have to be independent from the person making use of them. This is why teaching is a true profession and why its success depends on the personally acquired abilities of a professional. Yet at present, we have the opposite of evidence-based teaching in this field. Consequently, I am convinced that gaining at least some more insights into the effects and the effectiveness of different approaches to Religious Education will be beneficial, not least for the pupils who have to attend these classes.

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