



After religious education: lessons from continental pedagogy

David Lewin¹

Accepted: 16 October 2023 / Published online: 28 October 2023
© Crown 2023

Abstract

This paper takes up the theme of divergent political and educational paths in Religious Education (RE) by drawing out some educational theories from the German tradition of what is sometimes called ‘continental pedagogy’. As a development of work undertaken within the *After Religious Education* project, my interest in this paper is what these theories have to say about one aspect of education, namely the educational logic governing curricular presentation and representation. Within the German tradition, there is an established focus on ‘didactics’ (the theory and practice of teaching) which informs the approach taken here. Rather than seeing RE as a particular corner of the curriculum with its own unique challenges, my main argument is that RE theory is part of wider educational landscape and therefore it could usefully engage more actively with the tradition of general didactics. The argument will present and contextualize the work of Wagenschein and Klafki, educational theorists who are not well known among Anglophone theorists of RE, but who offer insightful considerations of the holistic formation of the person to which RE can make a vital contribution.

Keywords Bildung · Didactics · After religious education · Continental pedagogy · Klafki · Wagenschein

1 Introduction

Acknowledging the complex and diverse nature of Religious Education (RE) across the four nations of the UK, this paper takes up the theme of divergent political and educational paths in RE by drawing out some educational theories from the German tradition of what is sometimes called ‘continental pedagogy’ (Friesen & Kenklies, 2022). My interest in this paper is what these theories have to say about one aspect of education, namely the educational logic governing curricular presentation and representation. Within the German tradition, there is a rich and established focus on ‘didactics’ (the theory and practice of teaching) which informs the reflections of this article. That focus on didactics concerns educational principles across a range of subjects so one interesting thread within that discussion that I focus on here is the way the general educational theories derived from didactics, relate to,

✉ David Lewin
david.lewin@strath.ac.uk

¹ University of Strathclyde, Glasgow, Scotland

and inform the subject didactic issues raised by RE. The argument made here is theoretical and normative¹: there are important general didactic theories that pedagogies and practices of RE could usefully reflect upon. So rather than seeing RE as a particular corner of the curriculum with its own unique challenges, my main argument is that RE theory is part of wider educational landscape and therefore it could usefully engage more actively with the tradition of general didactics.² The argument will present some educational theorists who are not known among Anglophone theorists of RE, and who are not interested in RE per se, but who offer insightful considerations of the holistic formation of the person to which RE can make a vital contribution.

In what follows I outline key ideas from the *After RE* project to show the novel contribution it makes to discussions about the nature and future of RE.³ The paper proceeds in the following steps. First, I provide some context in which the project arises. Second, I outline the educational foundations on which the following argument rests to show where the focus of pedagogy is. Next, these foundational concepts offer a way to explore the idea of pedagogical knowledge as a particular way of understanding the production of school subject matter. This leads to a consideration of whether the much maligned ‘world religions paradigm’ (WRP) could be interpreted positively as a kind of pedagogical knowledge: the WRP can be seen as particular pedagogical structure which, if used judiciously, can be illuminating. The argument explores how, despite its manifold flaws, the WRP can be used educationally. The justification for this is that we can’t simply discard the discourse of world religions or the WRP, and that it is not a question of rejecting the essentialism it assumes, but of reflecting on our own uses of essentialist categories. I then consider objections that might be made to the argument and conclude by acknowledging the challenges of making this theory come to life in the classroom.

2 Context

Clearly there are tensions and complications around setting out a general theory of education across a complex and diverse kingdom since there is no such thing as a British education system or a British form of RE. It is just as well that conversations about the nature and future of RE in England are vigorous and engaging (e.g. Castelli & Chater, 2018) if a little self-referential. If RE debates in England are fairly characterised in this way, it is in many ways testament to the vitality and integrity of the debate in England. But the nature of the debate is also a product of the pressures—political, social, professional, economic—that

¹ The theoretical nature of this argument is meant in contrast to a more empirical analysis of what RE looks like. One could refer to my theoretical and normative approach as ‘philosophy of education’ but I do not do so here partly because that conceptualisation of education as a field which philosophers engage with is in tension with the structure of German pedagogical thinking. Further discussion of this is beyond the scope of this paper.

² It should be noted that the German-speaking tradition of Religious Education (Religious Didactics) is configured differently to that of the approach in England, not least because the structure of general didactics and special (subject-focused) didactics organises curriculum thinking differently and allows for greater harmonisation between general didactic principles and particular subject areas, such as Religious Didactics. For an example of this structure, see Nipkow (1998). So while the ideas developed in this paper are generally novel among Anglophone educationalists and scholars of RE, they will be more familiar to those working in the German tradition.

³ See <https://www.afterre.org>.

teachers and school leaders face. From constrained exam specifications to Ofsted intrusions to the pressures of Prevent and so on, the English RE teacher has a lot on their plate long before they get to the rarefied pedagogical or hermeneutical considerations of the how to interpret subject matter so that it resonates with the lifeworld of the child. Whatever the issues, the teacher or curriculum theorist in England has little opportunity to engage with the wider didactical conversations (i.e. from the continental tradition), a situation that this article seeks to address.

The *After RE* project seeks to explore continental pedagogy for RE by bringing together the expertise of RE teachers, of academics in Religious Studies, and of academics in Education Studies. The main question that the project explores is: what ought to be the educational logic governing the presentation and representation of the subject matter of RE? It accepts that RE needs significant change (Castelli & Chater, 2018; Cooling 2020; Chater, 2020) and supports many of the suggestions of the CORE report (CORE, 2018) while acknowledging that this report is a work in progress (Cooling, 2022). Among the most significant conversations that have followed the report is the so-called ‘paradigm shift’ to a worldviews approach in RE (Cooling, 2022).

Even if one is hesitant about the suggested change to a worldviews approach, the reasons for change may make sense, i.e.: to respond to changing demographics; to build on recent developments from the academic study of religion; to take better account of the lifeworld of children; to help children understand how religious language is used. It seems that the emphasis of the worldviews approach is less about new or different classroom content, than a different approach to content, a different way of framing content (O’Grady, 2022). In this respect, *After RE* can be said to be adopting a worldviews approach. It takes focus away from the particular content of the classroom to consider how the subject matter of RE is selected and arranged. This framing of subject matter is not about adding more worldviews—i.e. non-religious worldviews to supplement those established religions to try to make the subject fully inclusive or universal. That kind of approach leaves the teacher with too much to cover and can never really fulfil its promise to represent everyone in the room because there will always be exceptions. Rather the worldviews approach has a methodological emphasis: it presents teachers with an opportunity to rethink the *logic* of the selection, arrangement, and presentation of subject matter.

What makes the *After RE* project somewhat different to many of the other approaches to RE that exist,⁴ is its focus on educational principles governing the logic of curricular development. But surely most ideas around curricular development—apart from undue political or religious influence—are based on educational principles? I argue that the relatively lowly status of Education Studies as an academic subject in the UK means that educational theory is relatively underdeveloped leading to a surprising absence of reflection on educational principles. This is evident when we compare Education Studies in the UK with the Northern European (generally German speaking) context.⁵ There are several reasons to explore what the continent has to offer this conversation.

First, there is a developed notion of Education Studies that emerged in Northern Europe around 250 years ago and that has been influential in many European states for some time,

⁴ For a concise summary see the NATRE website: <https://www.natre.org.uk/primary/teaching-re/methods-of-teaching-re-1/>.

⁵ This German Education Studies tradition is by no means confined to the nation state of Germany. The tradition influences Education Studies in Northern European nations, especially Denmark, Norway, Sweden, Finland.

though hardly in the English-speaking world (Friesen & Kenklies, 2022). Many of the foundational texts of this tradition remain untranslated or unknown among Anglophone educationalists—take, for example, Schleiermacher’s influential 1826 lectures on pedagogy which have only just come out in English (Friesen & Kenklies, 2023). There is considerable work going on to bring ideas from the northern European (particularly German) tradition to English speaking educationalists (Westbury et al., 2015). Second, it is important to note that this tradition regards Education Studies as an academic discipline in its own right in contrast to the UK where the subject is largely conflated with a field of practice deriving academic legitimacy from the so-called disciplines of education (philosophy, psychology, sociology, history; see McCulloch, 2002). Third, that theory of education is not top down from theory to practice. Although the continental tradition offers a more substantial theory of education, that tradition does not generally regard theory as dominant and practice as derived from theory: theory is importantly informed through practice—the relation is symbiotic (Kenklies, 2012). Fourth, apart from a few exceptions (Alberts, 2007; Stones & Fraser-Pearce, 2022) these ideas have not permeated the debates about RE in England. While there is considerable work going on to bring together the traditions of (Anglo-American) curriculum and (German) didactics (Deng, 2015; Friesen, 2018; Hudson, 2002, 2003; Willbergh, 2015, 2016), there is still much to be done. One significant reason for the lack of cross-cultural discussion here is that the conception of RE itself is quite different within German-speaking contexts compared to the UK being rooted in a tradition of more confessionally oriented ‘religious didactics’ (Rothgangel & Riegel, 2021). Finally, the ideas developed here are of potential relevance to RE theory and practice precisely because RE has traditionally held a special place in the curriculum on England. If we are to resist the reduction of education to what can be expressed in the General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) specification, and so enable a form of education that seeks the holistic development of human powers (as *Bildung* is sometimes characterised; see Deng, 2021), then RE seems like a good place to elaborate such ideas.

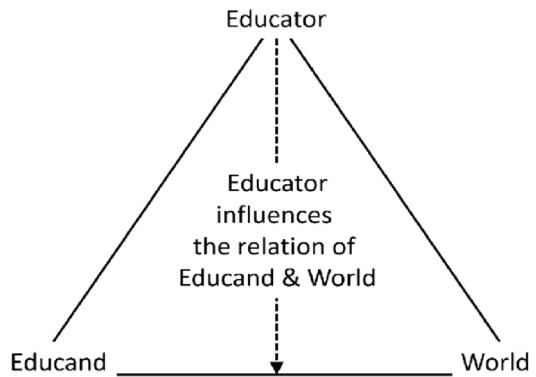
3 Educational foundations

Having said something about the general context on which the project draws, I turn to an aspect of that tradition that is foundational: the concept of education. What I mean by education is potentially a thorny issue since in the German language, there are three terms that are routinely translated with the English term education.⁶ Putting those complications to one side and drawing primarily on the term *Bildung* defined roughly as a lifelong and holistic process of human development or formation (Deng, 2021), let me outline the general theory of education that underpins the educational analysis in the project. This conception of education is drawn out of the continental/*Bildung* tradition of pedagogy which often elaborates the different educational relations through the figure of the pedagogical triangle (Fig. 1) (Friesen & Kenklies, 2022).

It should be noted that the triangle entails a number of particular relations, each of which have their own character: the educator–student/educand relation is a personal ‘pedagogical’ relation; the student/educand–world relation is one of formative development (or

⁶ German has three words typically translated as education: *Erziehung* (upbringing); *Bildung* (formation); *Aus-bildung* (training). *Bildung* is a complex notion with no single definition. For a fuller discussion of *Bildung* see (Autio, 2014; Pinar, 2014, p. 2; Horlacher, 2016).

Fig. 1 The pedagogical triangle
(Friesen & Kenklies, 2022)



Bildung); the educator-world relation is not only what the educator finds particularly interesting or important in itself, but—and this will be crucial in what follows—what the educator believes can contribute to the formative development of the student/educand (Friesen & Kenklies, 2022). On this basis, what defines the educator is not so much their particular disciplinary expertise or even their passion for their subject (though that might be important), but their capacity to influence and improve the student’s relation to subject matter (or world). For this reason, the real central feature of the pedagogical triangle is the dotted line: between the educator and the student’s relation to the world. Note that the dotted line intersects with the student-world relation. The focus here is specifically on the educator’s influence on the student’s relation with the world. This tells us where the focus of teaching is located.

Note also that this triangle structure is meant to be analytical: it tells us nothing about what education should be like, rather it provides a lens by which to describe the scope of action of the educator and the scope of action of the student: neither is wholly passive; neither is wholly active.⁷ This structure has other significant features: it presents the idea that the educator influences the student’s relation to the world through pedagogy (or didactics), an influence is initiated by the educator’s intention directed towards improving the student’s relation to the world. Regardless of these educational intentions, it is also important to highlight that the student’s relation to world/content has its own integrity: it is up to the student in the end whether and how they accept the influence of the educator. This focus on the activity of the educator highlights that the educator is responsible for how the subject matter appears to the student, but not how the student takes up subject matter. But our focus here is on the activity of the educator which we can call the production of subject matter. In this model, ‘subject matter’ is not just inert content waiting to be transmitted, but is produced through a pedagogical intention.

Let me illustrate intentional curricular production by an example. Imagine someone enjoying music. At what point, and with what justification, might music become educational subject matter? What happens to make music something to theoretically engage with, to be studied as educational subject matter? What is gained in this change to a theoretical engagement? What is lost? Some readers may recall the sad experience of losing a

⁷ This is not to deny that education is an intrinsically normative exercise, but that the educational triangle provides a description of the processes which are governed by educational norms and purposes.

passion for something formerly loved because it was theoretically framed by a teacher in a way that paid little attention to integrity of the relation: having to interpret poetry, for instance. My point is not to bemoan the ways things of beauty are sometimes reduced to curricular objects, which would be a different discussion. While we may be ambivalent about the production of educational subject matter, it is worth understanding its proper place before we bemoan it. So let me focus on this production process by introducing the concept of ‘grammatization’ as discussed by Vlieghe and Zamojski (2019).

Grammatization is a process by which something complex, unbounded, perhaps infinite in its depth, and ultimately unrepresentable is, in fact, transformed into a pedagogical object. As Vlieghe and Zamojski put it, “we make something that cannot be studied as such (e.g. the performed music) into a pedagogical object (e.g. the music score, the sounds of individual instruments)” (2019, 138). The example of music is explored in detail by these authors who focus on the pedagogy of Leonard Bernstein.

The idea of representing that which cannot be fully captured in representation, like music, suggests that grammatization both gives and takes away; both reveals and conceals. Representing the music through a score, or the orchestral elements allows something to be seen that otherwise might not be, but some will worry that the integrity of the experience of music is thereby undermined. Little wonder that there is often an ambivalence when it comes to producing subject matter: that the textbook account is a long way from the lived experience. Those who think about the teaching of RE also know that ambivalence (Lewis et al., 2017).

Consider an example from RE: a lived practice of Hinduism commonplace on the streets of Chennai, where a puja ritual is performed to bless a new car. How do we faithfully represent such daily rituals? It would not be reasonable to expect that all the relevant subject matter of RE could be encountered in its lived context even with the most creative approaches. So naturally, it seems, the school subject matter of, in this instance, ‘Hinduism’ is produced, in the form of a textbook account, in more or less vivid and creative representations. That process necessarily selects, arranges, and represents—it also simplifies and essentialises as I will go on to explain. This involves both give and take. I am not arguing that Hinduism textbooks are the best way to select, arrange and represent the lived experience of Hinduism.⁸ What I am saying is that some arranging and representing is unavoidable.⁹

The *After RE* project understands subject matter as something produced through an educational intention. The project focuses on the criteria, or educational logic, we should use to produce subject matter. What I hope is clear is that this question encourages us not to imagine that the subject matter is already there waiting to be transmitted. Subject matter is evidently produced. There are numerous theoretical discussions that might be helpful in analysing the ways subject matter is produced. I have already mentioned the concept of grammatization though we might similarly discuss Chevallard and Bosch’s (2014) didactic

⁸ Of course, there is no such thing as the lived experience of an abstract concept such as ‘Hinduism’. A particular individual’s experience as a Hindu is really more appropriate to refer to.

⁹ At this point we could follow the discussion about what ‘subject matter’ actually is. On the one hand subject matter can refer to the medium through which something is presented – the textbook. On the other hand, the subject matter can also refer to that to which the medium points—the lived experience of a Hindu. Aldridge (2015) has complained of the tendency to conflate the material being used in the class (e.g. textbook) with the real matter of concern which the textbook is meant to help to convey. This is certainly an important question, but I defend the idea that the intention of the educator means that there is an unavoidable productive element in this process.

transposition; the idea of turning matter into meaning (*Bildungsinhalt–Bildungsgehalt*) which is said to be foundational to the *Bildung* tradition (Willbergh, 2016); ideas around pedagogical reduction—the selection, simplification and representation of the world to the young (Lewin, 2019); and Tröhler’s idea of the formation of pedagogical knowledge which I will develop here.

4 Pedagogical knowledge

In his discussion of the history of textbooks in Europe, Daniel Tröhler (2008) has made a helpful distinction between academic or research knowledge, and pedagogical knowledge. For Tröhler, the stuff we present in school classrooms by way of the textbook is distinctively pedagogical which in short means that pedagogical knowledge is relatively stable and generalised. According to Tröhler, pedagogical knowledge has certain features: it is stable, not provisional or contested; exceptions and contradictions are avoided; elements are presented in discrete parts or units; the presentation employs attractive or entertaining media. In summary, this involves “[s]election, condensation, composition, didactical structuring and streamlining for classroom instruction” (Tröhler, 2008, 79). Tröhler describes the Heidelberg Catechism as “a prime example of an educational work or ‘textbook’ that treats knowledge pedagogically” (2008, 81) because it elides the theological controversies of the Reformation, representing the gospel in relatively accessible and uncontested form.

What is striking to many theorists and practitioners of RE is that Tröhler’s gloss of pedagogical knowledge precisely reflects what is supposed to be wrong with much RE today: it presents knowledge that is *too* stable; exceptions and contradictions are not given due attention which reflects an unhelpful essentialism; elements are presented in discrete units (i.e. things are put in boxes) (Panjwani & Revell, 2018). Based on these concerns one might argue that RE teachers should abandon this category of pedagogical knowledge, at least in the sense of a simplified school subject.

However, I argue that we cannot do without pedagogical knowledge in this sense any more than we can do without thought itself (Lapis, 2023, 17). Concepts are necessary to think, to describe, analyse, compare, evaluate; pedagogical knowledge is equally necessary to teach. So, although we can’t entirely dispense with pedagogical knowledge, we need to be more considered in how we go about using it. In other words, we cannot entirely dispense with the current frameworks we use to understand the terrain of our religious landscape, but we can and should interrogate those frameworks.

5 The world religions paradigm as pedagogical knowledge for RE

So we arrive at the question of pedagogical knowledge for RE: the pedagogical knowledge of RE is not neutral facts, descriptions and ideas, but is produced for a particular intention. There is a well-known framework for producing RE knowledge known generally as the world religions paradigm (WRP) (Alberts, 2017). Now we ask whether the WRP could usefully be understood as pedagogical knowledge. And if so, how do we use it well? Arguably, the WRP has become the dominant framework to interpret our religious landscape, but within the academic study of religion it has been subject to sustained critique for at

least 30 years (Owen, 2011).¹⁰ I have already summarised the issues in the characterisation of this paradigm as a form of pedagogical knowledge. The WRP focuses on the big six major world religions, employing essentialist categories that present discrete, stable religions and their elements that can be studied and compared (Cotter & Robinson, 2016, Introduction). Critiques of the WRP are rooted in critiques first of the concept of ‘religion’, then of ‘world religions’ so a brief overview of these nested critiques is appropriate.

Taking the concept of religion first, Tim Fitzgerald (e.g., 2004, 2007, 2015) and others have argued that the entity that gets called ‘religion’ is an invention which has its own particular history, one bound up closely with another ideological entity: modernity (Asad, 2003; Fitzgerald, 2007). From this perspective the discourse of religion is an integral part of modernity. Thus, religion and secularity are conceptually conjoined: the development of modernity is itself a product of the construction of an idea of secularity with the separating out of certain elements of power and social organisation into discourses of the religious and non-religious.

This concept of religion makes possible the notion of ‘world religions’ which raises the spectre of the universalism implied by the concept of religion as it develops into world religions (Lapis, 2023, 4). In her influential study *The Invention of World Religions: Or How European Universalism Was Preserved in the Language of Pluralism*, Masuzawa argued that there is: “a rather monumental assumption that is as pervasive as it is unexamined, namely, that religion is a universal, or at least ubiquitous, phenomenon to be found anywhere in the world at any time in history, albeit in a wide variety of forms and with different degrees of prevalence and importance” (Masuzawa, 2005, 1). Masuzawa’s and other critiques of world religions nourish the critiques of the world religions paradigm.

According to Hedges,

(t)he world religions paradigm (WRP) is the matrix of constructs that has evolved in the modern Western world through the influence of scholars and missionaries, among others, attempting to make sense of the data that came to be classified as ‘religions.’ In general, it prioritizes those things which seemed natural or important in the tradition with which those scholars and missionaries were familiar, generally Protestant Christianity. (2021, 46)

Critical theorists of religion and religious education have elaborated the orientalizing and colonizing narratives that the WRP is founded upon (Aldridge, 2015, 41), indicating that approaches that employ this paradigm reinforce certain hierarchies and assumptions that are Eurocentric, patriarchal, and racist. These are powerful criticisms that go far beyond the claim that we need to modify an existing framework by the addition of non-religious worldviews. Adding to a flawed framework could be epistemically unjust as well as pedagogically naïve. The questions of epistemic justice are vital but my focus here is on the pedagogical issues that they raise.

Despite the cogency and power of these and other criticisms, we can’t entirely jettison the WRP or the language of religion. Alberts, whose work makes links between the German tradition and English RE, has made a consistent and compelling case for basing RE on the academic study of religion, which therefore should take account of these criticisms of

¹⁰ It can certainly be argued that serious and extensive work in RE theory has been critical of this paradigm for a long time through work by Grimmitt (2000), Jackson (1997), and Wright (1993). So we should be cautious when presenting critiques of this WRP as a relatively new development within RE debates. Although questions about the WRP in RE are longstanding, its influence in shaping the subject remains strong.

the WRP. Nonetheless she acknowledges that it would be hard to deny that “as elements of discourse, ‘religions,’ and even ‘world religions,’ are social and cultural facts that the Study of Religions needs to deal with” (Alberts, 2016, 261). Not only are these concepts integral to the study of religions, but the study of major world’s religions as in the WRP can be regarded as “a huge step forward compared to the complete absence of non-confessional education about religions in many school contexts ... politicians and educators may not easily be able to follow the argument for a discursive approach to religion and religions, overcoming the world religions paradigm” (Alberts, 2016, 263). Consider, for instance, that many European states still uphold something like confessional RE (Davis & Miroshnikova, 2017).

Research knowledge from the academic study of religion cannot simply be transferred to the pedagogical knowledge appropriate to teaching RE. There are historical, practical, political, and pedagogical reasons for continuing to draw on the WRP, despite its evident problems which the academic study of religion(s) continues to discuss. The question is less whether we use it than how it can be used well, that is, educationally. The danger is that we forget that the WRP is a pedagogical construction. Part of this forgetfulness results from the fact that we lack a foundation in Education Studies as an academic discipline. Consequently, we don’t give sufficient attention to the art of pedagogy and didactics (of teaching). Rather we too often allow the idea of delivering inert content to creep in. The WRP becomes a convenient set of boxes in which we store that relatively stable (inert) knowledge about religion. But we forget the processes of pedagogy involved in the production of subject matter (pedagogical knowledge).

To bring that to mind is to become more self-conscious in the selection, arrangement, and presentation of subject matter. While I have no doubt that many teachers of RE already employ pedagogical expertise in their teaching (albeit inconsistently understood and applied), I argue that the German didactic tradition may be able to offer a more considered and reflective approach.

6 German pedagogy: exemplarity and didactics

Martin Wagenschein and Wolfgang Klafki are German educational theorists whom most teachers working in Northern Europe will have come across as part of some form of teacher education process. Working mainly in the latter half of the twentieth century, these theorists are mainstays of the *Bildung-Didactic* approach which has been influential well-beyond the confines of the German education system. Yet these theorists are virtually unknown among English-speaking educationalists, partly, according to my argument, because of lack of a systematic general didactics in the curriculum theory context (Westbury et al., 2015).¹¹ The concepts of exemplarity and didactic analysis are about making us more self-conscious about how our choices frame the subject matter. Let me first turn to Wagenschein’s consideration of exemplarity.

¹¹ It should be noted that the German-speaking tradition itself has a quite different configuration of Education Studies (*Allgemeine Pädagogik*) in which these kinds of ideas are embedded. As well as the different religious history and context, this different attitude to Education Studies corresponds to a different approach to, and conceptualisation of, Religious Education in schools (or Religious Didactics) (Rothgangel & Riegel, 2021).

In a critique of what he calls the systematic approach, Wagenschein (2015) questions the idea that learning should be a linear, chronological, and additive process of knowledge acquisition. The idea that education begins with the simple and then moves to the more complex has thrown too many a student on to the so-called ‘learning ladder’. Although a logical idea, it is, according to Wagenschein, not pedagogical. He elaborates an exemplary way, where the examples chosen function as entry-points rather than pieces of information and knowledge to be acquired on the way to further knowledge acquisition. We must have the courage to leave the systematic approach behind and to linger and spend time with the particular phenomena vividly brought to life.

The exemplary way emphasizes that there is no canonical content that must be transmitted. This means the teacher is freed or empowered to select, arrange and present their own examples. Curriculum production is about selecting narratives, ideas, contexts and images that have the power of exemplarity: the ability to open up understanding by showing the child something general through the particular. The example opens up the possibility of understanding by being an example of some thing: some general principle that the teacher wants the student to learn. This idea is elaborated further through Klafki’s didactic analysis.

At the heart of Klafki’s analysis are five questions designed to provide teachers and curriculum producers with a stimulus for thinking about the production of subject matter. The first question is as follows: “What wider or general sense or reality does this content exemplify and open up to the learner? What basic phenomenon or fundamental principle, what law, criterion, problem, method, technique, or attitude can be grasped by dealing with this content as an ‘example’?” (Klafki, 2015, 151) This is clearly resonant with Wagenschein’s notion of exemplarity.

Let me offer an illustration of my own. If I wanted children in my class to become more conscious of the interconnectedness of life, I might introduce Nan Shepherd’s Scottish folktale about the Wells of Dee in the Cairngorms to bring this point to life (Shepherd, 2011). Other people might use other tales, or more explicitly ‘religious’ sources. The fundamental principle of interconnectedness can be exemplified in countless ways. So, Klafki’s questions are designed to bring to mind what the teacher thinks will support the development of the student’s relation to content (as elaborated above). Klafki’s approach is further illustrated when we turn to his second question: “What significance does the content in question, or the experience, knowledge, ability, or skill, to be acquired through this topic, already possess in the minds of the children in my class? What significance should it have from a pedagogical point of view?” (2015, 151).

How might the children already understand/experience ‘interconnectedness’ or this particular expression of it in the Cairngorms? How can we draw out the pedagogical significance of this interconnectedness as a part of subject matter? It is up to the educator in a particular context to make a judgement about what content might help to support the development of the child. Klafki’s third question is “What constitutes the topic’s significance for the children’s future?” (2015, 151). The future significance of interconnectedness is, I hope, obvious: that such a consciousness changes how the child lives in the world.

Without going into all five questions in detail, let me emphasise the essential point: Klafki’s questions don’t stipulate specific content but offer a framework for thinking about the selection and arrangement of content in ways that are contextual: to the particular group of students, to the region/city, what’s going on in the wider world, what the disciplinary foundations might prioritise, and what the teacher sees as the ultimate educational goal. Through a set of questions, the teacher is given license and relative freedom to bring the curriculum to life in their way: the content is their own.

7 Objections

Following this overview of the educational theory informing the *After RE* project, no doubt there are questions that I have not fully addressed. One significant question is whether the outlined framework offers anything new. Is this another educational fashion or fad? In 1897 Dewey explored very much the same issues in his essay ‘The Psychological Aspect of the School Curriculum’:

[i]n taking it for granted that the subject-matter may be selected, defined, and arranged without any reference to psychological consideration (that is, apart from the nature and mode of action of the individual), it is assumed that the facts and principles exist in an independent and external way, without organic relation to the methods and functions of mind (Dewey, 1988, 72).

Dewey was, it should be noted, heavily influenced by the German didactic tradition (Hopmann, 2009) so perhaps it is not surprising to find similar ideas formulated here. Wagenschein’s and Klafki’s central arguments were first developed in the 1950s and 60s and draw on a host of theoretical and practical discussions that have been ongoing for a century or more. The striking issue is that their didactical considerations have never been taken up by theorists of RE, though that seems to be changing.¹²

One may also wonder how *After RE*, and the frameworks informing it, sit in relation to other theories of education and of RE, for instance, Young’s ‘Powerful Knowledge’ (2013) or Wintersgill’s ‘Big Ideas in RE’ (Big Ideas for RE, 2022). Along with other colleagues on the project, I have been developing a piece of research which explores some contrasts of the *After RE* approach laid out here with Powerful Knowledge and Big ideas and so this is not the place for a full discussion of these issues (Lewin et al., 2023).

Of course, there is so much here that I have not addressed, that has been glossed over or ignored. My focus was on pedagogy rather at the expense of considering the related issue of epistemic justice. But one can’t really separate how things are presented pedagogically from the ethics of that presentation (for instance the colonialism that is embedded in how we talk about religion). I hope at least to have highlighted the significance of this issue if not discussed it in depth.

On the concept of *Bildung*, I couldn’t take up the long historical discussions of the nature and purpose of education and the provocative suggestion that the diverse aims of RE could be brought together under the banner of *Bildung*. The capacious vagueness of *Bildung* is both a virtue and a vice. I also touched upon the disciplinary position of Education Studies (vis-à-vis its German equivalent *Allgemeine Pädagogik*): that in English-speaking academic discussions, Education Studies is not given due attention, and consequently education specialists don’t have the influence on governance and policy that one might hope for. That is another can of worms that deserves more careful analysis than I have been able to give it here.

Since I remarked on the significance of teaching practice and more than once described the responsibility of the teacher, I have probably given more for teachers to do without fully elaborating the structures of support that should exist to underpin their work. This does require us to rethink the profession of teaching to some extent. Teachers should, in my

¹² See Biesta and Hannam (2021), Stones and Fraser-Pearce (2022), Shaw’s recent work (2023).

view, be licensed professionals rather than trained functionaries, but that may also require a significant shift in thinking and in policy.

8 Conclusion

This paper set out to present the contribution to the theory, policy, and practice of RE of the *After RE* project. My general argument is that RE theory is part of wider educational theory and therefore it should engage more actively with the tradition of general didactics. I began with the central question of the *After RE* project: What ought to be the educational logic governing the presentation and representation of the subject matter of RE? A key outcome of the project will be the formulation of a framework to answer this question. The teachers on the project have the difficult task of trying to show how the framework can be usefully exemplified in practice. This is difficult partly because, as Klafki's questions highlight, it is so very contextual: what works in one context, won't necessarily travel. That is part of the message of the project. Teachers may thereby feel freed of the weight of specific subject content. Taken too far, this freedom might not feel very freeing. It could feel quite unsettling or disorienting, so the associated professional support must be addressed.

However, many of the teachers on the project have said that the questions of Klafki and the emerging framework already resonate with much that they have been doing for some time (Lewin et al. 2023). So, one could say that this is not an attempt to reinvent what many good teachers already know: of course, many teachers know full well the power of exemplarity for instance. As well as encouraging teachers to imagine RE in fresh ways, I hope that a framework for RE can give teachers greater confidence in their own judgements about what their subject matter is and why. Ultimately, this is about ensuring that teaching is regarded for what it is: a complex process involving aspects of art and science. Teaching, in the words of the German Didaktik tradition as formulated by Westbury et al. (2015) is to be seen as a reflective practice, and it is this simple observation that bridges the traditions of continental and anglophone education studies.

Acknowledgements The author is grateful to Culham St Gabriel's Trust for funding the project that led to the publication of this research and to the Association for University Lecturers of Religious Education for the invitation to present this work at their 2023 conference in Birmingham, UK.

Funding The author is grateful to Culham St Gabriel's Trust for funding the project that led to the publication of this research.

Data Availability There is no primary data associated with this work.

Declarations

Conflict of interest The author declares there is no conflict of interest.

Ethical approval There was no empirical work undertaken here so no participants involved. The claims made are of a general(speculative) nature. I have added a citation (Lewin et al. 2023) from the project to support the point that teachers made these points.

Open Access This article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License, which permits use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons licence, and indicate if changes were made. The images or other third party material in this article are included in the article's Creative Commons licence, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the

material. If material is not included in the article's Creative Commons licence and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder. To view a copy of this licence, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

References

- Alberts, W. (2007). *Integrative religious education in Europe*. Walter de Gruyter.
- Alberts, W. (2016). Afterword: The academic study of religions betwixt and between different interests. In S. Fährding (Ed.), *Method and theory in the study of religion: Working papers from Hannover 8* (pp. 259–270). Brill.
- Alberts, W. (2017). Reconstruction, critical accommodation or business as usual? Challenges of criticisms of the world religions paradigm to the design of teaching programmes in the study of religions. *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion*, 29(4–5), 443–458.
- Aldridge, D. (2015). *A hermeneutics of religious education*. Bloomsbury Academic.
- Asad, T. (2003). *Formations of the secular: Christianity, Islam*. Stanford University Press.
- Autio, T. (2014). The internationalization of curriculum research. In W. Pinar (Ed.), *International handbook of curriculum research* (pp. 17–31). Routledge.
- Biesta, G., & Hannam, P. (2021). Introduction. In G. Biesta & P. Hannam (Eds.), *Religion and education: The forgotten dimensions of religious education* (pp. 1–7). Brill.
- Big Ideas for RE. (2022). What are Big Ideas for RE?. <https://bigideasforre.org/what-are-big-ideas-for-re/>
- Castelli, M., & Chater, M. (Eds.). (2018). *We need to talk about religious education: Manifestos for the future of RE*. Jessica Kingsley Publications.
- Chater, M. (Ed.). (2020). *Reforming religious education: Power and knowledge in a worldviews curriculum*. John Catt Educational Ltd.
- Chevallard, Y., & Bosch, M. (2014). Didactic transposition in mathematics education. In S. Lerman (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of mathematics education* (pp. 170–174). Springer.
- Cooling, T. (2020). Worldview in religious education: Autobiographical reflections on The Commission on Religious Education in England final report. *British Journal of Religious Education*, 42(4), 403–414. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01416200.2020.1764497>
- Cooling, T. (2022). The commission on religious education—A response to L. Philip Barnes. *British Journal of Educational Studies*, 70(1), 103–118. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00071005.2021.1954142>
- CORE. (2018). Commission on religious education final report. Religion and worldviews: The way forward. A national plan for RE. <https://www.commissiononre.org.uk/final-report-religion-and-worldviews-the-way-forward-a-national-plan-for-re/>
- Cotter, C., & Robinson, D. (Eds.). (2016). *After world religions*. Routledge.
- Davis, D., & Miroshnikova, E. (Eds.). (2017). *The Routledge international handbook of religious education*. Routledge.
- Deng, Z. (2015). Content, Joseph Schwab and German Didaktik. *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 47(6), 773–786. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00220272.2015.1090628>
- Deng, Z. (2021). Powerful knowledge, transformations and Didaktik/curriculum thinking. *British Educational Research Journal*, 47(6), 1652–1674. <https://doi.org/10.1002/berj.3748>
- Dewey, J. (1988). The psychological aspect of the school curriculum. In J. R. Gress (Ed.), *Curriculum: An introduction to the field*. McCutchan.
- Fitzgerald, T. (2004). *The ideology of religious studies*. Oxford University Press.
- Fitzgerald, T. (2007). *Discourse on civility and barbarity: A critical history of religion and related categories*. Oxford University Press.
- Fitzgerald, T. (2015). Critical religion and critical research on religion: Religion and politics as modern fictions. *Critical Research on Religion*, 3(3), 303–319. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2050303215613123>
- Friesen, N. (2018). Continuing the dialogue: Curriculum, Didaktik and theories of knowledge. *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 50(6), 724–732. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00220272.2018.1537377>
- Friesen, N., & Kenkies, K. (2022). Continental pedagogy & curriculum. In R. Tierney, F. Rizvi, & K. Ercikan (Eds.), *International encyclopedia of education* (4th ed., pp. 245–255). Elsevier.
- Friesen, N., & Kenkies, K. (2023). *F.D.E. Schleiermacher's outlines of the art of education*. Peter Lang.
- Grimmitt, M. (2000). *Pedagogies of religious education*. McCrimmon Publishing Co Ltd.
- Hedges, P. (2021). *Understanding religion: Theories and methods for studying religiously diverse societies*. University of California Press.
- Hopmann, S. (2009). Mind the gap: Dewey on educational bridge-building. *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 41(1), 7–11. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00220270802172109>

- Horlacher, R. (2016). *The educated subject and the German concept of Bildung*. Routledge.
- Hudson, B. (2002). Holding complexity and searching for meaning: Teaching as reflective practice. *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 34(1), 43–57. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00220270110086975>
- Hudson, B. (2003). Approaching educational research from the tradition of critical-constructive Didaktik. *Pedagogy, Culture and Society*, 11(2), 173–187. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14681360300200171>
- Jackson, R. (1997). *Religious education: An interpretive approach*. Hodder and Stoughton.
- Kenklies, K. (2012). Educational theory as topological rhetoric: The concepts of pedagogy of Johann Friedrich Herbart and Friedrich Schleiermacher. *Studies in Philosophy and Education*, 31, 265–273. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11217-012-9287-6>
- Klafki, W. (2015). Didaktik analysis and the core of preparation of instruction. In I. Westbury, S. Hopmann, & K. Riquarts (Eds.), *Teaching as a reflective practice. The German Didaktik tradition* (pp. 139–160). Routledge.
- Lapis, G. (2023). *Religion, education, and the 'east': Addressing orientalism and interculturality in religious education through Japanese and East Asian religions*. Venice University Press.
- Lewin, D. (2019). Toward a theory of pedagogical reduction: Selection, simplification and generalisation in an age of critical education. *Educational Theory*, 68, 495–512. <https://doi.org/10.1111/edth.12326>
- Lewin, D., Orchard, J., Christopher, K., & Brown, A. (2023). Reframing curriculum for religious education. *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 55(4), 369–387. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00220272.2023.2226696>
- Lewis, J., Andreassen, B., & Thobro, S. (Eds.). (2017). *Textbook violence*. Equinox.
- Masuzawa, T. (2005). *The invention of world religions: Or, how European universalism was preserved in the language of pluralism*. Chicago University Press.
- McCulloch, G. (2002). 'Disciplines contributing to education'? Educational studies and the disciplines. *British Journal of Educational Studies*, 50(1), 100–119.
- Nipkow, K. (1998). *Bildung in einer pluralen Welt 2 volumes*. Chr. Kaiser/Güthersloher Verlagshaus.
- O'Grady, K. (2022). *Conceptualising religion and worldviews for the school*. Routledge.
- Owen, S. (2011). The world religions paradigms: Time for a change? *Arts and Humanities in Higher Education*, 10(3), 253–268.
- Panjwani, F., & Revell, L. (2018). Religious education and hermeneutics: The case of teaching about Islam. *British Journal of Religious Education*, 40(3), 268–276. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01416200.2018.1493269>
- Pinar, W. (2014). Introduction. In W. Pinar (Ed.), *International handbook of curriculum research* (pp. 17–31). Routledge.
- Rothgangel, M., & Riegel, U. (2021). Reflecting theology by a generic model of research designs? Impulses from religious didactics. *HTS Theologiese Studies/Theological Studies*, 77(2), a7023. <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v77i2.7023>
- Shaw, M. (2023). Worldview literacy as transformative knowledge. In O. Franck & P. Thalen (Eds.), *Powerful knowledge in religious education. Exploring paths to a knowledge-based education on religions* (pp. 195–216). Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-23186-5_10
- Shepherd, N. (2011). *The living mountain*. Canongate Books.
- Stones, A., & Fraser-Pearce, J. (2022). Epistemic literacy as an aim for religious education and implications for teacher education. In B. Hudson, C. Olin-Scheller, M. Stolare, & N. Gericke (Eds.), *International perspectives on knowledge and quality: Implications for innovation in teacher education policy and practice* (pp. 87–107). Bloomsbury Academic.
- Tröhler, D. (2008). The knowledge of science and the knowledge of the classroom: Using the Heidelberg Catechism (1563) to examine overlooked connections. In E. Campi, S. De Angelis, A. Goeing, & A. Grafton (Eds.), *Scholarly knowledge: Textbooks in early modern Europe* (pp. 75–85). Librarie Droz.
- Vlieghe, J., & Zamojski, P. (2019). *Towards an ontology of teaching: Thing-centred pedagogy*. Springer.
- Wagenschein, M. (2015). Teaching to understand: On the concept of the exemplary in teaching. In I. Westbury, S. Hopmann, & K. Riquarts (Eds.), *Teaching as a reflective practice. The German Didaktik tradition* (pp. 161–176). Routledge.
- Westbury, I., Hopmann, S., & Riquarts, K. (Eds.). (2015). *Teaching as a reflective practice: The German Didaktik tradition*. Routledge.
- Willbergh, I. (2015). The problems of 'competence' and alternatives from the Scandinavian perspective of Bildung. *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 47(3), 334–354. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00220272.2014.1002112>
- Willbergh, I. (2016). Bringing teaching back in: The Norwegian NOU the school of the future in light of the Allgemeine Didaktik theory of Wolfgang Klafki. *Nordic Journal of Pedagogy & Critique*, 2, 111–124.
- Wright, A. (1993). *Religious education in the secondary school: Prospects for religious literacy*. David Fulton.

Young, M. (2013). Overcoming the crisis in curriculum theory: A knowledge-based approach. *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 45(2), 101–118. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00220272.2013.764505>

Publisher's Note Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.