



The power of exemplarity in religious education

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ABSTRACT

Calls for reframing the subject matter of Religious Education in schools include the tricky question of how to select from a world of potentially interesting and relevant material. Pedagogues have long questioned the educational logic that takes so-called substantive knowledge as its starting point and imagines education to follow a linear path from simple to complex. Scholars of Religious Studies have addressed similar questions of how to bring the subject matter to life through taking a more disciplinary orientation, though this approach is problematized by RE's multi-disciplinary foundations. This paper brings together pedagogical and disciplinary perspectives to the question of exemplification in the production of curricular subject matter. Taking as its context RE in schools, the paper assumes the didactic principle that there is considerable difference between putative disciplinary knowledge and school subject matter and that the production of school subject matter requires considered processes of pedagogical transformation and reduction. The paper explores the logic governing this transformation by drawing on the pedagogical analysis of exemplarity offered by Martin Wagenschein alongside the more disciplinary analyses of the place of examples from Jonathan Z. Smith.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 10 July 2023

Accepted 19 January 2024



KEYWORDS

exemplarity; wagenschein; religious education; pedagogical triangle; bildung

Introduction

The general question we raise in this paper is: what ought to be the educational logic that governs the presentation and representation of subject matter? More particularly we consider this question in the context of Religious Education (RE) in schools primarily in England. There are many important reasons why the question of the representation of subject matter in RE is relevant to contemporary curricular theorists: the socio-political issues around colonialist and racist histories of the framing of religion (Nye, 2019); feminist critique of the representation of religion (Cush & Robinson, 2014); critical theories of religion (Hedges, 2021) and the way religions are framed by the so-called World Religions Paradigm (Cotter & Robertson, 2016).

In what follows, these dimensions form part of the wider landscape in which pedagogical representation and exemplarity in education are explored: we won't explicitly focus on these dimensions, but they generally inform the social context of selections and exemplifications that are our focus. Nor will we focus on question of what the specific subject content of RE ought to be. Of course, this is a key question for teachers, but we argue that it is best approached by first considering the educational logic that underpins the teaching of RE (Lewin et al., 2023).

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Therefore, our focus will be on the educational logic that governs the processes of the ‘transformation’ of the vast range of material that could be of interest to curriculum developers and teachers of RE, into school subject matter. There are still many additional pedagogical discussions that might also be explored, for instance to do with the experience and lifeworld of the child, or the disciplinary logic from which RE might be derived etc. In this paper we will focus on a particular aspect of the production of school subject matter: the example.

Examples are a key feature of understanding and education in that they illustrate general principles or rules by offering a particular instance that concretizes something abstract. Discussions of exemplarity—of the nature and purpose of examples—can be found within educational theory (Hållander, 2020; Korsgaard, 2024; Warnick, 2008; Zagzebski, 2017) as well as the disciplines underpinning RE (Cotter & Rpbertson, 2016; Smith, 2013). There is, however, little literature that brings together these approaches. The paper attempts to remedy this by introducing the idea of *the exemplary way* as proposed by Martin Wagenschein to a consideration of subject matter for RE. Our emphasis on exemplarity is an attempt to encourage curriculum developers to reimagine RE in creative ways, in particular by shifting teaching and learning away from the transmission or acquisition of reified subject matter to a renewed focus on the educational purpose of subject selections (Lewin et al., 2023).

We begin by situating the idea of the exemplary way in relation to RE as well as to its educational context and highlighting some of the underpinnings of the ‘continental’¹ tradition these ideas emerge from. Wagenschein proposes the exemplary way as an alternative to the systematic logic of traditional instruction based on disciplinary knowledge. The aim of the exemplary way is to open the subject matter in ways that permit the student not only to gain knowledge and understanding, but also to undergo formative experiences which potentially can have a profound impact on the student’s way of relating to, and being in, the world. Crucially, however, the experiences are not set up to foster prescribed ways of being in the world, but rather as open-ended encounters where the students themselves must find their own way of engaging with the subject matter. In the case of RE, the independence of this engagement and encounter is essential not least to avoid the charge of indoctrination.

Context

The question of the educational logic governing curricular presentation and representation in RE in England is especially timely. Non-denominational religious education (RE) (aka non-confessional or integrative RE: see Alberts, 2007) has been a legal requirement of the school curriculum in England since 1944. RE is compulsory in all state-funded schools in England and generally the curriculum consists of the study of different religions, religious concepts (e.g. leaders; beliefs; texts; practices), and other religious and moral themes. The presence of non-religious ideas and influences (philosophy; ethics; secular worldviews) has long been a part of English RE, but recently has become more pronounced and topical due to demographic changes and the rise of non-religion(s) (Strhan & Shillitoe, 2022). Because RE does not feature on the English National Curriculum, it is developed locally by Standing Advisory Committees on Religious Education (SACREs) on behalf of local governments. While faith-based schools are popular in England, with some reputation for academic standards and where RE tends to be well supported, in the context of community (non faith-based) schools in England, the primary context for this article, RE is perceived to be a subject in crisis (Barnes, 2019, 2021; Castelli & Chater, 2017).

Longstanding questions concerning the quality of RE in England and Wales led the Religious Education Council in 2016 to sponsor a two-year review of RE in England and Wales culminating in the final report: ‘Religion and Worldviews: the way forward. A national plan for RE’ (CORE, 2018). This CORE report makes several wide-ranging recommendations directed towards improving the quality and consistency of English RE the most striking of which is the proposal to rename RE as ‘Religion and Worldviews’, and to develop a National Entitlement which would redefine the curriculum by

developing 'a set of organising principles which form the basis for developing programmes of study' (CORE, 2018, p. 32). It is perhaps not surprising that the CORE proposals are often interpreted as calling for an expansion of subject content because one of the main aims of the renaming and reframing is to be inclusive of so-called 'non-religious' worldviews (Salter, 2021).

As teachers of RE attempt to wrestle with the expectation to broaden their scope by becoming more inclusive of diverse religious and non-religious worldviews, it is increasingly obvious that this expectation cannot mean including each and every religious and non-religious worldview. The proposed changes are understood less as an expansion of curriculum content, than a reconceptualization of RE through what has come to be known as the 'worldviews approach' to RE (O'Grady, 2022). What exactly the worldviews approach looks like is by no means settled,² but we suggest that a considered pedagogical logic for the selection and arrangement of school subject matter would support these debates and reflections. In some contexts, these reflections would be called school didactics (Uljens, 2005), but such a phrase is hardly recognized among Anglophone curriculum theorists which itself indicates the gulf between the English-speaking world of curriculum theory, and the continental tradition of pedagogy to which our argument largely refers (Westbury et al., 2015).

No doubt many RE teachers already have established and clearly thought through approaches to the challenge of being more inclusive and representative: they already skilfully select, and many could offer cogent justifications for the basis on which those selections are made. Practices of what can be called 'pedagogical reduction' (Lewin, 2019, 2020a, 2020b), that is of educational selection, simplification, and representation, are widespread and effectively employ the expertise and experience of the teacher. But crises of RE and the present context have drawn attention to the fact that such practices are inconsistent and unstable partly because they remain under-theorized (Hannam, 2019). The extent to which the lack of theorization contributes to the inconsistency of RE is an interesting and complex question. We suggest that a clearer pedagogical logic will support the theorization of RE and result in more coherent and consistent educational experiences. This paper hopes to contribute to that logic by developing the educational analysis of exemplarity that has not so far been taken up by scholars debating the future of RE.

But as an educational concept, exemplarity needs to be contextualized within a theory of education. Part of our observation here is that Anglophone educationalists rely on certain assumptions about education that make it harder to establish a properly educational logic (Westbury et al., 2015). We wish to highlight the intentional activities of the educator in what can be called the production of educational reality (*Erziehungswirklichkeit*): what does it mean for students not only to encounter the world, but to have things selected, arranged, and pedagogically organized or represented? (Mollenhauer, 2013)

To consider exemplarity in education, we first offer a definition of education. This is necessary to the extent that the concept of exemplarity emphasizes the intentional activities of an educator to influence the student's (educand) relation to the educational content (world). This is not to disregard the importance of the educand and the content, but to say that ultimately, responsibility for the selection of examples, even when brought forth by students or arising from discussion, rests with the educator. Our emphasis on the activity of the educator will be supported, then, by a consideration of what education itself means.

We define education as *the attempt to influence and improve someone's relation to something* (Kenklies, 2020). This is often introduced through the pedagogical or didactic triangle as shown in Figure 1 (Friesen & Kenklies, 2022):

It can 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 *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

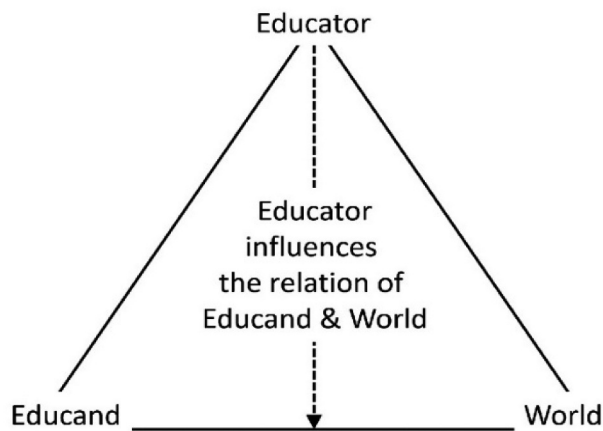


Figure 1. The pedagogical triangle (Friesen & Kenklies, 2022).

educator is not so much their particular disciplinary expertise (though that is certainly important) but their capacity to influence and improve the student's relation to subject matter (or world).

To illustrate this model, consider the scene from the movie *Star Wars* aboard the Millennium Falcon in which Obi-Wan Kenobi attempts to educate young Luke Skywalker in the ways of the force. While the educator, Obi-Wan, creates conditions in which the student, Luke, can feel the force, it is Luke's relation to the force that is at stake: the student's relation to subject matter has its own integrity.

This model highlights a few important features of education: Education is initiated by the activity of the educator. That activity is intentional: it intends to improve the student's relation to some aspect of the world. Thus, the educator's concern is with the student's relation to the world. Yet the student's relation to the world always pre-exists the intended influence of the educator: Luke's relation to the force has its own integrity, its own history and destiny. This outline already hints at the complex interaction between the 'external' influence of the educator, and the 'internal' growth and development of the student/educand; between cultivation from outside and autonomous growth as becoming (Biesta, 2021).

This conception of education is drawn out of the continental tradition of pedagogy (Friesen & Kenklies, 2022) often referred to as the *Bildung* tradition because its foundations lie in the concept of *Bildung* as a lifelong and holistic process of human development or formation (Deng, 2021). As indicated above, *Bildung* refers to a particular dimension within this network of relations: the relation between student/educand and world, and so the term might better be applied to this relation. We are certainly interested in this relation but even more vital is the relation between the educator and the student's relation to world. It is the educator's ability to influence the student's relation to the world through pedagogy (or didactics) that forms the central focus in what follows.

The exemplary way

After this clarification of the educational foundation behind these reflections, we will now go on what may appear at first sight a detour. We do this in order to further an educationally grounded approach to RE and the educational logic that we believe should govern the presentation and representation of the subject matter.

In a scathing critique of what he calls the systematic approach Martin Wagenschein condemns the idea that learning should be a systematic, chronological, and additive process of knowledge acquisition.³ The idea that we begin with the simple before moving to the more complex has thrown

too many a student off the so-called 'learning ladder'. Although a logical idea, the systematic approach is, according to Wagenschein, not pedagogical.

What is needed instead is an exemplary way, where the examples chosen function as entry-points rather than pieces of information and knowledge on the way to further information and knowledge. We must have the courage to leave the systematic idea behind and to linger and spend time with the phenomena we wish to study. To 'build nests' [einzunisten] and 'grow roots' [Wurzel zu schlagen] (Wagenschein, 1956, p. 3). Wagenschein was a physics scholar and educator, and hence his examples and ideas stem from physics and may at first glance seem an odd starting point with regards to RE. We will return to how this relates to RE, but allow us first to stay a while with Wagenschein's exemplary way.

The ability to stay with the example is the first key principle of the approach. We must build platforms from which we grow roots into the particular example, and from there burrow our way into the generality of the subject. Schools rarely offer this prolonged and decelerated time. Often confronted with myriad objectives and learning goals, we rush along, losing most of the students along the way. The pressure to pack in lots of educational content is exacerbated by the sheer scope of content in a subject like RE which increasingly is expected to take account of diverse religious, and non-religious worldviews.

An example of Wagenschein's alternative didactics comes from the early days of his teaching, when introducing the pendulum movement. Wagenschein describes how he once hung a large rock from the beams of the classrooms so that the children would be able to observe the pendulum in a larger format. He describes how the children were mesmerized by the movement of the rock through the room and puzzled by how the rock seemed to stop just for a moment at the high point of the arch: the mysterious high point. How long does it stop for, they wonder. Shorter than a moment, briefer even than an instant. Below all measurement of time. A body without motion, yet still in motion. "This introductory consideration does not preclude that we will come to the formula for pendulum movement. On the contrary, observation reveals the thing and allows it to speak, while at the same time allowing the students to be 'with it'. 'Haste spoils everything'⁴ (Wagenschein, 2008, p. 7). The movement of the large rock amplifies a phenomenon. It makes the thing tangible to the children, and importantly they cannot ignore it, they are drawn to it, and their curiosity is awakened. But we must not rush to the explanation. First, they must experience it. Observe it.

Quiet dialogue with both students and laypeople over the years shows that for many people a connection to natural phenomena is irrevocably torn. This begins early on in their schooling and is due to such factors as: entering too early and too hastily into the realm of quantitative teaching apparatus; merely copying technical terminology; only applying formulas; applying all-too tangible models that give rise to misunderstandings. As a result, students' perception is disturbed rather than enhanced, and their sensitivity for both phenomena and language is equally diminished.⁵ (Wagenschein, 2008, p. 7)

Wagenschein presents us with a great variety of examples, such as the phenomena of dust particles being illuminated in a dark room, or the way in which a stick bends when inserted into water. These examples capture attention but are not necessarily simple phenomena. Wagenschein criticizes how we are much too quick in wanting to name and categorize. We are often too hasty in introducing the language of physics before the phenomena and attending to experiences of them.

In a short text, 'Save the phenomena' [Rettet die Phänomene!], Wagenschein describes how powerful the experience of seeing radioactive material under the microscope can be. Using radium salt and a dark room, a simple experiment to set up in the physics class, Wagenschein explains how this observation carries the seed not only for experiences that potentially capture the students' attention, but also immediately brings a necessity to move from the phenomena to measuring and naming, since these are essential to learning about physics.

I do not speak for a flight into the phenomena, but I do say that they should have priority. I am advocating *for* something, namely for experience, such as I have described here, being fundamental and remaining so. Of course, quiet observation, reflection and dialogue take time. It is a remarkable thing that one often looks in vain

for the preconditions for such learning in schools . . . This small and cheap peep-box for atoms is of course only a beginning step in the exploration of radioactivity. The next question from the child is likely to be, 'Will the radium become less now?' Yes, it will. It won't go quickly, but it can be noticed after many years. Here one sees: *at this point* one cannot get around measuring and calculating anymore".⁶ (Wagenschein, 2008, p. 6)

A well-chosen example functions not only as a means of eliciting interest and attention, it functions as an entry-way [Einstieg] to the subject. To the way in which a physicist thinks, as he puts it in 'Zum Begriff des exemplarischen Lehrens' [on the concept of exemplary teaching] from 1956. It is important to mention that, according to Wagenschein, there is a further reason to start with the phenomena. This further reason is that physics is only one way of exploring phenomena. One which is as much about naming and measuring as it is about finding the limits of what we can name and measure. Physics;

results in a specific 'picture of nature', or, as we could also say, a mindscape. According to comparisons stemming from physicists themselves, physics gives us a picture of the surrounding sensory phenomena in the same way in which a map pictures a landscape, a score a symphony, or a shadow an object. In doing so, it gives a picture that is as sharp and correct as the shadow that a flowering tree throws on a wall. But of course the tree itself cannot want to be its shadow. Some of its structure and geometry remain, but colour, smell, three-dimensionality, and the rustling of its leaves are missing.⁷ (Wagenschein, 2008, p. 2).

If we do not begin with the phenomena, we run the risk of not being clear enough about this limit to physics. We risk limiting the imagination of children and 'locking' them up in the language of physics, debarred from experiences and the aesthetic and even existential dimensions of life.

Rushing is the death of formative experiences. These can only come when there is time to stay with the objects under study; when we allow ourselves and our students to experience and observe. This way, we open the possibility that they will eventually see that to fully understand we must begin to measure and name. But what is more, they will eventually come to see how 'in the physical as in the moral world, the fact that things never stand in isolation inspires *confidence in the world* [Weltvertrauen], and thus an educative or formative (*bildend*) experience' (Wagenschein, 2015, p. 169, our italics).⁸ This experience of not only becoming confident of oneself in relation to the world, but seeing how things are connected is key to understanding the pedagogical potential of the exemplary way. It is to see how we must begin with experience, and with examples that can not only awaken the curiosity of children, but also potentially open to formative experiences, that go far beyond mere learning of facts and formula.

Having opened up Wagenschein's exemplary way in which the educator offers of an entry point that allows for an encounter with something, we now turn to the approach applied to RE.

The exemplary way in school RE

Considerations of exemplarity are not new in RE. This is obviously so since exemplarity underpins almost every religious practice: 'Every religious tradition recognizes certain persons . . . the monks, nuns, saints, *gurus, yogis, bodhisattva*, or *daoshi* who exemplify a life of aspiration to, and attainment of, spiritual goodness' (Kidd, 2017, p. 171). In these contexts, examples function normatively, providing images of what we may imitate, emulate, or aspire to be. Some argue that this kind of normative exemplarity doesn't help RE since it hinders an even-handed interpretation of the phenomena of religion itself (Hermann et al., 2020). Moreover, it may support an idea of RE as special or different from other subjects, which results in the subject being conferred a privileged and exceptional position within the school curriculum. As will become clear in what follows, we argue that the subject's dignity should be conferred by its pedagogical significance rather than any specialness that religiosity may (or may not) attract.

But as was evident with the discussion of Wagenschein, a pedagogical approach to examples is quite different. Here we can see that the normative associations of (religious) exemplarity do not arise in the same way. While it would be naïve to assume the selection and presentation of an

example is ever entirely free of norms or commitments, its selection is (or ought to be) governed first and foremost by pedagogical considerations—that is, it should offer the student an optimal entry point into a particular field of study. The purpose here is less to emulate or imitate an exemplary figure (Warnick, 2008), than to understand something through the example. In view of the definition of education outlined earlier, we can now understand the basis upon which the educator ought to select examples for RE: examples should be chosen on the basis that they contribute to the positive formation of the student's relation to the world (*Bildung*).

Of course, precisely which examples will successfully contribute to *Bildung* is another, very difficult, but also vital, question. The first point to note, however, is that examples are chosen not primarily because they are canonical or foundational (we must discuss X because it is really important or because we have always discussed it). In support of this view, we turn to Jonathan Z. Smith, an American historian of religions who articulated one of the basic principles of curricular selection: 'there is nothing that must be taught, there is nothing that cannot be left out' (Smith, 2013, p. 6).

Why is this such an important pedagogical principle? Because it reminds us of a key to understanding exemplarity: examples are *examples of something*. At the risk of undermining the simple presence of the singularity before the child (the story, the object, the idea), it is the *something*, the reference point, that matters more than the example that is selected as a way to exemplify it. For Smith, then, there are no particular curricular selections that are sacred: for instance, we don't need to include the gospels because of their canonical or cultural significance (though that would be a consideration). Indeed, his general concern for RS scholarship was less on what might be called the substantive content of religion(s) than on the methods of Religious Studies. For Smith it is vital that students understand how the subject is shaped by the assumptions and attitudes of the teacher or student who studies (Smith 1982). One might take this as evidence that Smith emphasizes skills over the acquisition of knowledge (Andreassen, 2019, p. 82). But this seems to set up a false dichotomy since being able to show *how* 'knowledge' is formed is itself a vital skill.

Smith's insights originally focused on the university subject of Religious Studies which he taught throughout his career. But we suspect that these insights also apply to RE in schools (Moe, 2019). Rather than imagine RE to be comprised of piles of subject knowledge that students must learn, the curriculum can be reimagined through examples that illustrate general principles. This can lead us away from thinking of curriculums in terms of the linearity that so offended Wagenschein. We don't have to construct RE through the so-called world religions paradigm which so often dominates curricular thinking in RS and RE (Alberts, 2017).

The world religions paradigm (WRP) is a way of interpreting and organizing religious phenomena in the world into (normally) five or six 'major world religions' Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Hinduism, Buddhism and Sikhism. These categories represent simplifications of complex phenomena and as such offer some kind of pedagogical insight or entry point (Einstein) into the subject. The WRP reveals something about the world and arguably represents a 'huge step forward compared to the complete absence of non-confessional education about religions in many school contexts' (Alberts, 2016, p. 263). Nevertheless, it also simplifies and obscures many complexities and while a generation of scholarship in Religious Studies has questioned its predominance, it cannot simply be cast aside, not least because '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, p. 263). It is not that a WRP has nothing to offer pedagogies of RE but that it 'has gained the hegemonic status of ahistorical, universal "common sense"' (Cotter & Robertson, 2016, p. 10). In other words, it is a lens that we forget we are looking through. No doubt RE professionals (teachers and curriculum developers alike) are oriented in their curricular thinking by what they consider to be major world religions (Alberts, 2017; Jackson et al. 2010). So the issue is not with the WRP *per se*, but that it has become 'common sense': it no longer stands as a way of interpreting phenomena in the world, rather the big six religions simply are. They have ossified into the content that must be set along a path of learning. The uncritical adoption of the WRP too easily permits us to imagine religions

through the abstract categorizations of world religions that take priority over encounters with some thing in the world.

What Smith calls for, rather, is pedagogical encounters shaped by the peculiar intersection of the student, the educator, and the world. For instance, in a chapter entitled 'Fences and Neighbours', Smith shows how the botanical taxonomies of Juglandaceae (walnut family) can illuminate details of circumcision practices in early Judaism, which themselves tell us a good deal about how we think about religion (Smith, 1988, pp. 1–18).

The educator might arrange certain encounters that serve as entries into some larger perspective or understanding. Building on Wagenschein's emphasis on the particular examples and their significance, Wolfgang Klafki invites this kind of approach in his didactic analysis by encouraging curriculum theorists to consider the power of their examples '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?"' (Wagenschein, 2015, p. 151). To suggest what this might look like, let us offer a few signposts.

As we have already noted, Smith (1988) explores examples of the ways that the category of religion is discursively produced through his detailed discussions of quite particular case studies, from circumcision practices in early Judaism to the cultish figure of Jim Jones and the events of the Peoples Temple which resulted in the deaths of at least 909 members. The undergraduate student who encounters Smith's presentation of these cases might find the stories fascinating (like the pendulum that grabs the child's interest), but equally the student could be rather confused as to why Smith is taking such a deep dive into complex narratives around events and practices that don't appear to offer a systematic understanding of religion or to establish the main religious categories with which they arrive at the course. That seems to be Smith's point.

The narratives that Smith introduces are exemplary not of systematic or general categories of religion, but of the discursive practices of 'Imagining Religion', as the title of the book shows. What might be interpreted as rather particular, some might say idiosyncratic examples, in fact serve to open up a range of fundamental methodological issues for the student of Religious Studies. Smith is not just *imagining religion* for himself, but showing how discourse and culture imagines the categories of religion. The educational point becomes clear as the examples are opened up.

What about school RE? Exploring the discursive categories through how we *imagine* religion with university students is one thing, but don't schools have to establish those basic categories in order that they may later be analysed and deconstructed (shown to be the products of the scholars' imagination)? To some extent one can accept Alberts' point that the WRP cannot be cast aside within schools. Yet we argue that teachers in schools can and do have particular educational aims that also allow for similar educational analyses. Teachers of RE can open up principles to their students in terms that might resonate or have some kind of educational potency: for instance, how and why Anabaptists deny infant baptism; how Dalits in Tamil Nadu mobilize their political agency; or how the Japanese aesthetic of Wabi-Sabi is expressed in a concrete house in Torquay. Each of these particular narratives could be used with school children to examine certain educational principles. If the examples are developed through educational intentions, the extent to which the teacher of RE lingers on topics as Wagenschein suggests, is, in the end, a matter of professional and pedagogical judgement. The practice of teaching is, as Klafki suggests, an opening up of the particular to something more universal. Readers may be looking for a more concrete example and so we present the intention to influence someone to become mortal.

Becoming mortal

Like Wagenschein's hanging rock discussed earlier, the fact of death could be said to hang in—or hover over—our lives, though children are not often encouraged to pay any attention to its weighty presence. While it is something children might learn about, it is also important to note that 'mortal'

could be said to be something that children also 'become': our mortality is not just to do with the fact that we die, just as importantly, we live our lives knowing that we do not last forever, that we are 'being-towards-death' (Heidegger, 1996). For Heidegger, being-towards-death is not something we spontaneously embrace even though authentic human life can only be lived by facing the fact of death. From that point of view, mortality is something of an educational achievement. So, this illustration begins with proposing an educational intention to encourage children to reflect on mortality. Of course, the *memento mori* tradition has long encouraged reflection on death, and popular culture is replete with examples (consider films like *The Seventh Seal* or *Dead Poets Society*). But should this be part of compulsory RE in schools? With younger children, who are newer to life, reflection on death may appear out of place. Nevertheless, while there are other parts of the curriculum in which such reflection might be considered appropriate (e.g. poetry in English; still life painting in Art), RE seems to offer an appropriate place to consider mortality since religion is often concerned with death and what happens in the hereafter.

So how might teachers approach this? Faced with a group of lively 11-year-old children for whom death is perhaps inconceivable or perhaps something they may have experienced through some personal loss (family; friends; pets—of course one must be mindful of possible sensitivities) what activities might engage the children in this reflection: in both learning about death as well as in becoming mortal? The attempt to begin with the interests of the children, might encourage the teacher to ask certain questions: What do you think happens after death? How would you like to be remembered? What might be a suitable epitaph? What might your gravestone look like? The children might engage in various active responses: writing epitaphs; sketching gravestones; looking at the graves of others or other forms of memorial; exploring alternatives to burial. Looking at the examples from the history of religions from the locality: from the local cemetery to Tibetan sky burials (where the corpse is cut up and left at high elevation for vultures to feed on).

What would come out of these activities? Do the children really attend to their own mortality while exploring rituals for the dead? Are they really able to face the 'hanging rock' of their own demise and is that observation engaging, formative, unsettling, or upsetting? None of this is clear, but the illustration is meant to show how choices can be governed by a pedagogical logic, even if the intention cannot be proven to result in an anticipated outcome.

This illustration is intended to open something up: a pedagogical logic that governs selection. Of course, the idea of mortality can be explored and exemplified in countless ways. No two classes need to refer to the same example, and yet they could address the same general question (what does it mean to be mortal?) with the same 'subject matter': reflection on mortality being the real subject matter of the lesson. On its own this illustration might seem rather abstract and so needs to cohere with the broader formative intentions. How does reflecting on mortality support *Bildung* in a more general sense?

Conclusion

Exemplarity is at the heart of pedagogical and didactic analysis within the continental tradition of educational theory and philosophy. It is a key principle by which something is understood as (or made to become) educational. The processes of understanding through examples draws attention to the dialectical interplay at the heart of this paper: between attention to the specific phenomena, as we highlighted with Wagenschein, along with acknowledging that the real power of the example lies in its general significance, as our discussion of Smith showed. This dialectical interplay between particular and general is at the heart of pedagogy: general understanding must always be made through specific and engaging forms. Understanding this dialectic is key to recognizing how an object goes from being content or subject matter (as stuff) to educational substance ['Bildungsgehalt'] (Klafki, 2015). When educators consider reframing subject matter in schools, we believe these dialectical principles of didactic analysis deserve attention, in particular the principle of exemplarity.

Of course, there are other didactical principles that we might have put alongside the principle of exemplarity, but we suggest that the focus on examples resonates with educators of religion as well as educators in general. And as a contribution to the discussion of RE curriculums, it helps us to avoid some of the pitfalls: i.e. the idea that we need to expand the curriculum to be ever more comprehensive; the canonization of the world religions paradigm; the overly positive picture of religion and key figures, to name a few. The exemplary way permits us to open religious understandings to students in ways that are not focused on only the accumulation of knowledge but on opening ways of being in the world. Not with the aim of taking these up or simply accepting them, but to show how these are related not only to each other but to other aspects of life.

The educational influence upon the student's relation to the religious aspects of the world cannot be stripped of its normative and existential significance or of the associated risks of undue influence or even manipulation and/or indoctrination. This, however, is no argument against the exemplary approach, rather the approach serves to remind us that normativity is always part and parcel of any educative process, and that education is always guided by the idea that, by way of some particular example, we might catch sight of something more universal.

Notes

1. With Friesen and Kenkies (2022) we acknowledge the vagueness of the term 'continental' in this context. It denotes not continental philosophy, but continental pedagogy. Nevertheless, this 'continental' tradition draws mainly on German authors and so can also be characterized as the German didaktik tradition (Westbury et al., 2015).
2. There have been a number of publications exploring the concept of worldviews as it might apply to RE in England and Wales (Barnes, 2023; Benoit et al., 2020; Tharani 2020). This essay forms part of work coming out of the After Religious Education project (see: www.afterre.org).
3. An example of the kind of systematic, chronological pedagogical process can be found in the Wilhelm Rein's *Outlines of Pedagogics* (Rein, 1895).
4. Diese einführende Betrachtung, die ich hier andeutete, schließt nicht nur nicht aus, dass wir danach zur Pendelformel kommen: im Gegenteil. Sie erschließt erst die Sache, so dass sie redet, und die Schüler, dass sie »dabei sind«. Eile verdirbt alles.
5. Ruhige Gespräche mit Studenten, durch Jahre fortgesetzt, und auch mit Laien, lassen erkennen: Ein verbrühender und übereilter, meist sogar vorwegnehmender Einmarsch in das Reich der quantitativ beherrschenden Apparate, der nur nachgeahmten Fachsprache, der nur bedienten Formeln, der handgreiflich missverständlichen Modellvorstellungen, ein solcher Unterricht zerreit für viele schon in frühen Schuljahren unwiederbringlich die Verbindung zu den Naturphänomenen und stört ihre Wahrnehmung, statt sie zu steigern. Er reduziert die Sensibilität für Phänomene und für Sprache gleichermaßen.
6. We will provide the original quotes in footnotes. All original quotes are from Wagenschein (1977). The source is without pagination. "Ich spreche nicht für eine Flucht in die Phänomene, ich spreche für ihren Vorrang und ihre ständige Präsenz. Ich werbe für etwas: Dafür, dass solche Erfahrungen, wie ich sie hier beschreibe, fundamental sein und bleiben müssen. Sie verlangen nun allerdings Zeit für ruhiges Anschauen, Besinnung und Gespräch. Es ist bemerkenswert, dass man die Voraussetzungen dafür in den Schulen meist vergeblich suchen muss. The English translation has included a section preceding the one inserted here: Sind das die Atome? fragt das überinformierte Kind. Nein, es sind Lichtblitze (»Szintillationen«). Aber man hat den Eindruck, dass dieses Radiumsalz von selber feinste Trümmer aussprüht, die die Schicht ritzen. Zwar hat man dann nicht gerade Atome gesehen, aber doch sind wir nahe daran. So nahe wie die Fußspur eines Vogels dem Vogel selber ist, der sich für einen Augenblick auf dem Schnee niederließ.
7. Es entsteht so ein besonderes »Natur-Bild«, eine »Denkwelt« können wir auch sagen. (Ein vor kurzem erschienenes authentisches Sammelwerk führt den Titel »The Physicist's Conception of Nature«.)⁷ Nach Vergleichen, die von Physikern selbst herrühren, bildet es die uns umgebende sinnhafte Wirklichkeit der Phänomene so ab, wie eine Landkarte die Landschaft⁸, wie die Partitur eine Symphonie, wie der Schatten seinen Gegenstand.
8. "Nicht nur, um sie dann besser auf einen Gedächtnisfaden reihen zu können, sondern weil es eine Weltvertrauen erweckende und damit bildende Erfahrung ist, dass, wie der Physiker Tyndall einmal sagt, die Dinge „in der physischen Welt wie in der moralischen nie vereinzelt dastehen“ (Wagenschein, 1956, p. 7).

Acknowledgments

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

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

The work was supported by the Culham St Gabriel's Trust [353].

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