

Reflective Teaching

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Towards a Methodology for Comparative Studies in Religious Education: A Study of England and Norway

Braten, Oddrun M. H.
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Book Review

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The central questions of this study are how religious education (RE), as a part of public secondary school curricula, differs between England and Norway, and what accounts for these differences. To answer these questions the author analyzed documents reflecting national debates about RE in public schools, examined policy statements produced by the British and Norwegian governments, cited studies conducted by the European Union, and carried out limited ethnography at six secondary schools (three in Norway and three in England).

This study bears the marks of having been a dissertation, and is deeply self-conscious of its methodology. Bråten cites a broad range of theoretical and methodological orientations put forth for the study of RE in Europe, settling on two frameworks that offer the greatest utility for answering her questions. The first framework, which provides the structure for the book, is that of “levels of the curriculum.” After an extensive, if somewhat dry, literature review, Bråten compares differences between England and Norway in increasingly narrow fields. These are the societal, institutional, instructional (teachers), and experiential (pupils) levels. Bråten thus first gives a broad overview of the forces at work at higher levels of organization in the planning and execution of RE curricula before describing how it is taught and received in actual practice. In each chapter she applies the second of her two main methodological frameworks: an assessment of the supranational, national, and subnational forces that have impacted developments at each curricular level. For example, primary among the supranational forces she identifies are globalization and pluralism, and among the national forces are the differing historical relationships between state, religion, and schools within the two countries.

Bråten found that the teaching of RE as a multi-faith, non-confessional subject began earlier in England than in Norway, likely as a result of England's history of relatively greater religious plurality. Apart from the formative influence of scholars within the secular field of religious studies, curricular developments in England tended to happen "from the bottom up," and tend to be more diverse owing to the greater diversity of public schooling options. Norwegian RE, on the other hand, has tended to develop "from the top down," and places greater emphasis on Christianity than English RE. Curricular developments in Norway were also most influenced by departments of theology, unlike in England. All of this has led to differences in how RE curriculum is executed in the two countries, but not to as many differences in how it is received by pupils.

Given that most of the readers of this journal are involved with higher, not secondary, education in North America, I would suggest this study might be useful for faculty in the following ways. First, Bråten poses interesting questions about the importance of RE (mostly having to do with preparing pupils to be tolerant citizens in pluralistic societies) that are important for faculty and administrators to consider at institutions that require the study of religion as part of general education or liberal arts requirements. Why is RE considered necessary? How do students receive not only the content of what is taught, but the messages about why such courses are important? This book would also be of use for thinking about the supranational, national, and subnational forces that have impacted how and why we teach what we teach. Bråten raises many questions along these lines, and provides one multi-disciplinary model for how to answer them.

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