



Religion, Education, Dialogue and Conflict: Perspectives on Religious Education Research

Jackson, Robert, ed.
Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2012

Book Review

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Between 2006 and 2009 Wolfram Weisse and a team of researchers in eight European countries conducted pioneering research on the topic of religion and education. The project, known as REDCo, focused on adolescents, but also examined teacher beliefs and practices about religion and education. At the heart of this research is the question of whether learning about religion in schools can contribute to social harmony or social cohesion. Methodologically, the combined qualitative and quantitative approaches the team used sought to examine a number of aspects of this question. *Religion, Education, Dialogue and Conflict* reports on some of the results of the REDCo project.

Unquestioned in much of this research is the desirability of students' learning about religion in schools in one form or another. In other words, the question of whether learning about religion in schools can contribute to social harmony is for the most part transformed into an assumption, rather than retained as a research question. This can perhaps be forgiven if one examines the data as reported in this volume: across the chapters (written by key researchers in REDCo, including Robert Jackson who is a pioneer in this area of research), students themselves affirm the importance of education about religion as facilitating respect and the ability to live in a diverse society.

The diversity of results and the variations on the studies reported raise issues associated with conducting multi-sited research. Social and cultural context is such that one can never perfectly replicate research across national boundaries. REDCo seems to have responded to these variations admirably by giving researchers the freedom to fine tune the research design in a site-specific manner. Thus teachers in the U.K., for example, wrote reflective diaries that

enabled Miller and McKenna to analyse differences and similarities between teacher and student beliefs about religion and education. There was, it turned out, considerable agreement between teachers and students about their commitment to pluralism and respect for religion. The freedom to respond to local context might be seen as part of the broader theoretical framework -- Robert Jackson's interpretive approach -- relying on ethnographic methods to employ a student and teacher centered approach to the study of religion and education. Only by taking such an approach can we begin to decipher the usefulness of education about religion, which should not be taken as a given but held in critical tension with an examination of religion, and knowledge about it, in the education of future citizens.

Since REDCo's completion, there has been a flurry of research activity on the broad subject of religion and education. For all of us engaged in these activities, it is vital to learn what we can from the path-breaking efforts of the REDCo researchers. So, for example, a theme that recurs across the chapters is that students believe that "doing things together" is a key strategy for developing understanding about the "other." This recognition, which mirrors a great deal of research on diversity management and social cohesion, seems to warrant further exploration, through, perhaps, an examination of students' (and teachers') experiences of shared activities with those who belong to religions (or no religion) other than their own.

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