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The Interpretive Approach as a Research Tool: Inside the REDCo Project

Robert Jackson

Notes on contributor
Robert Jackson is Professor of Religions and Education in the Institute of Education at the University of Warwick, UK and Director of the Warwick Religions and Education Research Unit (http://www.warwick.ac.uk/go/WRERU). He is also Professor of Religious Diversity and Education at the Council of Europe-related European Wergeland Centre in Oslo, Norway (http://www.theewc.org). He has undertaken various projects for the Council of Europe, the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe and the United Nations Alliance of Civilizations programme, as well as taking a leading role in many research projects, including the European Commission project on Religion, Education, Dialogue and Conflict (REDCo). He is author of many publications in the field of religions and education, is co-editor of the book series *Religious Diversity and Education in Europe* (Waxmann) and was Editor of the *British Journal of Religious Education* 1996-2011. His books include *Rethinking Religious Education and Plurality: Issues in Diversity and Pedagogy*, London, RoutledgeFalmer, (2004) and *Religious Education: An Interpretive Approach*, London, Hodder and Stoughton, (1997).

Abstract

This contribution shows how the author's interpretive approach to religious education was used as a theoretical and pedagogical stimulus and an empirical research tool by researchers in the European Commission Framework 6 REDCo (Religion, Education, Dialogue, Conflict) Project. The origins and development of the interpretive approach, from its roots in the ethnographic study of children from religious backgrounds, are summarised, and an account is given about how its key concepts were used to frame a checklist of questions for REDCo researchers dealing with both empirical research methodology and pedagogy. Examples and case studies are presented illustrating how the approach was used by REDCo researchers as a methodological tool for empirical research, a pedagogical tool or stimulus to pedagogical clarification and a tool for meta-analysis and theory development.

Keywords: interpretive approach, religious education, representation, interpretation, reflexivity, ethnography, qualitative research, quantitative research, hermeneutics, pedagogy, classroom interaction, citizenship, REDCo Project.

Introduction

The interpretive approach to religious education (Jackson 1997; 2004; 2006; 2008a,c) was developed originally for use in publicly funded community schools in England and Wales, where the subject is concerned with helping students to gain a critical and reflective understanding of religions. Subsequently, the approach has been developed further in the UK, and has also been used and discussed in various countries including Turkey (Jackson 2005a), Canada (Jackson 2005b) and Japan (Fujiwara 2008), as well as being utilised in a Council of Europe project on the contribution of studies of

religions to intercultural education across Europe (Council of Europe 2004; Keast 2007).

The interpretive approach continues to be used and developed in a variety of contexts. It is advanced as a pedagogical and research tool and a contribution to various debates and has never been intended to be seen as *the* pedagogical approach to the subject (Jackson 1997, 6); it is complementary to various other approaches, and lends itself particularly to the study of contemporary religious practice (Jackson 2004; 2006). Some ontological and epistemological issues relating to the approach have been debated (Eriksen 2010; Jackson 2008b; Wright 2008). The present discussion illustrates how the interpretive approach was used and developed as a tool during the European Commission REDCo project (Jackson *et al*. 2007; Weisse 2007).

The interpretive approach was originally developed during ethnographic studies of children (e.g. Jackson and Nesbitt 1993). Studies of children from different religious backgrounds in Britain stimulated methodological reflection and were used as a primary source for pedagogical thinking and curriculum development. A close link was seen between the activity of the ethnographic researcher, working on field research, and the activity of the learner in the classroom, attempting to understand religions in the contemporary world. At their own level, each faces similar theoretical, methodological and analytical questions (Jackson 1989, 1997; Jackson and Killingley 1988, pp. 23-39; Jackson and Nesbitt 1990). Ideas developed during ethnographic research were applied to religious education pedagogy and were used in the development of curriculum texts (the Warwick RE Project) written for children of different ages (eg Barratt 1994; Barratt and Price 1996; Everington 1996; Jackson, Barratt and Everington 1994; Wayne *et al.* 1996). The books aimed to help learners and teachers to use interpretive methods in engaging with ethnographic data on children from religious backgrounds, portrayed in the context of the communities in which they lived and the wider religious tradition to which they related.

Subsequently, the broad approach was employed in various pedagogical studies which were sensitive to pupils' self-identity and to the representation of their life-worlds in the classroom (e.g. O'Grady 2003, 2005), and as a tool in developing a methodology for pupil-to-pupil dialogue, in which children from different religious and cultural backgrounds were encouraged to communicate with and learn from one another (e.g. McKenna, Ipgrave and Jackson, 2008). The design and implementation of a European Commission Framework 6 project (REDCo) on religion, education, dialogue and conflict provided an opportunity for further international developments.

The Interpretive Approach in Summary
The following summary of the key concepts of the interpretive approach, used also in the ethnographic methodology associated with it, gives attention both to pedagogy and to field research.

Representation
The interpretive approach is concerned with how religions are represented – for example by practitioners, the media, and by resources for religious education. It takes a critical stance towards Western, post-Enlightenment models of representing 'world religions' as homogeneous belief systems, whose essence is expressed through set structures and whose membership is seen in terms of necessary and sufficient

conditions (Jackson 1997). This does not entail abandoning the use of the language of 'religions' or claiming that 'religions' as 'wholes' are incapable of description or that they are not in some sense 'real'. However, the approach is critical of stances which essentialise or stereotype religions and is equally critical of simplistic representations of cultures and of the religion/culture relationship. Debates in social/cultural anthropology and other social sciences are used to develop more sophisticated models of the representation of cultures, cultural processes and ethnicity (e.g., Barth 1981; Baumann 1996; Clifford 1988; Eriksen 1993; Geertz 1973; Said 1978).

A model for representing religious material was developed which encourages an exploration of the relationship between individuals, in the context of religio-cultural groups with which they are associated, and the wider religious tradition. It neither privileges the individual nor the religion, but is concerned with the hermeneutical relationship between the two, taking account of the strong influence of different kinds of groups (such as denominations, sects and movements). The tradition is seen as a contested 'whole', with power acknowledged as a factor in the representation of religions (Jackson 1997, pp.55-57), and it is recognized that different insiders (and outsiders) might have varying understandings of the nature and scope of particular religious traditions. The model offers a view of religions which acknowledges their complexity and internal diversity, including their varying interactions with 'culture'. The personal element in religions is emphasized, with religion being presented as part of lived human experience, but the idea of religions as 'wholes' (albeit contested wholes) is not rejected. The approach is not relativistic in relation to truth, acknowledging varying and often competing truth claims (e.g., Jackson 1997, pp.122-6). The interpretive approach also recognises that some individuals draw eclectically on religious and other sources in expressing a 'postmodern' worldview. Such individuals might have a tenuous, or no formal, connection with religious groups (Jackson 2004).

Interpretation
In contrast to the phenomenology of religion, in which researchers or learners are expected to leave their presuppositions to one side, the interpretive method requires a comparison and contrast between the religious symbols, concepts and experiences of those being studied and the nearest equivalent concepts, symbols and experiences of the researcher or learner (whether religious or not). The student's or the researcher's *sensitivity* is a necessary condition, with genuine empathy being possible once the concepts of the other's discourse have been understood. Thus the approach is very much concerned with understanding religious language and discourse and therefore with religious literacy, including issues of translation. As I have remarked elsewhere, '…a basic aim of RE is to develop a knowledge and understanding of the grammar – the language and wider symbolic patterns – used by people within religious traditions, so one might understand better their beliefs, feelings and attitudes' (Jackson 1984, 142; Jackson 1997, p123).

The application of the model of representation outlined above requires moving between individuals in the context of their groups and the wider religious tradition – the consideration of one informs the other. This is a second feature of the process of interpretation. The work of the American cultural anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1973, 1983) influences the method as does the discussion of 'religion' by the Canadian scholar Wilfred Cantwell Smith (1978), although some aspects of their

work are criticized or not adopted in the interpretive approach (for example, Smith's theology: the interpretive approach is not derived from theology). Both scholars essentially use a hermeneutical methodology, Geertz's developed consciously from the work of the French philosopher Paul Ricoeur (Geertz 1973, 19). The interpretive approach utilises other aspects of Ricoeur's hermeneutics, including the concepts of participation and distanciation (Jackson 1997, 129; Ricoeur 1973).

Reflexivity

Reflexivity is understood as the relationship between the experience of researchers/students and the experience of those whose way of life they are attempting to interpret. Three aspects of reflexivity are identified as applicable to religious education. Researchers/learners are encouraged to review their understanding of their *own* worldview in relation to what they have studied (edification). They are helped to make a constructive and informed critique of the material studied at a distance; and they are involved in reviewing their own methods of research/study.

One of the key aims of religious education, as understood in several European countries, is to help students to reflect on their studies of ways of life that are different from their own in some ways. Interestingly, from a social science perspective, some anthropologists have written about how their studies of others have prompted a re-assessment of their understanding of their *own* worldviews or ways of life (e.g. Leach, 1982 , 127). In the interpretive approach, the term 'edification' is used to describe this form of learning.[1] In practice, such reflexive activity is not easily separable from the process of interpretation. Interpretation might start from the other's language and experience, then move to that of the student, and then move between the two. Thus, the process of understanding another's way of life is inseparable, practically, from considering issues and questions raised by it. Teachers cannot guarantee that such reflexive activity will happen, but they can facilitate opportunities for reflection. Moreover, reflexive activity often helps to motivate students to participate more fully in religious education (O'Grady 2003). Whatever differences there might appear to be between the student's way of life and the one being studied, there may also be common features or points of contact. What might appear to be entirely 'other' might link with one's own experience in such a way that new perspectives are created or unquestioned presuppositions are challenged. Edification need not only result from studying religions or cultures other than one's own. The study of *one's own* ancestral tradition, in religious or cultural terms, can also give new insights in re-examining one's sense of identity. In the case of religious education, young people might see religions, including the one of their own history, from a new perspective (Meijer 2004).

Edification does not imply the *adoption* of the beliefs of followers of a religion being studied, but does recognise similarities and differences between all humans and of the relationship between the identity of each person and the manifestation of differences. Moreover, it builds upon a positive attitude towards diversity, recognising the encounter of people with different beliefs and cultural practices as enriching in principle, and seeing individual identity as potentially developing through meeting the 'other'. 'Recognition' of the 'other' can lead to a more positive approach to plural societies, leading to an active accommodation of differences, while upholding and strengthening shared values and a common human identity.

Reflexivity also involves the learner (or researcher) being able to engage critically with material studied. The management of such critical work is a sensitive pedagogical issue, especially in pluralistic classrooms. Criticism can also be applied to method. Just as researchers should spend time reflecting on the effectiveness and the ethics of the methods they have used, so a critique of methods used in religious education can be a fruitful part of its content. Methodological reflection can reveal issues of representation and can also stimulate creative ideas for improvement, in the presentation of findings to others, for example.

Adapting the Interpretive Approach to the REDCo Project

The co-ordinator of the REDCo Project, Professor Wolfram Weisse, incorporated the interpretive approach into the project proposal (Weisse 2007). Weisse was conscious that his multinational project would draw on a range of different disciplinary, methodological and theoretical traditions and used the interpretive approach to provide theoretical stimulus for research and pedagogical development within the project. The research was conducted by a consortium of scholars from nine European universities, from England (Warwick), Estonia (Tartu), France (Paris, Sorbonne), Germany (Hamburg and Münster), the Netherlands (Amsterdam, VU), Norway (Stavanger), the Russian Federation (St Petersburg) and Spain (Granada). In a project including researchers steeped in a range of epistemological and theoretical positions and methodological approaches, it was considered appropriate to use the interpretive approach not to impose any uniformity in theory, epistemology or method, but as a *stimulus* to theoretical thinking in relation to field research methods and to pedagogy (Weisse 2007).

The REDCo project included generic qualitative and quantitative studies across all the participating countries (e.g. Knauth *et al*. 2008; ter Avest 2009; Valk *et al*. 2009), plus nationally based studies (e.g. Ipgrave, Jackson and O'Grady 2009; Schihalejev 2010; van der Want *et al.* 2009), some of which included partners from project teams from the other countries. In successive discussions by the REDCo project team, the interpretive approach was summarised as a series of *questions* to be reviewed as research and pedagogical development proceeded (Jackson 2008d). The questions apply equally to the research process (in which the interpretive approach was itself rooted) and to the development and review of pedagogical processes. Each group of questions corresponds to one of the three key concepts of the approach.

Representation

As researchers and developers of pedagogies:
- How well are we portraying the way of life of those we are studying so that we avoid misrepresentation and stereotyping?
- Are we presenting 'religions' in too monolithic a way?
- Are we giving sufficient attention to diversity within religions?
- Are we considering whether individuals might be drawing on a wider range of spiritual or ethical resources than are reflected in traditional portrayals of religions?
- Are we showing awareness that individuals might be combining elements from a religion seen in traditional terms with values and assumptions derived from a more post-modern outlook?
- How far are we aware of the perceived relationship (or lack of relationship) of individuals studied to background religious and cultural traditions?

- How far does the use of power by relevant authorities/actors (national, regional, local) affect the representation of 'others' and 'self'/'own group/tradition'?

Interpretation

As researchers and developers of pedagogies:
- How far are we giving attention to the religious language/concepts/symbols used by those whom we are studying/representing?
- How well are we 'translating' the other person's concepts and ideas (or comparing the other person's language/concepts with our own nearest equivalent language/concepts) so we have a clear understanding of them?
- How far are we able to empathise with the experience of others after we have grasped their language/concepts/symbols?
- Have we considered the relationship of individuals to groups to which they belong (eg sub-tradition, sect, denomination, movement, caste, ethnic group) and of these groups to their background religious and cultural traditions?
- Have we considered the impact of power relations on processes of interpretation?
- How far have we considered issues of 'translation' (linguistic and cultural) in relation our use of religious language?

Reflexivity

In relation to research:
- How far are we aware of the impact of our own cultural background/values and beliefs/gender/research role/power etc. on the research process or development of pedagogical ideas?
- How far are we relating the data of our research to our own current understandings of difference?
- How far are we giving attention to the evaluation of our research methods?

In relation to pedagogy:
- How far are we enabling students and teachers to reflect on their own assumptions/presuppositions/prejudices in relation to studying those with different religious/cultural beliefs/practices?
- How far are we giving attention to issues of enabling students and teachers to relate material studied to their own ideas and values?
- How far are we giving attention to issues of motivation in relation to reflexivity?
- How far have we enabled students and teachers to make a careful, sensitive and distanced critique of new ideas studied?

Individual project members were free to use these questions (and other literature on the interpretive approach) as they wished, but were required to report on how they had used the approach in a progress report (milestone M2.1) and as part of a report written near the end of the project (Jackson 2008d). The following accounts of uses and developments of the interpretive approach refer to examples from the texts submitted for the final report[2] and also various publications from members of the REDCo Project team.

Reviewing the internal and public outputs of the REDCo project, it is clear that the interpretive approach was utilised in a number of ways, with researchers often using it in at least two ways. In summary, these uses of the interpretive approach can be classified as:

- A methodological tool for empirical research
- A pedagogical tool or stimulus to pedagogical clarification
- A tool for meta-analysis and theory development

Under each heading, I will make some brief general remarks, with reference to various studies within the project. I will then take a specific example to discuss in more detail as a case study.

A methodological tool for empirical research

Methodologically, the checklist of questions based on the interpretive approach was used as a tool in formulating research questions, developing interview schedules and in designing the quantitative questionnaire used across all eight countries participating in the project. In relation to the quantitative questionnaire, the interpretive approach was used as a device to ensure that questions reflected religious traditions in their variety, and addressed issues of 'translation' and interpretation (Valk *et al.* 2009). In particular, different understandings of the term religion, or its equivalent in the languages of the project partners, were teased out and discussed in relation to the formulation of questions to be used across all eight countries.

The Hamburg team used the interpretive approach to analyse religious diversity among the student population (Jackson 2008d). In relation to data analysis, the team from the Netherlands employed the interpretive approach to analyse student discourse on religion and values, with particular reference to gender in the relationship between researcher and interviewees (Jackson 2008d). As well as being employed in the design of interview schedules, the key concepts of the interpretive approach were used by the Warwick team to shape school and university based action research studies, while the comparison of findings within the Warwick community of practice suggested generic ideas that could be applied to further studies (Ipgrave, Jackson and O'Grady 2009; O'Grady 2009; Skeie 2009a).

Case Study: Estonia

In her qualitative studies of young people in Estonian schools, Olga Schihalejev used the three key concepts of the interpretive approach as methodological tools. Rather than applying the concepts specifically to people from religious backgrounds, she used the checklist of questions as an instrument to reconstruct the meanings of young people in schools, and to uncover her own understandings and presuppositions as a researcher.

In her qualitative study of young people, she initially conducted extended semi-structured interviews with individual students. The analysis of these revealed not only information about the ways students think about religion in school life and relationships with others, but also much about how students understood her questions. In the following phase she included open questions in order to give space for students to prioritise their own concerns (Schihalejev 2010, 69-106). In her classroom interaction study, in which examples of videoed lessons in two contrasting schools

were analysed, she aimed to identify potentials and limitations for dialogue in students' engagement with each other and with teachers. In data analysis, in order to apply questions related to the *representation* element of the interpretive approach, group-interviews with students by means of stimulated recall and semi-structured interviews with teachers were used. Interviews enabled the reconstruction of students' personal views on religion. Classroom interaction was also studied from the perspective of the learners and teachers. Stimulated recall was used in the analysis of videoed lessons, allowing participants to express their own interpretations of classroom interactions. With regard to representation, respondents were viewed as unique individuals. Schihalejev highlights not only each individual's social context, but also his or her relation to time; she recognises that in another temporal context interviewees might have answered differently (Schihalejev 2010, 157-178).

Drawing on the questions derived from the interpretive approach, Schihalejev used the principle of *interpretation* reflexively in order to uncover her own presuppositions, and to compare them with new concepts emerging from fieldwork. The checklist had a central role in influencing her data collection and analytical methods. Her interview techniques required explanations from respondents, during data collection and through their feedback during data analysis. The main focus was on students' use of religious language. In the first phase of the fieldwork the key term 'religion' was not imposed on respondents; instead they were asked about their views and understandings. During interviews, possible interpretations of religious terminology were requested from each interviewee ('Did I understand correctly that you meant…?').

The principle of reflexivity was used to maintain the researcher's self awareness in relation to the data, requiring sensitivity to the meanings expressed by others as well as critical distance from her own thinking and the material under study (Schihalejev 2010, 37-39). A combination of ethnographic and hermeneutical methods, starting from the qualitative study of views about religious diversity, enabled a reflexive analysis of data and methods used. Schihalejev introduced the idea of 'self interview', in order to raise her awareness of her own presuppositions and ideas. She first 'interviewed' herself on the topics to be covered in interviews with students and teachers, and then distanced herself from her responses in order to compare and contrast them with the interviewees' responses. The students who were videoed and the teachers who were interviewed, in turn, were asked to distance themselves and to reflect upon their own views, ideas and values as expressed in the video or experienced in their lessons (Schihalejev 2010, 35-39).

A pedagogical tool or stimulus to pedagogical clarification
Pedagogically, researchers from Granada and Münster used the interpretive approach as a *response* to research findings. As a strategy to improve pedagogy, the Granada team, in collaboration with a Muslim religion teacher, encouraged the development of new approaches to teaching and learning in order to facilitate inter-religious and inter-cultural dialogue (Jackson 2008d). In the case of Münster, the interpretive approach was seen a source for pedagogical principles aimed at minimising the tension between students' positive ideals about society and their fears of the conflict they felt would result from learning together about different religions and worldviews. It was suggested that the interpretive approach could be adapted for use in a confessional (for example Islamic) context in developing intra-religious as well as inter-religious

understanding (Jackson 2008d; Jozsa 2008). In St Petersburg, the researcher used the concepts of the interpretive approach as a tool to structure teaching and learning methods in order to maximise student participation and utilise students' own knowledge and experience (Fedorov 2009; Jackson 2008d). The resultant lessons were the object of research observation and analysis. The range of studies from within the Warwick community of practice used the interpretive approach to develop pedagogical principles and strategies in a variety of teaching and learning situations in schools and teacher training courses (Ipgrave, Jackson and O'Grady 2009; O'Grady 2009).

Case study: Norway
From the Stavanger team, Marie von der Lippe studied identity construction and intercultural dialogue in relation to educational policy and classroom practice in Norwegian religious education. She used the interpretive approach in formulating research questions during ethnographic fieldwork (von der Lippe 2010a). However, of particular interest are her analyses and reflections upon fieldwork, which provide insights for developing the interpretive approach pedagogically.

With regard to representation, von der Lippe's classroom interaction study showed how much students made use of various discourses available to them, including politics, media and religion; they were especially affected by representations of religions in the media, particularly Islam. Students tended to be more negative about Islam and Muslims in the classroom than in interviews (von der Lippe 2009). They drew on dominant – especially media – discourses (Baumann 1996). However, they also had more personal discourse arenas relating to family, friends, school and activities. Young people were found to have a repertoire of such discourse arenas which tended to change contextually. These repertoires provided resources with friends, at home, at school, during activities, at church or mosque and beyond the local level in relation to the media, politics and national and international events. The young people's use of different repertoires of discourse was seen to affect how they understood themselves and others and how they viewed and are shaped by society.

Several points emerge that might help in clarifying and developing the interpretive approach. With regard to representation, insight is shown into the relationship between individuals and wider groupings from a linguistic point of view. The powerful effect of various discourses is clear, but so is the potential for individual agency. Students were seen to be capable of formulating their own more independent positions. However, von der Lippe observes that students need more assistance in doing this in order to deconstruct stereotypical representations of religion and culture (von der Lippe 2011). This is an important pedagogical point.

A second point relating to 'representation' is the finding that some religiously committed students, especially those of a Muslim and charismatic Christian background, were anxious that conversations about religion might lead to conflict, especially fearing that their own beliefs might be criticised or that they personally would have to respond to stereotypical representations of their faith. The finding reinforces the need for a high degree of sensitivity in developing approaches in which students reveal their own personal positions.

With regard to interpretation, it was evident that the majority of students had no personal experience of religion and had a very limited understanding of religious concepts. A much smaller student group participated in religious life, and these students found it much easier than their more secular classmates to comprehend the religious discourse of others. For the 'secular' majority, the question is raised about how effectively religious concepts can be compared and contrasted with the closest possible non-religious concepts in order to deepen students' understanding of religious language. There is also a question of motivation in relation to those students who have had no experience of religion (compare O'Grady 2003). Data from various REDCo studies, including those from Estonia, England, Norway, France and the Netherlands, show that there is a low level of motivation for many 'secular' students to engage directly with religious vocabulary. However, tolerance *did* emerge as an important value to the majority of students, both in Norway and across the project as a whole. Since most young people felt that learning about religions in schools was necessary to promote tolerance in plural societies, one might look to developing discussions of tolerance of religious difference as a bridge to engaging with others' religious language (von der Lippe 2008). Von der Lippe's finding was mirrored by the Dutch research team who found that students in vocational secondary schools used very little overtly religious vocabulary and, even then, used it in a fragmented way. However, Turkish and Moroccan students had a stronger awareness of concepts from their Islamic background than their Dutch/Christian counterparts. Generally, students' language reflected common values of Dutch society, such as 'tolerance' and 'respecting each other'. Thus, in interpreting religious vocabulary, many students needed to draw on their understanding of concepts outside formal religion – of values for example (Jackson 2008d; ter Avest *et al.* 2008).

In relation to reflexivity, von der Lippe's analysis shows links between edification at an individual level, and broader social values and actions. An individual's personal insights are connected to wider social attitudes relating, for example, to citizenship. Finding pedagogical ways to explore this connection would enhance and show the inter-relatedness of religious and values education and a broadly understood citizenship education, such as that promoted by the Council of Europe (Jackson 2007, 2008e, 2010).

Von der Lippe's case study research with young people from Christian, Muslim and non-religious backgrounds showed the contextual nature of their views of the importance of religion in dealing with questions of personal identity (see Jackson 2004). Her case studies showed various ways in which religion was included in reflections on identity by students from religious backgrounds. However, in the case of a student who would not have self-ascribed as religious, his interview illustrated how ideas from various religious traditions could be used in constructing a personal view of religion. Another case study student stated the lack of importance of religion in her existential thinking, yet nevertheless used religious claims as a foil for her atheistic choices. Everyday discourses, related to personal experiences, were seen to assist students in formulating their own views. These more personal micro-discourses related to dominant discourses from the media, public debate, the school and religious institutions.

A tool for meta-analysis and theory development

From a theoretical point of view, several teams formulated developments to the interpretive approach. The Hamburg team's combination of the interpretive approach with Levinas' idea of 'neighbour religions', including taking account of contextual social and economic factors in understanding religion in the life of a city, is an innovation (Jackson 2008d). From the Granada team, Gunther Dietz developed the reflexive side of the interpretive approach with reference to the Spanish data. Focusing on the inter-subjective, dialectical relationship between the researcher and the subject being researched he analysed the reciprocal process of criticism and self-criticism between both parties (Dietz, forthcoming; see also Álvarez Veinguer and Rosón 2009). For the case study I will outline and discuss Skeie's use of the interpretive approach in providing a meta-analysis of the classroom interaction studies in the REDCo project.

Case study: Geir Skeie

In his analysis of classroom interaction studies, Geir Skeie developed a form of conceptual hermeneutics inspired by the interpretive approach, with the goal of explaining understandings of dialogue and conflict in religious education contextually and then comparatively (Skeie 2009b). He traced how the concepts of dialogue and conflict were represented and interpreted initially by different contributors to the project proposal, and then in the classroom interaction studies conducted by each national partner, giving attention to the wider national (or sub-national) context, dominant theoretical assumptions and predominant styles of teaching and learning in the different countries. He proceeded to make some comparative points, and then to make some cautious generic points on the basis of the combined studies. Finally, he asked what all these processes contribute to the understanding of the researchers' initial presuppositions, thus completing the hermeneutic circle.

To flesh this out in relation to comparative issues, Skeie points out that in Hamburg there is a well established local dialogical religious education model. The Spanish confessional model is very different, showing a marked distinction between policy discourse, which supports dialogical approaches, and actual practice, where dialogue hardly appears. The French example shows the impact of the idea of laïcité, but also shows France as less different from the other countries than one might expect, at least at the level of classroom interaction. The English study focuses on the potential of utilising conflict situations in order to promote learning through dialogue, the Estonian study reveals historical and structural reasons why dialogue in class is uncommon, while the Dutch study emphasises the personal dimension of dialogue in classroom interaction. All of Skeie's examples show how context influences the representation and interpretation of dialogue and conflict.

Skeie goes on to make some generic points about *students* from the eight countries. He notes that there is a general awareness of religious diversity and that knowledge about religions is seen as important to general education and citizenship. Students prefer to focus on present-day issues in relation to religions. In general, students are tolerant of others' religions and worldviews, but there is also some expression of prejudice. Students are concerned that conflicts may arise in the wider community, and their attitudes to dialogue in school tend to reflect this.

With regard to *teaching styles*, Skeie points out that these range from academic, cognitive and teacher led approaches (Russia, Estonia, France) to more conversational ways of teaching with a much higher degree of student involvement (England and Norway, for example). Some ways of teaching and acting in the classroom can bring about tension and insecurity among students, and thus can be seen as contributing to conflict. However, in other cases, students' expressed prejudices have been used as a tool for promoting dialogue, combining pedagogy and teacher skill to make individual students feel secure enough to voice their opinions. In certain cases a dialogical teaching style may privilege more able students, as in the Estonian example.

Generically, *student involvement and activity*, and therefore motivation, increased with the introduction of 'experience near' issues, whether from teachers or students. Many students appreciated open discussion about religious issues if the atmosphere was safe and the teacher was non-judgemental. This was so even for some countries (e.g. Estonia) where teaching styles tend to be formal.

Lesson content can range from textual analysis (e.g. France) to starting points being related to the life-world of students (e.g. the Netherlands). There is a common tendency to focus on Islam when issues of religion and conflict are raised, as examples from Norway, Germany (Münster), France, England and Spain show. Where lesson content is not strictly fixed, or student agency is more prominent, the qualifications of the teacher – in relation to both subject knowledge and pedagogical skill – are tested. Despite all the evidence from the research for the need for teachers to have facilitation and pedagogical skills, strong subject knowledge is also seen to be important.

With regard to the *role of teachers*, the studies largely confirm that teachers see themselves as mediators between cultural and religious groups – as these are represented by their students in class – and as contributing to the school's role in integration. However, there is sometimes a gap between teachers' discourse on dialogue and their actual teaching practice. There are various reasons for this which can be expressed in terms of power relations.

Students have their own agenda partly influenced by contextual factors and partly by their own intentions within classroom dynamics. Issues of social relations and identity are especially important to the age group studied. Conversations about religion in class are part of identity politics, including the dimension of gender.

In drawing on the range of studies in order to formulate a generic view of dialogue, Skeie utilises Olga Schihalejev's representation of dialogue as a 'shared inquiry', seen as a 'communicational act consisting of three components: exploration of own ideas, discovery of the ideas of another human being and examination of the subject under investigation' (Schihalejev 2009, 62-83; 2010, 29-33). Skeie relates this generic view to the concept of edification as used in the interpretive approach (Skeie 2009b, 273).

Conclusion

The employment of the interpretive approach generally by project teams, as illustrated in particular by the three case studies, shows an imaginative use of the key concepts from the approach and of the checklist of questions formulated for use by project team members.

Schihalejev's use of interpretive approach as a methodological tool shows creativity, both in uncovering young people's meanings in relation to religious language and her own presuppositions as a researcher. The technique of self interview by the researcher, followed by a distanced analysis is an interesting application of the concepts of participation and distanciation, as is the reflexive use of extracts from videoed lessons as a stimulus for young people to explain their meanings during classroom interaction.

Von der Lippe's research findings suggest a number of possibilities in relation to the development of the interpretive approach as a pedagogical method. Especially pertinent is her work on the relationship between the personal discourses of students and wider dominant discourses relating to religion and a range of other themes. Her work shows that giving students the opportunity to share their views and to criticise dominant discourses, can enable them better to relate their knowledge and understanding of religions to their own personal and social development (von der Lippe 2010b). The connection of the personal and the social suggests ways in which the reflexive process at an individual level can be connected with themes of social morality and citizenship. From the perspective of a contextual form of religious education, Leganger-Krogstad similarly sets out to explore the relationship between what she calls the student's 'inner space' with the 'outer space' of family, school, locality and society (Leganger-Krogstad 2001). It is worth noting that Bruce Grelle also explores the relationship between the personal and social in suggesting an adaptation of the interpretive approach for use in public schools in the USA. In the American context, it would be impossible, in the public school classroom, to give close attention to the ways in which individuals might be edified through reflecting on what they have learned about religions. Instead of concentrating on the personal, Grelle suggests applying insights from religious traditions to wider social issues related to citizenship, thereby distancing discussion of the issues from the personal views of individuals in the class (Grelle 2006). Von der Lippe's findings could be used as a tool for such a development.

Skeie's meta-analysis of the various classroom interaction studies shows creativity in applying the methodology of the interpretive approach to the concepts of dialogue and conflict as understood by the various project teams and by participants in the research. He points out important contextual differences across the various national studies, revealing the issues in moving from individual cases to a generic overview relevant to policy development at the European level.

The case studies thus illustrate the relevance of the interpretive approach to research methodologies aiming to understand the worldviews of others. They also show opportunities for pedagogical developments linking reflexive processes in relation to religions to issues of social morality and citizenship, and in broadening the interpretive approach to deal with meta-analysis of themes relating to dialogue and conflict.

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[1] This concept resembles Michael Grimmitt's idea of 'learning from' religion but is not identical to it (see Grimmitt 1987, 225; Jackson 1997, 131-2).

[2] The unpublished reports used as sources for Jackson 2008d were prepared by Ina ter Avest (Amsterdam), Aurora Álvarez Veinguer (Granada), Wolfram Weisse (Hamburg), Dan-Paul Jozsa (Münster), Bérengere Massignon (Paris), Fedor Kozyrev (St Petersburg), Marie von der Lippe (Stavanger), Olga Schihalejev (Tartu) and myself (Warwick).