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What is 'good' Religious Education?

The fundamental question “What is good Religious Education?” is touched upon in all articles of this compendium, as the theory of religious education is interested in enlightening and improving the practice of Religious Education. Similarly, during the course of studies when classroom observation takes place, a certain understanding of what constitutes good Religious Education is expected. This can also be seen in the respective instructions for classroom observation during teachers' training, and perhaps also in observation guidelines used during the sitting in on classes.

Against this backdrop, it is remarkable that the question of the quality of Religious Education was only a marginal one for a long time. The crisis of school education that has been diagnosed in Germany in connection with international empirical comparative studies (PISA and others), however, led to an intensive discussion of quality in respect to the school system. This also explains why there has been an increase in publications on this topic since the turn of the millennium.¹

¹ A general overview of the pedagogical discussion can be found in: A. Helmke, *Unterrichtsqualität erfassen, bewerten, verbessern*, sixth edition Seelze (2003) 2007; Themenheft: *Guter Unterricht. Maßstäbe & Merkmale - Wege & Werkzeuge*; *Friedrich Jahresheft 25* (2007); A. Helmke, *Unterrichtsqualität und Lehrerprofessionalität. Diagnose, Evaluation und Verbesserung des Unterrichts*, Seelze / Velber 2009; H. Meyer, *Was ist guter Unterricht?*, fifth edition Berlin 2008; E. Jürgens / J. Standop (eds.), *Was ist „guter“ Unterricht? Namhafte Expertinnen und Experten geben Antwort*, Bad Heilbrunn 2010. For the discussion on religious education see: M. Rothgangel, *Qualitätskriterien „guten“ Religionsunterrichts*, in: D. Fischer / M. Rothgangel (eds.), *Standards für religiöse Bildung? Zur Reformdiskussion in Schule und Lehrerbildung*, second edition

1. Societal, religious, and educational context

The question of good Religious Education reveals that the school subject is located at an intersection of very divergent expectations. From the perspective of the different people and institutions, quality of instruction can mean quite different things - one reason for this is a divergence of interests which are partly *connected* to different *understandings* of education:

- As persons in charge of education, many parents have an interest in, on the one hand, having Religious Education for their children, and on the other hand, that it is of good quality. They have varying expectations reaching from the desire for knowledge-based lessons on religion and faith, to active communication of faith in the sense of an instruction of one's own denomination and religious practice.²
- For pupils participating in Religious Education, other quality standards can be central. For instance, they could definitely appreciate having one subject in school where the pressure to perform is less, in comparison to the other subjects.³ However, expectations for good Religious Education can also be determined by their seeking and questioning the 'Where From, What For, and Where To' of their own lives and their need for orientation.
- For teachers of Religious Education, teaching Religious Education forms part or all of their chosen profession (as religious educator, teacher of Religious Education, or pastor). In this case, very different personal motives and interests determine their perspective on what constitutes good Religious Education.⁴

Münster 2005, 104-118; as a special volume devoted to the present topic cf. Was ist guter Religionsunterricht?, in: JRP 22 (2008); M. L. Pirner, Auf der Suche nach dem guten Religionsunterricht, in: RpB 60 (2008), 3-17; B. Schröder, Fachdidaktik zwischen Gütekriterien und Kompetenzorientierung, in: A. Feindt et al. (eds.), Kompetenzorientierung im Religionsunterricht. Befunde und Perspektiven, Münster u.a. 2009, 39-56.

² Cf. M. Domsgen, Kaum gefragt, aber von grundlegender Bedeutung. Welchen Religionsunterricht Linden Eltern eigentlich gut?, in: JRP 22 (2006), 136-147.

³ A. Bucher, Religionsunterricht zwischen Lernfach und Lebenshilfe. Eine empirische Untersuchung zum katholischen Religionsunterricht in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland, third edition Stuttgart 2001.

⁴ See below section 4.2, and the article by Gottfried Adam, Religious Education teacher: profession-person-competence and the empirical studies listed there.

- Religious communities have an interest in having their denomination propagated according to their own understanding, and that pupils become receptive for it. In addition, also the pupils' religiosity and approach to life, as well as other denominations, religions, and worldviews are considered.⁵ The expectation that Religious Education should lead directly to a rooting in one's own denomination is hardly seen as realistic and articulated any longer.
- The question of good Religious Education can at present be found increasingly in the context of quality management in the school system. Therefore, good Religious Education is also a task of the competent education authorities.
- Finally, public interest should be mentioned, as it is reflected in the national educational policy and the discussion in society as a whole. In this case, religion is considered both as a defining part of culture and historical background, and as its public function in festivities, and crisis and conflict management. This, however, also includes an interest in interfaith dialogue and education in ethics.

This short overview of the various interests shows that there can be no one "universal gauge" to indicate what good Religious Education is. The intention is rather to have a "relative gauge" that has to be seen in the context of the negotiation progress of what constitutes Religious Education in the view of the respective circumstances.

In the following section, first some basic data on the discussion on quality is presented, which is then followed by a review of the discussion in general education and in religious education. The connection to Religious Education and other chapters in this volume are presented throughout, to illustrate where the relevance to the question of quality can be located.

⁵ For the Protestant Church, see Kirchenamt der EKD (ed.), *Kompetenzen und Standards für den Evangelischen Religionsunterricht für die Sekundarstufe I. Ein Orientierungsrahmen* (EKD-Texte 111), Hannover 2011; id. (ed.), *Kerncurriculum für das Fach Evangelische Religionslehre in der gymnasialen Oberstufe. Themen und Inhalte für die Entwicklung von Kompetenzen religiöser Bildung* (EKD-Texte 109), Hannover 2010; id. (ed.), *Kirche und Bildung. Herausforderungen, Grundsätze und Perspektiven evangelischer Bildungsverantwortung und kirchlichen Bildungshandelns. Eine Orientierungshilfe*, Hannover 2009.

2. Fundamental distinctions of quality⁶

For many areas of the current discussion on quality, the basis is formed by the views of Avedis Donabedian, who differentiates between three levels of quality: 1. structural quality, 2. process quality, 3. result quality. In addition, 4. concept quality, has also been established.

2.1 Dimensions of quality

(1) Structural quality

In the context of Religious Education, “structural quality can be understood as [... 1 the organisation and all parameters that make it possible”⁷ for Religious Education to take place. As examples for parameters for Religious Education we can designate the following: the professional education, advanced training, and continuous education of teachers of religion; legal and organisational parameters of Religious Education; curricular parameters (see article by Friedhelm Kraft, Curricula for Religious Education), quantitative parameters, such as number of hours and rate of cancellation lessons of Religious Education at school.

(2) Process quality

The term process quality designates “all concrete procedures and workflows”⁸. In the context of Religious Education, this denotes that the concrete part of teaching, the behaviour of teachers of Religious Education (see article by Gottfried Adam, Religious Education teacher: profession-person-competence) or pupils, the use of methods and media⁹ are focussed on. Although the term for the discussion on quality has only been a rather recent one, in this context we can refer

⁶ For the following, see M. Rothgangel, Qualitätskriterien, 104-118.

⁷ M. Dietzfelbinger, Qualitätsmanagement in psychologischen Beratungsstellen evangelischer Träger, in: C. Schneider-Harpprecht (ed.), Zukunftsperspektiven für Seelsorge und Beratung, Neukirchen-Vluyn 2000, 177.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Cf. also G. Adam / R. Lachmann (eds.), Methodisches Kompendium für den Religionsunterricht, vol. I, fifth edition Göttingen 2010, and vol. II, second edition Göttingen 2006

to the observation guidelines which have been used for a long time by students, student-teachers, and teachers of Religious Education to perceive, but partly also evaluate Religious Education. The current discussion on quality can contribute to a systematic discussion on these observational schemata and their clarification.

(3) Result quality

In the area of Religious Education, result quality means that the targets and measurable learning progress is examined, and when possible, with consideration of the feedback of all pupils. In respect to the results of the learning progress in Religious Education, this is a difficult and also controversial challenge, as they have to be collected empirically, on the one hand, and they are also dependent on the pupils' feedback.

(4) Concept quality

In the context of quality management in the area of social work, it has proved to be useful to also consider concept quality, as “structural, process, and result quality gain their specific profile and their special emphases through their definition of targets and the guiding principles of pastoral care and diaconical work”¹⁰. This issue is also indispensable for Religious Education. Similar to the way in which 'competence in theology and in religious education' was defined as a goal in the training of teachers of Religious Education (see article by Hartmut Lenhard, Stages of training for teachers of Religious Education), a general principle is also necessary for Religious Education. It could be oriented on mandatory targets in curricula - so-called “global aims”¹¹, certain conceptions of religious education (see above articles by Rainer Lachmann, History of religious education and Martin Rothgangel, Conceptions of religious education and didactical structures), or in epistemological considerations of religious education in general (see Martin Rothgangel, What is religious education?).

¹⁰ M. Dietzfelbinger, Qualitätsmanagement, 178.

¹¹ Such a comprehensive global objective for all school forms can, for instance, be found in the “Leitlinien für den Evangelischen RU in Bayern” (2004) (<http://www.rpz-heilsbronn.de/arbeitsbereichschularten/real-und-wirtschaftsschule/ru-aktuell/leitlinien.html>) (accessed on January 20, 2014).

2.2. Normative and empirical aspects

Another helpful distinction can be made in connection with Ewald Terhart from general education.¹² He distinguishes between a normative and an empirical approach to the determination of quality within the educational discussion.

"The fact, that the objectives as criteria of high and highest quality were often developed without considering empirical or other restrictions [...], but were situated in the normative context of the setting of superordinate 'final' targets¹³, is quite important and also characteristic for normative attempts at definition".

However, if empirical, historical, societal, etc. aspects continue to be disregarded, these rationales should in fact be characterised as 'normativist', in the negative sense. Empirical aspects are indispensable as realistic impact assessments for normative deliberations.

However, in reverse it would be problematic if empirical studies on quality would not take normative reflections into consideration. There would be danger that only empirically measurable goals were set. In respect to school in general, and Religious Education in particular, for example, all comprehensive indicative goals would be disregarded. Furthermore, the "actual effects of educational measures [...] within the wide scope of all possible effects of socialisation would not be precisely isolated."¹⁴ At the same time, there is consensus on the fact that it is useful and necessary to examine the question of school and Religious Education by means of empirical research on education and schools.

An interesting empirical study on Religious Education was presented by Anton Bucher¹⁵. He documents what, in the opinion of pupils, constitutes good Religious Education. There it becomes clear how closely the empirical touches upon the normative aspect. Considering the normative aspect, also the above-mentioned question of which perspectives are decisive for the determination of

¹² Cf. E. Terhart, *Qualität und Qualitätssicherung im Schulsystem. Hintergründe Konzepte - Probleme*, in: ZP 46 (2000), issue 6, 809-882, here 814-820.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 817.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 8818.

¹⁵ A. Bucher, *Religionsunterricht zwischen Lernfach und Lebenshilfe*, third edition Stuttgart 2001.

quality criteria for Religious Education, was examined.

3. What is “good education”? – Pedagogical aspects

In the educational discourse, the features of quality according to Andreas Helmke and Hilbert Meyer are frequently discussed. Helmke distinguishes between the following ten features:

1. “Classroom management
2. Clarity and structuredness
3. Consolidation and security
4. Activation
5. Motivation
6. Climate conducive to learning
7. Orientation on the pupils
8. Competence-based
9. Approach to heterogeneity
10. Supply-oriented”¹⁶.

He explains that features 2 to 4 “are directly focussed on the facilitation of processing information”, features 5 to 7 “primarily to the promotion of learning receptivity”, and features 9 and 10 “take the fact of diversity of educational objectives, subject content, and individual presuppositions to learning into account”¹⁷.

In comparison, the eleven features of good education according to Hilbert Meyer are the following:

1. “Clear structure of lessons (clarity of processes and roles, agreement on rules, rituals, and freedoms)
2. High share of actual learning time (through good time management, punctuality, transfer of organisational matters)
3. Climate conducive to learning (through mutual respect, reliable observation of rules, assumption of responsibility, fairness, and caring)
4. Clarity of content (through understandable tasks, plausibility of the

¹⁶ A. Helmke, Unterrichtsqualität und Lehrerprofessionalität, Seelze 2010, 168 f.

¹⁷ Ibid., 169.

- thematic course, clarity and reliability when securing the findings)
5. Meaningful communication (through involvement in planning, culture of discussion, discussion of significance, pupil feedback)
 6. Methodological variety and depth (richness of dramaturgical techniques; variety of patterns of action; variability in forms of progression; development of methodological competence)
 7. Individual support (through areas of freedom, patience, and time; inner differentiation; individual analysis of the learning progress and adapted support measures; special support for pupils pertaining to risk groups)
 8. Intelligent practice (through pointing out learning strategies, fitting practice tasks, and targeted assistance)
 9. Transparent performance expectations (through learning opportunities that are oriented on the guidelines and educational standards that is appropriate for the pupils' capabilities, and expeditious feedback on the learning progress)
 10. Prepared surroundings (through orderliness, functional furnishings, and appropriate learning aids)
 11. Joker (for features of subject didactic)."¹⁸

Opposed to such 'feature catalogues', it is sometimes critically remarked that they do not sufficiently consider aspects of the scientific discipline and of subject-related didactic, both necessary for good education. Furthermore, the eclectic selection of features is criticised, as they are not developed from an underlying theory, and therefore are not very homogeneous.¹⁹ The empirical foundation of these features is also very diverse. However, a number of these features does have a good empirical foundation and the catalogues of features are indeed quite helpful as a heuristics for classroom observation.²⁰

Indeed, from the point of view of didactics, there are a number of interesting findings on the conditions of successful teaching. They were gained through

¹⁸ H. Meyer, Merkmale guten Unterrichts - ein Kriterienmix, in: E. Jürgens / J. Standop (eds.), Was ist "guter" Unterricht?, 166 f.; opposed to an earlier version of the catalogue in H. Meyer, Was ist guter Unterricht?, 25 ff., Meyer introduced the eleventh feature "Joker (for features of subject-related didactics)" because the earlier features were neutral considering subject-related didactics.

¹⁹ Cf. A. Helmke, Unterrichtsqualität and Lehrerprofessionalität, 170.

²⁰ Cf. aqs.r1p.de (accessed on January 20, 2014).

meta-analyses of empirical studies. These findings were also dealt with in Hilbert Meyer's work. In the following, we concentrate on the question of professional development.²¹ Frank Lipowsky pointed out the subsequent aspects²²:

1. "effective classroom management (intensive use of learning time, establishment of rules, few disturbances),
2. clear structure of lessons (clear sequencing of the lesson into individual stages and steps, clear tasks and expectations, language of the teacher must be understandable),
3. frequent and contentually relevant feedback from the teacher, which also needs to be in close connection with their subject-didactical expertise,
4. cooperative learning through pair- or group-work, although there has to be individual responsibility of each group member, and there needs to be instruction on how pupils should perform their tasks,
5. practice and repetition, as they are necessary for long-term learning success."

These features can be applied more or less to different subjects and teaching in different grades. However, Lipowsky also points out that "in recent years, there has been an increase in findings that teachers with higher knowledge and ability of subject-related didactics, and therefore knowledge of subject-related didactics itself, have a higher impact on the pupils' learning success."²³ This is mainly connected to (1) cognitive activation, and (2) focus and contentual coherence.

It is characteristic for cognitive activation that the teacher animates the learners to a more intense consideration of the educational contents. In this case, the teacher takes up an active role, as "they confront the pupils with challenging tasks, provokes cognitive conflicts, emphasises differences of ideas and positions, animates the learners to relate to each other, and initiates opportunities to reflect upon one's own learning process. Such teaching behaviour

²¹ When focussing on the motivational and affective dimension of success in school (e. g. development of interest of the joy of learning), sometimes other features of teaching are relevant.

²² In: Friedrich Jahresheft 25 (2007), 26 - 30, here 27.

²³ Ibid., 28.

presupposes knowledge and ability of subject-related didactics, and a high flexibility of thought.”²⁴

Successful teaching is also characterised through “focus on the relevant content and through a high contentual coherence.”²⁵ This means that teachers are capable of distinguishing between important and unimportant information, and to connect all the relevant elements of a topic to a coherent entity.

Also very revealing is the evaluation of meta-analyses presented by John A.C. Hattie in “Visible Learning. A Synthesis of over 800 meta-analyses relating to achievement”²⁶. Not all effect levels examined by Hattie can be presented here in detail. However, he draws up insightful conclusions on six evidence-based features “towards excellence in education:

1. Teachers are among the most powerful influences in learning.
2. Teachers need to be directive, influential, caring, and actively engaged in the passion of teaching and learning.
3. Teachers need to be aware of what each and every student is thinking and knowing, to construct meaning and meaningful experiences in light of this knowledge, and have proficient knowledge and understanding of their content to provide meaningful and appropriate feedback such that each student moves progressively through the curriculum levels.
4. Teachers need to know the learning intentions and success criteria of their lessons, know how well they are attaining these criteria for all students, and know where to go next in light of the gap between students’ current knowledge and understanding and the success criteria of: ‘Where are you going?’, ‘How are you going?’, and ‘Where to next?’.
5. Teachers need to move from the single idea to multiple ideas, and to relate and then extend these ideas such that learners construct and reconstruct knowledge and ideas. It is not the knowledge or ideas, but the learner's construction of this knowledge and these ideas that is critical.
6. School leaders and teachers need to create school, staffroom, and classroom environments where error is welcomed as a learning opportunity, where discarding incorrect knowledge and understandings is

²⁴ Ibid. - Also see F. Lipowsky, Auf den Lehrer kommt es an, in: ZP Beih. 51 (2006), 47-70.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ London / New York 2009.

welcomed, and where participants can feel safe to learn, re-learn, and explore knowledge and understanding.”²⁷

From the perspective of subject-related didactics, it is remarkable and gratifying at the same time that in the context of empirical analyses within educational psychology, the relevance of genuine subject-related aspects (see especially 3 to 5) for good (Religious) Education can be demonstrated. What is especially interesting for the didactics of religion, however, is a school and classroom culture which welcomes errors. Accordingly, there need to be some subject-didactical additions or specifications for the above mentioned quality features by A. Helmke and H. Meyer, which should also be considered for the formulation of quality criteria for good Religious Education.

4. What is “good Religious Education” – The perspective of Religious Education²⁸

In the two studies by F. Lipowski and J. Hattie, the relevance of subject-related didactics already becomes visible. Here we want to turn to contributions from the discipline of Religious Education that can be seen as a starting point for considerations on the question of what can be seen as quality criteria for ‘good’ Religious Education.

4.1 Normative considerations

In his empirical study on Religious Education, Anton Bucher points out that ‘empiricists’ should declare their normative preconception of Religious Education, because first, empirical analyses are shaped by such ideal conceptions, and second, because a theory for Religious Education cannot be constructed in an empirical way.²⁹ Consequently, Bucher himself formulates five theses on his own ideas of good Religious Education:

1. “Good Religious Education brings joy to the pupils.

²⁷ Ibid., 238 f.

²⁸ For 4.1 and 4.2 see M. Rothgangel, *Qualitätskriterien*, 104-118.

²⁹ A. Bucher, *Religionsunterricht*, 26.

2. Good Religious Education allows for pupils' self-activity.
3. Good Religious Education is seen as relevant for life by the pupils.
4. Good Religious Education raises explicitly religious subjects, especially God.
5. Good Religious Education aims at the predefined targets, and reaches them, at least in part."³⁰

Although one can generally agree with these quality criteria for good Religious Education, these five criteria are too general to be applicable for an assessment of the practice of Religious Education. On the basis of the previous considerations, it should be asked which of these aspects could be operationalised in which way, or whether they elude empirical verifiability. Furthermore, in comparison to the distinctions of quality above, it can be observed that Bucher concentrates on aspects of process, result, and concept quality, while he mostly disregards aspects of structural quality. In the empirical part of his study, the remarkable result that the popularity of a school constitutes an important determinant for the popularity of Religious Education emerges.

Werner Tzscheetzsch also formulated quality criteria for good Religious Education. He proposes the following six determinants:³¹ Religious Education is (1) theory-driven; (2) experience-oriented; (3) dependent on the teacher; (4) relationship-oriented; (5) a subject for orientation; (6) discusses faith multi-perspectively. Regarding these quality criteria, the comments made about A. Bucher's theories are also valid. In general, they can be agreed with, but in the present form, it is difficult to apply them for the assessment of Religious Education, and in comparison with the differentiations in the discussion of quality, they need to be expanded upon.

The following can be documented as an interim result. For the determination of quality criteria for 'good' Religious Education, normative objectives are necessary. However, they run the risk of being inapplicable, as they are not formulated on an 'intermediate level of concreteness'. In addition, the question of who composes these normative objectives arises again.

Yet it is absolutely legitimate that the individual position of the author in regard to theology and religious education does play a decisive part for the

³⁰ Ibid., 27-33.

³¹ W. Tzscheetzsch, Was macht die Qualität von RU aus?, in: E. Nordhofen / K. Schimmoller / Th. Sternberg (eds.), *Religionsunterricht macht Schule stark. Qualität entwickeln in Schule and Religionsunterricht*, Münster 2001, 15 - 20, esp. 15.

formulation of quality criteria. In any case, it seems to be advisable to develop appropriate quality criteria for good Religious Education in the framework of, for instance, 'mixed commissions' or 'round tables', so as to allow for different perspectives.

4.2 Practice-oriented empirical research

However, this is not to say that the question of quality criteria for good Religious Education would be answered as soon as a group or committee agreed upon a differentiated catalogue of requirements or criteria. This is impressively documented by Rudolf Englert in a report about a study conference on the topic “What is good (Religious) Education ?”

“For this conference, we invited a group of teacher-trainers. They could be seen as experts on the assessment of concrete teaching practice, as this does form part of their day-to-day business. To give their assessments a subject-specific, solid foundation, the group elaborated a framework of criteria according to which the teaching efforts of their teacher trainees were supposed to be evaluated. These frameworks of criteria reflected a fundamental agreement on 'good' or 'successful' Religious Education.

However, when they tried to put these criteria to the test by applying them to a real demonstration lesson documented on tape, it turned out that the lesson in question, and a number of behavioural patterns and interventions by the teacher were *assessed* very differently. The grades given by the instructors for this lesson varied between ‘good’ and ‘inadequate’. This illustrates once more: a consensus reached in a discussion of quality standards for Religious Education does not necessarily show clearly that one shares the same ideas about successful Religious Education on the level of concrete teaching and learning processes.”³²

This result became apparent at an earlier time within the research group on “Religious learning at primary school age” led by Englert. The members of the working group soon agreed that “criteria for successful teaching cannot be defined as a list of individual aspects that were more or less decided in a

³² R. Englert, Was ist gelingender Religionsunterricht? Die Sicht von Anwärter/innen für das Lehramt an Grundschulen, in: D. Fischer / V. Elsenbast / A. Scholl (eds.), Religionsunterricht erforschen. Beiträge zur empirischen Erkundung von religionsunterrichtlicher Praxis, Münster et al. 2003, 226 - 242, here 228.

bureaucratic ivory tower, but rather need to be gained through research and investigation of teaching practice itself.”³³

To this end, the research group conceived of a quantitative empirical study on Religious Education in primary schools in order to, amongst others, gain an insight from the consulted teachers of religion on what characterises good Religious Education from the point of view of practice. The study yielded the following results:

“Teachers of religion in primary schools deem 'general educational' objectives to be especially important (e. g. 'to get the children to think'), without losing sight of the reference to Christian tradition. However, this reference is no longer an end in itself [...], but needs to make a contribution to the pupils' lives.”³⁴

In accordance to this, from a didactical-methodological perspective, subject orientation on the child, activity-oriented learning paths, open teaching formats, as well as a methodological competence that allows for flexible ways of acquisition were preferentially mentioned.

“However, the most important professional competence is not methodological adeptness, but the personal prerequisite: the ability to give ‘the children the feeling of human acceptance’.”³⁵

In general, this quantitative study shows a rather homogeneous image of what teachers of religion in primary schools understand as good Religious Education. However, there is also a justified suspicion that current trends in general education and in religious education led to a “rhetoric of consensus typical for the profession”, and that currently common phrases, such as “more open learning” or “stronger orientation on the pupil” could obscure the differences in lesson design existing in practice. This is why the research group decided to perform a qualitative study among teacher-trainees. They aimed at obtaining accounts of successful and unsuccessful lessons of Religious Education. One of the impulses for the individual interviews was:

“A central task for teachers is teaching. Can you remember one of the lessons of Religious Education you held, where you would say, ‘This lesson was really

³³ Ibid., 227.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid.

successful’?’³⁶

A look at subjective theories by teacher-trainees in the stage between university education and professional day-to-day business was supposed to show “how concepts of professional practice gain more and more shape through the harmonization of theoretical suppositions and practical expectations.”³⁷ The analysis of the interviews produced the following criteria for good Religious Education:³⁸

1. The intensity of participation by the pupils.
2. Congruence between planning and execution of Religious Education.
3. Congruence with the professional ideal.
4. Successful learning.
5. Emotional response in the pupils.
6. One’s own feeling.

In the interviews, the most common criterion for successful or unsuccessful lessons of Religious Education was the intensity of participation. The meaning of this is evident. “If the pupils let themselves be affected by the lesson and are attentive, a central requirement for successful Religious Education is fulfilled.”³⁹ In the opinion of teacher-trainees, the usage of appropriate methods play a crucial part. However, *a good method* is no guarantee for good Religious Education, “the individual *class atmosphere*, as well as the *attitude towards Religious Education* can have the effect that the methodological plan is perceived as being of secondary importance.”⁴⁰

On the basis of his empirical studies, Rudolf Englert eventually deems the following features of quality as especially relevant for “good” Religious Education: based on competence and objectives, pupil-oriented, structuredness, classroom atmosphere, treatment of theology, the *Gestalt* of the lesson.⁴¹

³⁶ Ibid., 231 f.

³⁷ Ibid. 231.

³⁸ Ibid., 233.

³⁹ Ibid., 234.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 236.

⁴¹ R. Englert, Die Diskussion über Unterrichtsqualität - and was die Religionsdidaktik daraus lernen könnte, in: JRP 22 (2006), 52-64

4.3 Matrix on dimensions of quality of good Religious Education

For the further discussion of good Religious Education, the eight areas identified by Bernd Schroder in his matrix “Dimensions of quality and criteria for good Religious Education” form important points of reference:

1. “Good Religious Education are lessons held ‘properly’ and in ‘prepared’ surroundings (quality of determining factors / structural quality)
2. Good Religious Education are lessons by ‘good’ teachers for ‘good’ pupils (personal quality)
3. Good Religious Education corresponds to the technical rules of the art of teaching (process quality / technical quality)
4. Good Religious Education is theologically committed and makes the essential elements of the subject accessible, that means that it builds bridges between the central topics of the subject and the experiences of the pupils (subject quality)
5. Good Religious Education captures the attention of the involved, reflects the mutual appreciation of teachers and pupils (quality of atmosphere and relationship)
6. Good Religious Education leads to verifiable learning success of all pupils, if possible, and - perspectively - contributes to their becoming autonomous subjects (result quality)
7. Good Religious Education supports the establishment of interdisciplinary competence and contributes to school life and the school profile (system quality)
8. Good Religious Education can be justified in its form and can be selectively improved (concept quality).”⁴²

What is very positive is that in these points, Schröder clearly takes the discourse on quality as well as the current state of the discussion on religious education into account. In this sense, he simultaneously adopts normative considerations and empirical studies. However, also questions that endorse further treatment of the topic are raised. For instance, whether it is advisable to expand upon the four

⁴² B. Schröder, *Fachdidaktik zwischen Gütekriterien and Kompetenzorientierung*, 50 f.

abovementioned dimensions of the discussion on quality so much? The complexity is increased, as Schröder assigns five sub-items to each of these eight areas of quality. Detailed questions become obvious when, for example, the sub-items of subject quality (4) are considered:

“Concentration on the essential
aspiration towards mutual development
links from taught to lived religion
change between external and internal perspective
theological contemporaneity”⁴³

Why is only theological contemporaneity, but not theological scripturality considered? Would the issue “aspiration towards mutual development” rather not belong to process quality? Is the link from taught to lived religion really a genuine aspect of subject quality?

4.4 Twelve characteristics of good Religious Education

In our opinion, the following twelve characteristics of quality deserve special attention for the further discussion of Religious Education:

Process quality

1. Feedback (goal-oriented, cognitively activating and 'error-friendly' feedback to constructively accompany and encourage the process of education and learning of pupils in Religious Education)
2. Classroom management (good classroom management; punctuality; attention to 'time thieves'; transfer of organisational matters; efficient use of time; high proportion of actual learning time in Religious Education)
3. Clarity and structuredness (in view of goals, contents and teaching processes of Religious Education: focus on the theologically and educationally relevant aspects; development of networked knowledge; anchor ideas [advance organizers]; representativeness and relevance of contents)

⁴³ Ibid.

4. Learner-centredness (differentiated perception of attitudes and abilities in reference to topics of Religious Education before and during processes of Religious Education and learning; motivating and activating feedback; internal differentiation and cooperative learning; involvement in planning and meta-teaching)
5. Atmosphere conducive to learning (mutual respect in the relationship between teacher and pupils; climate positive towards errors and investigation; assumption of responsibility as well as fairness and caring)
6. Dealing with heterogeneity ('No one is left behind', inclusion; difference in the presuppositions for learning; individual support; aspects of gender; learning about / from / in religion; change between internal and external perspective)

Result quality

7. Consolidation and securing (consistent securing of processes of education and learning in Religious Education; feedback culture that is professionally-based and at the same time 'pupil friendly')
8. Goal- and competence-based and transparent expectations of achievements (based on models of competence and educational standards from religious education; appropriate consideration of the various *dimensions* and subject areas of religious competence; cumulative development of competences with respect to religious competences)

Structural quality

9. Organisational factors (training and further education of teachers of Religious Education; legal and curricular parameters of Religious Education as well as sufficient amount of hours; small amount of cancelled lessons; lessons not in the first or last time-slot of the day)
10. Interdisciplinary (cooperation with other subjects; contribution to the school profile; denominational-cooperation as well as interfaith learning) and orientation towards the world beyond the school (link to locally lived religion / religions)

Concept quality

11. Conscious differentiation between goals of Religious Education that

cannot be attained (especially also the global goals that cannot be operationalised, such as the ability of religious self- and co-determination / identity and dialogue, etc.) and educational standards of religion that can be operationalised, as well as the in-depth consideration of aspects of Religious Education that can be attained and cannot be operationalised.

12. Understanding Religious Education against the backdrop of foundational theoretical considerations (relationship between theology and pedagogy? Which subject-related didactics? Which theology? Relationship of theology and religious studies? Which conceptions of religious education? Which integrative model of conceptions? *Bildung* / Education / Learning? Church-based / Christian / Religious? Non-denominational / Ecumenical / Denominational cooperation / Denominational Religious Education?)

5. ... an ongoing process

The aspirations towards good Religious Education are not a topic that can be treated once and then be considered as settled. It is much rather an ongoing process that demands constant reflection on different levels. This is also true considering the considerations of Religious Education which are presented here. They capture important differentiations of the abovementioned discussion of quality as well as more recent developments of the educational discussion while making them more concrete by connecting them to Religious Education.

But the normative and the theoretical considerations are faced by the question of how they can be operationalised in respect to empirical research, but also in respect to the frameworks of observation referred to. It would be unfortunate if Religious Education would suffer from teachers finding it easier to compile and revise normatively oriented quality standards than to operationalise them to revise them empirically. It is beyond dispute that not everything that is constitutive of the quality of Religious Education can be empirically verified. Yet for the further endeavours towards good quality of Religious Education it is without a doubt not only helpful but also necessary that in the future a larger number of empirical studies will be performed on the aspects and dimensions

of Religious Education that can be empirically verified.⁴⁴

At the same time, there should be no restriction to the characteristics that can be empirically verified, as that would involve, for example, that some quality features related to personality would have to be disregarded. For the research of religious education, the question of good Religious Education also opens up a new field of investigation for the discussion of fundamental normative questions and empirical research.

In the end, good teaching is more than the sum of the individual variables of the lessons. R. Englert points out that teaching apparently has something like a *Gestalt*. The individual traits need to be “supplemented by something like an inner consistency, in any case a quality that integrates the individual traits into a whole.”⁴⁵ Not least, the person of the teacher plays a decisive role with their individual personal profile.

For further reading

- J. Hattie, *Visible Learning. A Synthesis of over 800 meta-analyses relating to achievement*, London / New York 2009.
- A. Helmke, *Unterrichtsqualität erfassen, bewerten, verbessern*, sixth edition Seelze 2007.
- Jahrbuch der Religionspädagogik 22 (2006): Themenband: Was ist guter Religionsunterricht?*
- E. Jürgens / J. Standop (eds.), *Was ist “guter” Unterricht? Namhafte Expertinnen und Experten geben Antwort*, Bad Heilbrunn 2010.
- H. Meyer, *Was ist guter Unterricht?*, fifth edition Berlin 2008.
- B. Schröder, *Fachdidaktik zwischen Gütekriterien und et al.*, (eds.), *Kompetenzorientierung im Religionsunterricht. Kompetenzorientierung*, in: A. Feindt *Befunde und Perspektiven*, Münster et al. 2009, 39-56.

⁴⁴ This is also necessary as empirical studies can provide important suggestions for the question of the emphasis of individual characteristics of good teaching. To give an example: an improvement of the actual working conditions are of far less importance for successful teaching than it is generally considered in the discussion. Empirical studies show that for instance financial improvement and a reduction of class size have a comparably low positive effect (see J. Hattie, *Visible Learning*, 73 - 75, 85-88, 297 - 300).

⁴⁵ R. Englert, *Diskussion über Unterrichtsqualität*, 64.