This is the published version of a paper published in *Religion & Education*.

Citation for the original published paper (version of record):

Vikdahl, L. (2019)
A lot is at stake. On the possibilities for religion-related dialog in a school, in Sweden
*Religion & Education*
https://doi.org/10.1080/15507394.2019.1577713

Access to the published version may require subscription.

N.B. When citing this work, cite the original published paper.

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way.

Permanent link to this version:
http://urn.kb.se/resolve?urn=urn:nbn:se:sh:diva-37940
A lot is at stake. on the possibilities for religion-related dialog in a school, in Sweden

Linda Vikdahl

To cite this article: Linda Vikdahl (2019): A lot is at stake. on the possibilities for religion-related dialog in a school, in Sweden, Religion & Education, DOI: 10.1080/15507394.2019.1577713

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/15507394.2019.1577713

© 2019 The Author(s). Published with license by Taylor & Francis Group, LLC

Published online: 12 Mar 2019.

Submit your article to this journal

Article views: 50

View Crossmark data
A lot is at stake. on the possibilities for religion-related dialog in a school, in Sweden

Linda Vikdahl

ABSTRACT
This article reports the experiences of religion-related dialog among 24 Swedish students and their teacher in religion education. All students had immigrant backgrounds from the Middle East and all of them had strong religious convictions. By using qualitative analysis to reveal their experiences with dialog in school, the concept of "safe space" is critically discussed. The students' educational environment was not a "safe space" when it came to religion-related dialog, in part because historical and political conflicts in the Middle East have an impact on students' willingness to open up. The case study provides an example of the effects of the wider political and societal context on the micro-structure of classroom-interaction.

KEYWORDS
safe space; dialog; religion education; religious education

Introduction
This article reports on a study of religion-related dialog amongst young adults in an upper secondary school south of Stockholm, Sweden. The study is part of a larger project entitled Religion and Dialogue in Modern Societies (ReDi). The background for the research is the finding of the European research project, Religion in Education: A Contribution for Dialog or a Factor of Conflict in Transforming Societies of European Countries (REDCo 2006–2009), that the classroom should be a "safe space" in which students can communicate openly about diversity without being ridiculed or marginalized due to their religion or beliefs.1 The Council of Europe's book Signposts follows up on this with the chapter “The Classroom as a Safe Space,”2 in which Jackson ascertains that “safe space” has become a shorthand term for a desired classroom atmosphere. In a safe classroom space, students can express their views and positions openly, even if they differ from those of the teacher or their peers.3 It is possible to engage with others in personal communicative acts that delve into the depths of students’ own experiences. This also exposes them to the risk of being hurt...
by others as well as to having the experience of being recognized and appreciated as a subject, despite their vulnerability.

The article reports on the experiences of religion-related dialog amongst 24 students and their teacher in a religion education context in Sweden. The students live in a municipality with many immigrants, mainly from the Middle East, and have strong religious convictions. They describe themselves as Syrian Orthodox, Assyrian Orthodox, Chaldeans, Catholics, Muslims, and Mandaens. The research is based on the following questions: To what extent is their educational environment a “safe space” when it comes to religion-related dialog? What are the limitations of religion-related dialog in their religion education classroom? What significance does the teacher have for the dialog? The research also generated wider questions.

**Contextual settings**

**Research**

The use of the expression “safe space” has only recently been introduced into Swedish religious education (RE) research. The potential problems with classroom interactions are well known. For example, Osbeck et al’s research highlights circumstances that may undermine the Swedish RE classroom as a safe space. They show that discrimination based on ethnicity is a problem in Swedish society in general and also in schools, and that ethnicity often overlaps with religious identity. Furthermore, some Swedish upper secondary school students report feeling offended during RE classes. RE students are sometimes regarded as exotic, or the “others”.

Processes of “othering” have been related to the combination of a “cool” youth culture and secularism which dominate in the classroom.

Osbeck et al. maintain that there are risks involved in an RE teaching that is open to conversations and interactions. The RE teacher is regarded as a critical “factor” in terms of their ability to organize and manage classroom dialog. They refer to research illustrating how ways of approaching diverse RE classrooms seem to depend on several interrelated elements, including teachers’ personal teaching styles, their interests and values, and their capacity to engage with the students to make the subject interesting and relevant. A lack of subject knowledge may also determine the quality of classroom interactions. Osbeck et al. claim that it is hardly surprising that some RE teachers try to avoid conversations about beliefs and values if they are unable to guarantee that the classroom will continue to be a safe space.

Research on safe space mainly deals with students’ views and interactions and with issues and problems that can arise for teachers moderating open classroom discussions. However, other contextual factors, such as a school’s policies, the curriculum, opportunities for collaboration between
different communities at the local level, and the place of religion in society, may also have significance for religion-related dialog in the classroom.

**Swedish religion education**

Unlike in most European countries, religion education in Sweden is compulsory. It is not possible, as in some other countries, for students to be exempted from the subject if their parents so wish. Swedish religion education is also non-denominational. The teaching should be objective, encompass a range of different approaches, and be based on scientific grounds and proven experience. Consequently, RE in Swedish schools does not differ to any great extent from education in other school subjects, such as history or social science.

As already indicated, the term *religion education* is used in this article rather than religious education, because of the Swedish school subject’s nondenominational nature and a study of religions approach. In contrast, “religious education” sometimes refers to confessional RE teaching, which is not found in Swedish schools.

“A school for all”

An objective and non-denominational religion education has its foundation in Swedish school policy, which emphasizes the importance of “a school for all,” regardless of religious background. The ambition of the policy is to be inclusive and avoid segregation. A non-denominational and objective religion education was introduced in the 1960s. Earlier, Swedish religion education had a clear Christian and confessional character. This changed after the law on freedom of religion was adopted in 1951, when schools were allowed to teach any religion or no religion at all. Swedish society is now becoming increasingly multicultural and religiously diverse and this is reflected in the syllabus for religion education and the entire national curriculum. The Swedish school still supports inclusivity and does not take a stand for or against a certain religion or life view.

**Objectivity cramp**

The objectivity requirement led to a heated debate when it was introduced, because it was unclear how it would work in practice. It also created great uncertainty amongst teachers, who did not dare to reveal their own views or participate in dialogs because of their fear of influencing their students in a way that was contrary to the curriculum. There are reasons to assume that this uncertainty—or objectivity cramp—has been transferred to new generations of teachers and that many teachers still feel like this
This “cramp” can therefore be understood as inhibiting religion-related dialog in classrooms. Research shows that many students appreciate teachers who share their own opinions with them and experience frustration when they do not. Fancourt argues that it is important for students to know whether their teachers have personal religious beliefs or not, that they are able to listen to and empathize with the students’ ideas and beliefs and can manage discussions firmly but fairly. Teachers need to manage the dialog, supervise it, and be part of it.

**Religion-related dialog in the curriculum**

There is support for religion-related dialog in the curriculum for the Swedish upper secondary school. The overall curriculum states, for example, that: “The goals of the school are that all students individually can interact with other people based on respect for differences in living conditions, culture, language, religion and history,” and the religion education curriculum indicates that students should be given the opportunity to “discuss” and “argue.” However, religion-related dialog can also include a personal exchange about (non-)religious beliefs, or an interaction in which subjective perspectives are related to each other. But this kind of personal exchange is not emphasized in the curriculum for the Swedish upper secondary school. This does not mean that a personal dialog about religious beliefs and life values cannot happen in the classroom, but there is no support in the curriculum to initiate or encourage such a dialog.

**The place of religion in Swedish society**

The place of religion in society also has significance for religion-related dialog in schools. Sweden is often referred to as one of the most secularized countries in the world, especially by Swedes. The meaning of this is not very obvious, partly because secularization is a complex concept and aims at different things. In short, the term generally refers to the process in which secular institutions take over social responsibilities previously held by religious organizations. In Sweden, it is primarily the former state (Lutheran) church—that has lost ground. The concept of secularization can also refer to the process of religion becoming less important for people and religion being displaced from the public sphere to the private.

It has been shown that relatively few Swedes believe in God. In a survey conducted by the European Commission in 2005, only 23% answered in the affirmative to the question “Do you think there is a God?” This differs from the European average of 52%. Only the Czech Republic and Estonia had a lower proportion of believers in God. Even though many people in
Sweden do not believe in God, in 2015 63% of Swedes were still members of the Church of Sweden. This is somewhat paradoxical. David Thurfjell, who has interviewed Swedes about their religiosity, talks about postsecular Christians, which is a term that describes the religious attitude of many Swedes. Amongst postsecular Christians, there is a widespread notion that they are not religious or Christian, although many still take part in Christian celebrations, life phase rituals, and other aspects of Christian culture.

The religiosity of young people in Sweden does not substantially differ from that of adults. Quantitative and qualitative studies have shown that young people, like adults, see religion as an individual and private affair. This means that, even amongst young people, the concept of religion has become devoid of its traditional content and that the view of religion has changed.

Sweden is thus a country with an apparent majority religion—Lutheran Evangelical Christianity—although many members of the church do not rigidly adhere to its content. Jenny Berglund puts it like this: “Sweden is a society that can be described as a society marinated in Lutheran Christianity, officially claiming to have washed away the marinade, but having problems in admitting that the taste abides.” Postsecular Christianity can contribute to a certain shyness, or reluctance, to participate in religion-related dialog. Furthermore, people who do not believe in a God will probably have little interest in talking about religious issues. Studies also show that religion and religious issues are rarely discussed or paid attention to by Swedish youth.

The school context, data material, and study’s methodology

I interviewed 24 students between the ages of 18–19 from three different classes and their teacher of religion education in an upper secondary school south of Stockholm.

The school environment differed in several ways from the above description, especially as many of the students had strong religious convictions, which is unusual in the Swedish school context. Most of the students lived in Västernäs, a municipality with many immigrants, mainly from the Middle East. As one of the Syrian Orthodox female students told me: “Yes, as you probably know, Västernäs is the place where most people believe in God and have a religion.”

All the interviewed students identified themselves as religious. This was a requirement for participation in the study. The purpose of the project was to study religion-related dialog between young people with different
religious backgrounds, which presupposed that the interviewed students identified with a particular religious tradition.

Religion is not defined in the study and this is a conscious choice. As a psychologist of religion, the task is not to define the concept without both exploring and trying to understand people’s experiences and practices related to religion.45 Who is religious or not religious, or what religion is, are thus primarily based on the participants’ understanding of religiosity and religion.

The participants were interviewed individually. The interviews lasted between 20–60 min. Examples of interview questions were, What does your religion mean to you? Do you talk about religion with those who have a different affiliation than yourself? Do you talk about your religion in the classroom? Are you interested in talking about religion?

There were also students of Swedish ethnic background at the school, some of whom could probably be described as postsecular Christians (i.e., they had a Christian lifestyle and celebrated Christian festivals but did not confess to the Christian faith). None of these students chose to participate in the study, which may have been because they did not see themselves as religious or Christians.46

**Theoretical perspective**

The analysis is based on symbolic interactionism, which is an approach or perspective for analyzing social reality. It is also the term used in social psychology to describe the socialization process, which is how people successively become social and learn how to behave in different situations.47 Both aspects of the term are relevant to an understanding of the prerequisites for religion-related dialog in RE.

According to George Herbert Mead, a person’s identity develops in four stages: the preparatory stage, the play stage, the game stage, and the reference group stage.48 The game stage and the reference group stage are particularly relevant for this study, because they coincide with the teenage years.

The game stage is characterized by a person being able to “read the game” and act in an appropriate manner. It can put different perspectives together to form “a generalized other,” which is like a common culture or a common approach. For example, someone could say “In our school we do this” or “In Sweden we are not very religious ….” However, the environment sometimes has different perspectives which make it impossible to perceive a generalized other. Parents may have one perspective and the school another, which makes it difficult, if not impossible, for a student to merge the perspective of a generalized other. One common way of
resolving such a conflict is “to redefine the situation” (i.e., to interpret the situation in a new way and deselect some people’s opinions in favor of others). In the teenage years, it is common for parents’ opinions to be deselected in favor of the thoughts and ideas of peers. The game stage is also characterized by people’s ability to perceive their own positions in the social order (i.e., understand their position in a group). According to symbolic interactionism, each group organizes according to a “social order.” This means that group members have a somewhat shared view of members’ different positions and the behavior associated with them.49 Goffman describes it as playing rules on a playing field.50 Some rules are common to all, whereas others only apply to certain positions in some situations. For example, common playing rules in Swedish schools can be said to be secular, in that research has shown that there is a secular norm in Swedish schools.51

In the reference group stage, a person can have several generalized others. Individuals can interact with different groups and identify with different cultures, which means that they do not have to choose one generalized second before another but can relate to the complexity.

The dialog

The dominating secular playing rule

Some of the participants said that, as religious beings, they were often in the majority both at school and in the classroom and that they had never had a friend who was not religious. Despite this, several of them were aware that they had to relate to a secular norm. Sandra, one of the participants, told me:

If I was to talk about my Christian faith to someone who wasn’t religious as I am … it would be strange for them because you don’t really hear about such things these days, especially from someone my age, so it feels as though … now there are new norms and new rules. It’s not something you can really discuss with everyone in Sweden.52

Even though all the interviewed students said that religion was an important part of their lives, they nevertheless found religion-related dialogs conflicting, difficult and rather boring. The difficulties included relationships with students who did not have a religious conviction. Adam, one of the participants, described what it was like to be a religious person in Sweden:

It’s like being told you’re an idiot.

How come?

I believe in God … “Hihihi,” someone says. […] They think that you are stupid. They think that you are old-fashioned … that you have medieval way of thinking,
because it’s beyond their comprehension. They don’t understand Christians. Or not just Christians, but all groups. They laugh and point.\textsuperscript{53}

My interpretation is that the common playing rule amongst the students is to have secular attitudes and a secular way of living. This could mean that a religious lifestyle is divisive and may prevent religious students from communicating openly about their religion. Breaking a norm is always associated with risks, such as social exclusion.\textsuperscript{54}

\textbf{Conflicts in the middle east reflected in the classroom}

However, the difficulties with religion-related dialogs were not primarily related to classmates with a secular attitude, those from other religions or from other group affinities within the same religion. The students' stories pointed to conflicts between Christians and Muslims and between different Christian groups. Some of these conflicts had clear links with historical events and contemporary politics in the Middle East. These disputes also became apparent in the classroom situation. Fatma, a Muslim female student, described an incident in which she wanted to hit one of her Christian classmates during a lesson:

I think there are stealth racists at school, like my classmate. When we studied Islam in \textit{RE} she said things. She went too far and I almost hit her. I’ve never hit anyone, but I was really close to hitting her. She is much taller than me. I just stood up … I’m not very tall, but I just stood up and wanted to hit her. But my friend said, “No, let’s go out.” I said “No, I’m not going out! She needs to understand …” I mean … I told my classmate “You would probably have been blown up now if I was an IS terrorist.” She said, “But you’re not religious.” I said, “Who are you to say that I’m not religious? You don’t even know me.” She said, “You don’t have a veil.” And I just (said) “What’s that got to do with being religious or not?” … Then the teacher … eventually the teacher spoke to that girl. When she’d said that I wasn’t religious then she had to leave the classroom. But she didn’t want to leave, but just shouted “I haven’t done anything wrong, she’s the one who’s sitting and shouting at me.” But of course I had to say something when she was denigrating me and my religion. … After the lesson I went to Anna, our teacher. I said, “So Anna, I’m sorry that I shouted.” She knows that I never usually shout. I’m a very calm person. I said, “Sorry” and … But Anna just said, “But no, you were absolutely right to do what you did.”\textsuperscript{55}

\textbf{Public space–private space}

During the interviews the participants talked about religion-related dialogs in the classroom that had been conflicting and loud. Several of the participants expressed that the conversations were often about “winning.” Some still appreciated these dialogs because they took place under controlled forms, which was not the case for dialog in the corridor or the school hall. However, the classroom was not experienced as a safe space when students
talked openly and personally about their beliefs. If they did express their personal views and positions openly they did it with close and like-minded friends outside the classroom. It was in the private space that they felt confident enough to talk about religious aspects from a subjective perspective. The classroom, which can be understood as a public space, was perceived by several as not being a particularly good environment for dialog. Elias, a Muslim male student, explained,

I don’t talk to others about their religion because I think it’s their thing. I don’t want to interfere. They can believe what they want. And I respect them, as long as they respect me. … I don’t think that this generation cares very much where you come from, what your ethnicity is, or what you believe in, as long as you respect each other and spread love.

Do you ever talk about religion with your friends?

No.

Is school a good place to learn about each other’s religions?

It depends on how you see it. Not everyone wants to go round and talk about private things with anyone. It’s probably better to do this after school, when you hang out with friends and drink coffee … then you can discuss religion. But at school … no, I don’t think so.

Why the classroom is not a safe space for religion-related dialog

Contemporary and historical religious conflicts

All the participants talked about reasons why a religion-related dialog was complicated and could prevent the classroom from being experienced as a safe space. Discussions relating to conflicts in the Middle East made dialog difficult, as Maria explained:

I think about what has happened in history. My parents, before they came to Sweden, lived like most Syrians, in a village in Turkey because Syrians have no land. But they were forced to move because the Kurds forced them to. They either had to convert from Christianity to Islam or move. That’s when the genocide started. You don’t convert to something you don’t believe in, it’s as simple as that. Therefore, I know that Syrians in general have a grudge against Muslims. It’s wrong really. You shouldn’t generalize, but I can still understand why they feel like that. So many lives have been lost. They’ve had to leave everything and flee the country. There is a reason why those two girls argued in the classroom. One’s a Syrian and the other a Muslim.

A mission to represent one’s religion, culture and people

Although the students repeatedly stressed that they did not want historical or contemporary conflicts to affect their relationships with their classmates, this proved difficult in practice. All the interviewed participants were close
to their parents, relatives and cultures and for many of them religion meant
affinity to the group. If they questioned their religion in any way they were
also questioning their families and their origins. Several of them also iden-
tified with being a minority people, and some stressed the importance of
being loyal to the group for its survival. Andjelica, a Syrian Orthodox
female student, experienced the group norm as problematic. She wanted to
cut her hair, but her mother was opposed to this. Her story was an
example of the kind of loyalty that was expected from her own culture:

It became problematic because I live in Västernäs. We are a people who try to stick
together and everyone knew what was going on. And people began to have lots of
ideas. Mum had understood that this would happen. She’d told me, “You know
what will come. You will be criticized.” I thought, “But I can do what I want.” But
you can’t think like that when you live where I live. Especially not as we are a
minority people. Solidarity is important and staying together are important. What I
wanted to do was revolutionary in my group and mum tried to persuade me not to
do it. She said, “It’ll be as though you … yes, it’s as though you’ll be a rebel.” And
she said, “I don’t want you to stand out like that. I understand what you mean
when you say you have your own will, but still, you also have to remember that we
are Syrians.”

The impression here is that affinity to parents, families, and cultures
made it difficult for the students to be open with each other and share
their personal religious perspectives. The classroom was a public space in
which they assumed the role of representing their religion, culture, and
people. I told Anna, the teacher, about my observations and she explained,

They are the custodians of a lot of trust with which they have to safeguard their
parents and their country, or their people. So, I think that … no, it doesn’t leave
much room for maneuver, but at the same time it’s a reality.

The religion-related dialogs in the classroom can be interpreted as reveal-
ing the students’ different “generalized others.” They wanted to be friends
despite their different backgrounds, but the religion-related dialogs some-
how counteracted this. Instead of bringing students closer together, the dia-
logs revealed differences and underlying frictions.

It could be that the students found the historical and contemporary con-
licts too great and too extensive to put the different perspectives together
to form a “generalized other.” This is a common approach, or a common
value base. Several of the students were under severe pressure from their
immediate social environment and the discussions forced them to take a
stand, even if they did not want to. However, the price they would have to
pay if they turned against their families and social networks was probably
considered too high. Therefore, the religion-related dialogs in the classroom
became a state of war, where the students took a strong stand for their
people, religion, and culture. In the private space, though, between friends
with a similar “generalized other,” they felt confident enough to talk about religious things from a subjective perspective.

**Religion is truth and something that you should be prepared to suffer for**

Several of the participants seemed to perceive their religion as an absolute truth, in the sense that it could not be questioned or changed, which meant that they were not particularly interested in new perspectives or dialog with people with different beliefs. Marcus, one of the Syrian Orthodox male students, said “It’s like minus and minus don’t go together. So, it’s a bit difficult sometimes.” Anna, their teacher, explained, “Those who have this strong conviction don’t try to understand. They feel threatened by someone saying they don’t believe in what they believe in.”

Some of the students also said that a good religious person should be prepared to sacrifice for the sake of his or her religion. By this they meant that it was both pious and valuable to suffer for one’s faith. The teacher, Anna, said that this idea reverted to the religion-related dialog:

Being religious has a price. They sometimes refer to this with Peter and the cockerel, and that it is important to stand for your beliefs even when you are contradicted. One of the most important things is to dare to stand up for your religion even if you are threatened, or so. I’m convinced it’s more black and white in the classroom than in the dining hall. No, by the way it can be black and white there as well. It has happened that when students are sitting in the dining hall someone has not been allowed to join them.

The students may have acted as though their religion was nonnegotiable for a number of reasons. Some may have felt that they could not question their history. One of the risks of dialog and listening to others with an open mind is that your own attitudes and opinions might change. For the students, this could have meant turning against their own people, religion and culture, which would have been problematic. Being open to a change in religious perspectives could be perceived as a betrayal of the family and the closest social environment.

**Conflicts within religions**

It was not only the conflicts between the different religions that made it difficult for the students to talk openly and personally about their religious beliefs. The interviews also showed that there were frictions between Christians, Syrian Orthodox, and Catholics, which also contributed to the classroom not being regarded as a safe space for religion-related dialog. Some of the Catholic students felt challenged by the Syrian Orthodox students to the extent that they avoided talking about their religion at all. They experienced that their religious tradition was not respected and that
they were questioned as Christians. Whitney, a Catholic female student and regular worshiper, was not sure how to make Syrian Orthodox classmates “back off:”

It feels as though I don’t … When I said that I was going to be interviewed by you, people told me “She’ll think that you’re a proper Christian.” Then I asked, “And what’s a proper Christian?” And why did I think that …? They are Orthodox. They and their parents are very religious. Their parents often go to church, not just on Sundays like my mother. I don’t know. I had to say that I was a Christian just to make them back off. But if they ask more questions I don’t really know what I will say. I’ve had been through some tough periods. Then I’ve turned to Jesus. And I have read some parts of the Bible. That’s what you usually do as a Christian!

*Do you feel pressured by your friends when they ask, “But are you Christian?”*

Yes, because I don’t really know what to say. Should I say that I’m Christian? Or should I say that I’m agnostic? Or should I say that I’m an atheist? I don’t know. I just want them to just back off.64

**The school’s objective and neutral approach**

Another aspect that was highlighted by some of the students was that the school’s religion education should be neutral and non-denominational. Some thought that it was good that the school did not take a stand for or against a particular religion, whereas others were skeptical. The skeptical students thought that the school’s neutrality contributed to a negative attitude towards religion and affected the conversation climate negatively. Religions were presented in ways that made them both unrecognizable and unfavorable.

Miriam, one of the Catholic female students, said that, “I have a higher opinion of my religion than someone who is neutral.”65 She also said that she corrected her teacher when she thought that she was wrong. Once, when she did not have enough knowledge to interact with her teacher about how to interpret a Bible text, she consulted the deacon at her church, who explained his own views to her. Miriam then passed on the deacon’s reflections to her teacher.

**The role of the teacher**

**Lack of education**

The teacher, Anna, said that she was not trained to manage a classroom situation in which the students had strong religious beliefs. She said that she sometimes had to deal with situations that were difficult to handle, and that she did not really know what to do. One example was when one of
her students expressed that the children of suicide bombers should also be killed:

I had a student who said that all suicide bombers’ children should be killed, otherwise there would be more suicide bombers. At first I thought that this was a joke. But no, he really meant it. I protested and said, “You can’t say that, it’s not okay.” But then this came … “You just sit here and say things that you think are right, but you have no experience of this at all! My grandfather, and so on … I have his picture on my phone because I want to be reminded of him every day.” His grandfather had killed a lot of Muslims and the student regarded this as a status thing. I ended the lesson. I felt that I couldn’t be professional. If I hadn’t ended the lesson I would have just stood there and said, “You’re stupid when you say that, it’s not right, you can’t say that.” That wouldn’t have led anywhere. I decided to put everything aside and continue next week. You’re not equipped for everything that emerges in here.66

The teacher’s neutral and objective approach

Anna also said that some of the religious students seemed frustrated about the school’s objective approach to religion. She felt that they wanted her, as their teacher, to take a stand when the religion-related debates became heated, and that they were frustrated when she did not. She talked about a student whose grandfather had been killed by Muslims. He found Swedish religion education to be presumptuous and too politically correct. The student told her: “You just sit here and say things that you think are right, but you have no experience of this at all! My grandfather had killed a lot of Muslims and the student regarded this as a status thing. I ended the lesson. I felt that I couldn’t be professional. If I hadn’t ended the lesson I would have just stood there and said, “You’re stupid when you say that, it’s not right, you can’t say that.” That wouldn’t have led anywhere. I decided to put everything aside and continue next week. You’re not equipped for everything that emerges in here.

Anna also said that some of the religious students seemed frustrated about the school’s objective approach to religion. She felt that they wanted her, as their teacher, to take a stand when the religion-related debates became heated, and that they were frustrated when she did not. She talked about a student whose grandfather had been killed by Muslims. He found Swedish religion education to be presumptuous and too politically correct. The student told her: “You just sit here and say things that you think are right, but you have no experience of this at all!” Anna also felt that some students regarded her as a coward who was afraid to take a stand, but she explained that her assignment was to ensure that every student had an opportunity to express an opinion and to show respect, which was not always easy. She said,

My task is to always make sure that everybody can express their opinion at the same time ensure that others are respected. But when they’re in groups and are asked to discuss ethical dilemmas, it’s as though “My way of thinking is better than yours”. It’s a little bit like having to win. Some also think that we—teachers are always batting the questions back to them and that we’re cowards who do not answer. I can get the question “But Anna, do you believe in this?” And I can respond, “Well, when we read about this religion I might do”. And then they say, “Oh, that’s a typical religion education teacher!” And “Oh, I hate that!” [Laughs].

I asked Anna why several of the interviewed students thought that having religion-related dialogs in the classroom was difficult, or even meaningless. Her view was that their experience depended on the school’s objective and non-denominational approach. Anna experienced that some of the students thought that religion-related dialogs were meaningless, because she, as a teacher, did not take a stand. She explained, “I think, if they don’t get
any confirmation, there is no point in discussing religion.” It was clear that Anna found the role of the teacher problematic in this particular context. On the one hand, she encouraged her students to take a stand on various issues and to argue their case, whereas on the other she did not reveal her own religious affiliation. Anna said it would be easier to teach religious students in a school that was confessional, where the teacher did not have to be objective and neutral. In such an environment, the students would have more opportunities and freedom to explain what they believed. As the situation was now, Anna felt that her objective approach prevented religion-related dialog, rather than encouraged it. She said,

If I could allow the students’ truths stand for the truth, I would give them more space to explain their truth, rather than now, that I have to supply an objective truth. Then I could respond to their questions or statements with follow-up questions. I would not have to say to the class, for example, “This is just an opinion, in this corner. The rest of you can of course think what you want.” … On the one hand it’s important that they can express themselves objectively, and on the other hand it’s important that they can put their own opinions and thoughts into words. I think that it’s when you put what you think into words that you become aware of what you actually believe in. But as it is now, my opinion, or what I put forward in the classroom, could control them or limit them in a way that makes them afraid of expressing themselves.69

It can be interpreted that Anna had an important role to play in the “secular game”. As a teacher, she had a special responsibility to ensure that the rules in the classroom were objective and non-denominational, which she found somewhat frustrating. Anna said that her duty was to teach objective knowledge, although this was not elaborated on further in the interview. However, the fact that she was careful not to reveal her own beliefs makes it reasonable to believe that she suffered from the objectivity cramp that Hartman70 writes about (i.e., a fear of influencing students in a way that is contrary to the religion education curriculum). In actual fact, there is nothing in the curriculum that prevents a teacher from expressing his or her own religious views in the classroom if the teaching encompasses a range of different perspectives and the approach is non-denominational.

Other circumstances that impede religion-related dialog

Anna’s classes did not only consist of young people with strong religious convictions. There were also students who could be called postsecular Christians. Anna said that these students were not as interested in religion-related dialogs as the religious students, which was also apparent in the classroom. Anna expressed that she found this challenging as a teacher, because on the one hand she wanted the students to express their views, but on the other wanted to avoid the religious students dominating the
conversation and stifling the involvement of the non-religious students. She thought that this was difficult, especially as the religious students often expressed strong views and feelings.

Anna also mentioned the fact that students were graded and thought that this could have a negative impact on the conversations. She thought that they sometimes said what they thought she wanted to hear. The striving for a high grade could thus be a hindrance and prevent students being free to express their opinions and thoughts. Anna said, “They’re smart. They’re in the third year of upper secondary school. They’ve been in school for twelve years and they know what is appropriate to say here. So, it’s clear that grades are like heavy blankets over them.”

Discussion and conclusion

The analysis shows that, in this case, the classroom—the public space—is not a safe space where students can talk openly and personally about their religious beliefs. They are only able to do this amongst close and like-minded peers outside the classroom—in the private space—where they feel confident enough to talk about religious things from a personal perspective.

Several factors influence the classroom’s prerequisites to be a safe space. The difficulties include relationships with students who do not have any religious conviction. Some of the participants even feel challenged by their non-religious peers. The secular students’ questioning of their religious peers’ lifestyles creates a distance between them.

Historical and contemporary conflicts in the Middle East are also brought into the classroom to the extent that the students’ religious and ethnic identities overlap. The conflicts are partly between religions and partly between intra-religious groups such as Syrian Orthodox and Catholics. Several of the students talk about events that show that it is difficult or even undesirable to oppose their own religion because it weakens their position within the group and the group’s position in Swedish society. Some of the interviewed students perceive religion as an absolute truth that cannot be questioned or discussed. In many ways the classroom functions as a space in which a person’s religion is challenged.

Some of the students are also skeptical about the school’s neutral attitude and consider that it contributes to a negative attitude to religion, which in turn affects the conversational climate. There is also an expectation by several of the students that the teacher will take a stand one way or the other and that when she does not the religion-related conversation becomes less interesting. The hope that the teacher will take a stand and be personal about her own religious views are line with earlier research. Osbeck et al.
point to the RE teacher as a critical factor when it comes to conversations and interactions in the classroom. Fancourt also argues that it is important for students to see that their teacher has a personal religious belief and that at the same time he/she is able to listen carefully to the students’ beliefs and manage the discussion firmly but fairly. The teacher needs to be both part of the dialog—within it—and the manager of it—supervise it. Studies of how teachers can combine their own public religious attitudes in the classroom with a neutral, or non-denominational, approach to what they teach have been conducted. For example, Jackson points to the importance of increasing teachers’ awareness of relevant research findings for making classrooms safer spaces.

A classroom cannot be completely safe for all students all the time, but there are appropriate methods and procedures for making classrooms safer spaces. Jackson writes that the realization of safe space is dependent on agreements (rules) negotiated in a communicative way that can guarantee mutual trust, appreciation and the safeguarding of personal integrity and dignity. In the classroom featured in this study, there are no articulated agreements on how to interact and have an open and “safe” in-depth dialog about personal religious views and experiences. This is not really surprising, given that the Swedish religion education curriculum does not explicitly encourage dialog on personal religious beliefs and life values. The teachers thus have no explicit support for the creation of a safe space for religion-related dialog. Furthermore, some studies show that young people’s confidence and ability to participate in classroom dialog improves with practice. In other words, if students do not practice and engage in dialog involving personal religious experiences, the classroom may never be a safe space for religion-related dialog.

Clearly, there are many issues to address in this particular case. Apart from addressing issues within the school, consideration also needs to be given to the kind of positive effects that collaborations beyond the school may have, for example, with parents and families from different religious and belief backgrounds. Some of the literature on interfaith collaborations within multicultural communities suggests that positive developments are likely to influence the families in those communities, including children and young people of school age.

The school context in which this study is conducted is unusual in Sweden in that many of the students have strong religious convictions. In this sense, the study is not representative of all Swedish schools. But all classrooms are different, and a lot of work still needs to be done in order to make them safe spaces for religious-related dialog. An overarching question needs to be answered and reflected on first is: Should Swedish religion education aim at exchanges in which students openly and personally talk
about their (non-) religious beliefs? If so, it will be necessary to consider the role of the teacher and how to educate students in religion-related dialog.

Notes
4. Due to its non-denominational nature, the term religion education is used in this article, rather than religious education.
7. Camilla Hälggren, “‘Working harder to be the same’: everyday racism among young men and women in Sweden”, Race, Ethnicity and Education 8, no. 3 (2015), 319–342.
22. Läroplan för grundskolan (Skolverket, 1962) used the Swedish term objektivitet. The current curriculum has replaced ‘objektivitet’ with ‘saklig’ (Skolverket, 2013) to avoid misunderstandings about the purpose of the requirement.
24. The term objectivity cramp was introduced by Hartman (2000).
27. Linda Vikdahl, CARDIPS project, work in progress.
30. One definition of religion-related dialogue in the ReDi project is: a personal exchange about (non-) religious beliefs, or an interaction in which subjective perspectives are related to each other.


40. Berglund, 2013.


42. The project is approved by the Regional Ethical Review Board according to Swedish legislation (Regionala etikprövningsnämnden i Uppsala dnr. 2016/196).

43. The names of the places and people have been changed and the translation of the quotations is my own.

44. Linda Vikdahl, Interviews with students south of Stockholm, (Unpublished manuscript, 2017), 301. The interviews were conducted in spring 2017. All quotes are translated from Swedish to English, and edited with respect to confidentiality and readability.


55. Vikdahl, 2917, 73.
58. Vikdahl, 2017, 204
60. Vikdahl, 2017, 145.
64. Vikdahl, 2017, 361.
70. Hartman, 2000
74. Rebecca Y. Kim, 2011.
75. Fancourt, 2007; Jackson, 1997; Linda Vikdahl, CARDIPS, work in process.