

Article

Teaching Controversial Issues in Diverse Religious Education Classrooms

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Abstract: In educational contexts, certain issues are perceived as controversial, since they reflect conflicts of interest and reveal divergent views. This is especially evident in debates related to religion in societies regarding themselves as secular but whose population is multi-religious. The aim of this article is to analyse how some issues that are considered controversial in the public debate are represented in the teaching of non-denominational and integrative Religious Education in a Swedish multicultural classroom practice, where the majority of students have a Muslim cultural background. The ethnographic empirical material consists of classroom observations of Religious Education lessons in upper secondary school. The analysis is based on the debate about how controversial issues ought to be taught—as empirically or politically open/settled or in a directive/non-directive way. The results indicate that a number of issues—divergent interpretations of religious narratives and religiously motivated rules, holidays, views of forgiveness, the Israeli–Palestinian conflict and abortion—were regarded as open political issues in classroom practice and these were taught in an open, non-directive way. Issues represented as settled were value-oriented issues related to female genital mutilation, forced marriage and child marriage and gender equality. The arguments supporting these values were mainly rooted in religion.

Keywords: Controversial Issues; Religious Education; diverse classrooms; classroom studies; ethnography

1. Introduction

Teacher: I want them to think for themselves. We are here to shed light on things from different angles, to give possible perspectives on things, not to force an opinion on them. Those who want to go on being fundamentalist may do so. But that does not mean that you can stop listening to others.

Education in democratic societies inevitably means constant oscillating and choosing between partially contradictory goals. While the Swedish school system aims to foster active democratic citizens who enjoy religious freedom, freedom of opinion and freedom of speech, schools are also expected to impart knowledge to students about central social issues, but also convey values, such as equality and respect for everyone's equal value (Skolverket 2011b). In an educational context, certain issues are perceived as controversial, since they reflect conflicts of interest and reveal divergent views (Ljunggren et al. 2015; Stradling 1984). This is especially evident when the issues relate to religion in a secular but also multi-religious society. It is well-documented in research that teachers often find it difficult to teach issues that can become controversial in classroom practice, and that they often try to avoid those kinds of questions (Anker et al. 2018; King 2009; McDermott and Lanahan 2012; Niens et al. 2013; Pollak et al. 2018). This article explores how various controversial issues can be represented in the teaching of non-denominational integrative Religious Education (RE). The empirical examples are based on educational ethnographic data with classroom observations in a Swedish upper secondary school, where the majority of students have a Muslim cultural background.

In all societies, but not least in democratic, secular and multi-religious societies, religion is a topic that can often evoke strong emotions in the public debates (Göndör 2019; Thurfjell 2015). Inherent in the concept of religious freedom is the liberty to exercise any religious or non-religious worldview, but simultaneously also the right to avoid being exposed to religion. In our contemporary pluralistic society, there is ongoing debate and negotiation about where the boundaries of both aspects of freedom of religion should be drawn in the public sphere. The classroom is a place that, on the one hand, can be seen as part of the public sphere—teaching is governed by publicly regulated curriculum and syllabus. However, the classroom is also a place where teachers and students spend their everyday lives. Thus, the classroom becomes a point of intersection for the public and private or is perhaps “neither private nor public but contaminated by both spheres” (Bergdahl and Langmann 2017, p. 473).

RE, not least integrative and non-denominational RE, is thus a school subject that contains many topics potentially perceived as controversial and sensitive in the classroom practice (Anker et al. 2018; Flensner forthcoming; Quartermaine 2016). The fact that there are contradictions, different views and opinions in society is nothing new. In the encounter with Swedish teachers of RE they describe how issues related to religion are increasingly perceived as “political” in the sense that factual content is perceived and valued on the basis of a political right–left scale and linked to both party politics and identity politics. This creates uncertainty among teachers about how to deal with these issues, as they perceive it as their duty to include and convey certain values, but above all that the teaching should be comprehensive, balanced and neutral. They spoke about an increasingly polarized classroom climate which is making it harder to teach about certain issues where there are substantial and vehement differences of opinion (Flensner forthcoming; Flensner et al. 2019). Issues where it is difficult to draw a sharp boundary between opinions and facts and where there exist widely differing perceptions of reality, the problems and how the solution to these problems should be outlined are commonly described as “controversial issues” (Ljunggren et al. 2015; Stradling 1984). At the same time, schools in Sweden have a democratic mission and the syllabus for RE in upper secondary school states that the students, through teaching, should be prepared for life in a society characterized by diversity (Skolverket 2011a).

Due to globalization and increasing migration flows and the development of social media, diversification and diversity have increased in most societies, including Sweden. Today, 25.5% of Sweden’s population were born in another country or have two parents born in another country (Skolverket 2019). Diversification also applies in the field of religion. While Sweden is often described as “the world’s most secularized country” (Thurfjell 2015; Tomasson 2002; Zuckerman 2009), Sweden is also a multireligious country (Andersson and Sander 2015; Göndör 2019). Swedish schools are also strongly segregated (SOU 2017), which means that it is difficult to describe what “a typical Swedish classroom” looks like because they can look so in different, and different classrooms are shaped by students with different experiences.

Against this background, with an increasingly polarised and diverse landscape, the overall aim of this article is to analyse how some issues that are considered controversial in the public debate can be represented in teaching of non-denominational and integrative RE in a Swedish multicultural classroom practice where the majority of students have a Muslim cultural background. The analysis is based on the debate about how controversial issues should be taught—as empirically or politically open or settled (Hess and McAvoy 2015) or in a directive or non-directive way (Hand 2007).

2. Controversial Issues

One way of defining controversial issues is to describe them as issues that lie on the borderline between facts and opinions, between knowledge and politics, and where it can be difficult to draw a sharp line between them, which affects both problem descriptions and solutions as they are based on different value systems (Stradling 1984). For instance, Berg et al. (2003, p. 3) list the following five points:

- The subject/area is of topical interest.

- There are conflicting values and opinions.
- There are conflicting priorities and material interests.
- Emotions may become strongly aroused.
- The subject/area is complex.

These points include several of the definitions that dominate the literature on controversial issues. Above all, there are two definitions usually contrasted: definitions that emphasize behaviour and those that focus on the epistemic nature of the issue. *The behavioural criterion* describes controversial issues as issues in which there are different opinions and perceptions in society, which tend to arouse strong emotions, leading to controversy. Literature that is more practice-oriented or directed to teachers of RE seems to emphasize the behavioural criterion more often than in research-oriented literature (Huddleston and David 2017; Huddleston and David 2015; Oxfam 2018). The behavioural criterion thus establishes that an issue should be understood as a controversial issue if it is perceived so by the students or groups in the surrounding community and society. Instead, *the epistemic criterion* focuses on the question itself and how teachers should present different questions. Following this, Hand (2007) argues that controversial issues should be presented in a non-directive way, that is, in an open way and present the current conflict lines if there are rational arguments for different views on the issue. In other words, if there are no rational arguments for contradictory views, the issue is not a controversial one and the teaching of this should be presented as “settled” in a “directive way”: “What distinguishes teaching-as-settled from teaching-as-controversial (or directive from nondirective teaching) is not a pedagogical method or style, but the willingness of the teacher to endorse one view on a matter as the right one” (Hand 2007, p. 213). Hand (2007) illustrates his reasoning with an example of arguments about the question of the moral status of homosexual acts and, after reviewing various arguments, argues that this question is not a controversial issue and should therefore not be taught as such. Hand (2008) is basically on the right track when discussing what controversial issues are and how teachers should teach them. However, many researchers who partly agree that the behavioural criteria are too broad, argue that the epistemic criterion and the sharp division of issues that are either settled or open become too narrow and do not take the context and teaching conditions or goals into account (Hess and McAvoy 2015; Reiss 2019; Warnick and Smith 2014; von der Lippe 2019). For example, Camicia (2008) emphasizes the contingent nature of controversial questions and that all reasoning is taken from a specific point of view and that all social relationships contain aspects of power. Therefore, controversial issues must be viewed in their historical, current and ideological context. It follows that a question that is perceived as controversial in one classroom need not be perceived in this way in another classroom, and the questions change over time (Camicia 2008; Ljunggren et al. 2015). Misco (2012) points out that the specific classroom context and the student composition there have implications for the educational choices that teachers must make in their teaching. Thus, another distinction in relation to controversial issues is between teaching controversial issues, as compared to dealing with controversial issues, where the latter refers to controversies that arise in the classroom and which teachers need to deal with. Teachers need different strategies for these aspects of controversial issues (Ljunggren and Öst 2011).

Yet another way of framing controversial issues is found in the work of Hess and McAvoy (2015) who advocate what they term as *a politically authentic criterion*. For them, issues should be taught as controversial “when they have traction in the public sphere, appearing on ballots, in courts, within political platforms, in legislative chambers and as part of political movements” (Hess and McAvoy 2015, p. 168). Taking a societal perspective, this definition approaches the behavioural criterion, but Hess and McAvoy (2015) make a distinction between empirical and political issues. Empirical questions can be open if it is impossible to answer the question through empirical evidence, e.g., because there is scientific debate about the issue or because the evidence at present is contradictory or insufficient. A settled empirical question, on the other hand, is an issue where there is empirical evidence and there is in principle consensus on the issue. However, there are also many issues that arise from the fact that different people value different factors, and Hess and McAvoy (2015) call these political or policy

issues. As an example of an open empirical question, they mention the question of whether it is safe for people to drink unpasteurized milk, while it is a political question whether it should be legal to sell unpasteurized milk for human consumption or not. As an example of a settled empirical issue, they cite the question of whether women are less capable of making rational decisions in elections. It is empirically proven that this is not the case. However, it is a political issue whether women should have the right to vote, but this issue is perceived as a politically settled issue because in the absolute majority of (democratic) countries worldwide, people have the right to vote regardless of gender. Hess and McAvoy (2015) argue that the epistemic criterion means that central discussions in society are excluded from classroom practice, which becomes problematic when the school's mission is to prepare students to manoeuvre in society and be able to take an active part in the democratic political conversation. For example, von der Lippe (2019) arrives at a similar conclusion when discussing whether circumcision should be presented as a controversial issue or not. She believes, in line with Warnick and Smith (2014), that to develop critical thinking, it is important to consider different perspectives, and "directive" teaching, trying to influence students in a specific direction, can be problematic.

Controversial Issues in Relation to Religion

Cooling (2012) criticizes Hand (2007) as the epistemic criterion does not take *fairness* into account, that is, according to Cooling (2012), education is also about teaching students to live together despite having different opinions. Based on this, he proposes yet another criterion, *the diversity criterion*, which states that: "we should teach as controversial these matters where significant disagreement exists between different belief communities in society where those communities honour the importance of reason giving and exemplify a commitment to peaceful co-existence in society and teach as settled only those matters where there is demonstrable consensus in society which derives from wide agreement and compelling evidence" (Cooling 2012, p. 177). Cooling (2012) primarily addresses his criticism to the fact that Hand (2007) positions himself within a secularist discourse, where religion is portrayed as irrational per se. From this perspective, religious conceptions should be described as settled, and issues where there are different views based on religious interpretations should not be raised as controversial due to irrationality and there are no rational arguments for these views. This becomes especially interesting in the subject of RE, since the content of the subject concerns beliefs and practices in different religious and non-religious worldviews.

Although the literature stresses the contingency of controversial issues, research has found that the following issues are often addressed as being controversial in educational settings: human rights, freedom of speech, citizenship, family values, gender, homophobia, migration, racism/discrimination, environmental protection, sustainable development, genocide, the Holocaust and evolution (Cowan and Maitles 2012; Woolley 2010). Specifically related to religion and RE, studies have identified the theory of evolution as the foremost controversial issue raised by mainstream school pupils who hold a religious worldview (Hanley et al. 2014; Timothy et al. 2017). Other disputed issues are ritual circumcision (von der Lippe 2019), the celebration of both majority and minority holidays (Aldrin 2018; Berglund 2010; Puskas and Andersson 2017); the Israeli–Palestinian conflict (Hanna 2017; Jannert and Persson 2018; Pollak et al. 2018) and various gender-related issues, in particular, the separation of boys and girls in teaching (Göndör 2019).

In matters related to religion in the public sphere, the last century saw enormous changes in many countries. Secularization, globalization and international migration mean that the religious landscape and the role of religion in society have changed in many countries. In Swedish society, there is a great variety of religious and non-religious views of life, and among Swedish students there is also a great variety of experiences and knowledge about different views of life (Sjöborg 2013). Nilsson (2018) believes that these changes affect the conditions for non-denominational and integrative RE more than, for example, changes in curricula and syllabuses. He describes this in terms of "the unpredictable" and "ungeneralizable classroom". Given that society is in many ways characterized by a radical diversity or "superdiversity" (Vertovec 2007), Franck and Thalén (2018)

advocate an intercultural approach to teaching controversial issues in RE. [Lahdenperä \(2004\)](#) argues that the concept of “culture” in intercultural education should be understood as a system of meaning, something that gives order and direction in people’s lives. These meaning-making cultures can, for example, be ethnic, religious, linguistic, thought-based, lifestyle-related, gender-based or class-based. Thus, interculturality involves interaction, interconnection and communication between people with different cultural, that is, different meaning-making backgrounds ([Lahdenperä 2004](#), p. 21). Applied to the field of RE, intercultural RE focuses on “equipping students with knowledge and skills that create understanding of religion and that facilitate and enable constructive participation in a pluralistic society” ([Löfstedt 2018](#), p. 231, my translation).

3. Religious Education in Sweden

Since RE is the international term for a subject that can have very different designs and goals, a few words need to be said about what type of RE is the object of this article. In Sweden, RE has the academic residency within the discipline of Religious Studies. RE is a compulsory subject in both primary and secondary education, even for those taking vocational education, and students in vocational programmes and preparatory programmes for higher education study according to the same syllabus. The subject is, since the 1960th non-denominational, non-confessional and integrative, that is, all students are taught in the same classroom regardless of their religious or non-religious affiliation. The teaching mainly concerns central beliefs and practices within the so-called five world religions, central non-religious worldviews and ethics. For example, one of the subject’s main aims in upper secondary school is formulated as: “Teaching should take as its starting point a view of society characterised by openness regarding lifestyle, outlooks on life, differences between people, and also give students the opportunity to develop a preparedness for understanding and living in a society characterised by diversity” ([Skolverket 2011a](#)). The course that the students in this study take, Religion 1, usually covers about 40 h teaching time, should (besides ethics and relationship between religion and science), cover the following core content:

- Christianity, other world religions and different outlooks on life, their characteristics and how they are expressed by individuals and groups in the present, in Sweden and the world.
- Different views of human beings and God within and between religions.
- Religion in relation to gender, socio-economic background, ethnicity and sexuality.
- The identities of groups and individuals and how they can be shaped in relation to religion and outlooks on life such as written sources, traditions and historical and contemporary events ([Skolverket 2011a](#)).

4. Method

The empirical material in this article was produced within the framework of the research project *Global conflicts with local consequences – learning and arguing about Middle Eastern conflicts in Swedish classrooms* funded by The Swedish Research Council. Through ethnographic field studies at schools, this project analysed the consequences of the Middle Eastern conflicts in the teaching in civics and RE at six Swedish high schools ([Flensner 2018, 2019, forthcoming](#); [Flenser et al. 2019](#); [Flensner et al. forthcoming](#)). In this article, the analysis is limited to the material from one of the schools. This limitation is primarily justified by fact that a larger number of controversial issues were raised in the teaching at this school. However, this specific school setting also constitutes an interesting case as the majority of the students in this class articulated a religiously oriented identity, while the teaching simultaneously related to the surrounding majority secular society and the non-confessional character of the subject of RE.

4.1. Data

The study uses an educational ethnographic approach (Gordon et al. 2007). The analysed material consists of ethnographic data in the form of field notes from eight RE lessons, each lasting 120 min (16 h). The observations were carried out during 8 weeks in the autumn of 2017 and, in terms of content, the lessons aimed primarily at dealing with the three world religions: Judaism, Christianity and Islam. The classroom observations were recorded as audio files. Two focus group interviews were conducted with a total of nine students and three individual interviews with the teaching teacher. An open request to participate in focus group interviews was made to all students in the class, and nine students signed up for participation. The two focus group interviews, one with seven students and one with two students, were conducted at the school on two different occasions during the lunch break just before the lesson. All observations and interviews were transcribed verbatim.

The students were in their second year on the vocational programme of *The Health Care Programme* [*Vård och Omsorgs-programmet*] and were 17–19 years old. The class included 9 male and 15 female students. In Sweden, 99% of all students attend upper secondary school and choose between university preparatory programs and vocational preparation programs. Both types of programs last three years. A few subjects are common and compulsory for all students at all programs, including RE. The Health Care Programme is vocational education for work in health and elderly care and the students receive a degree as assistant nurses.

The school is located in a suburb of a big city. In the area the proportion with higher education (16.3%/44% national average), average income (228,000 SEK/329,000 SEK national average) and expected lifespan (77.5 years/83.0 years national average) was significantly lower than the national average, and unemployment (12.2%/3.7% national average), congestion in housing and the proportion of foreign-born inhabitants (53.5%/25.5% national average) was higher than the national average (SCB 2019).

At the school, there are about 1000 pupils and 79% of these had foreign backgrounds, defined as born in another country or having two parents born in another country (Skolverket 2019). During one of the observed lessons, one of the students asked the classmates whether not everyone in the class was Muslim, and the response to this direct question was that of 24 students: 22 students positioned themselves as Muslims while two students positioned themselves as Syrian Orthodox Christians. Whether or not this is in accordance with the identity and religious affiliation of each individual student is impossible to say. However, this gives a picture of a context in which the articulations in the classroom are characterized by an understanding that the majority of the students in the classroom had a Muslim cultural background but were living in the secular Swedish society. The teacher was asked by the students about her faith and she presented herself as “privately religious”. In many ways she was a representative of an ethnic Swedish majority society, largely absent in the area.

4.2. Analysis

In the analysis, the transcribed material was read through carefully to identify themes where there are different views in society and issues that thus could be characterized as controversial “in the public sphere, appearing on ballots, in courts within political platforms, in legislative chambers and as part of political movements” (Hess and McAvoy 2015). This identified the following themes: divergent interpretations, the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, abortion, forced marriage and child marriage—to follow the Qur’an or the Sunnah, female genital mutilation and equality. Two more themes that aroused strong emotions and led to heated class discussions emerged in the observed material: religious and public holidays and forgiveness.

This is a classroom study where the focus is on how controversial issues can be represented and discussed in the classroom and the analysis relates and takes into account the interactions in the classroom in relation to this content (Osbeck et al. 2018). The Stefan (1997) version of the didactic triangle guided the analysis of the above-mentioned content themes. Please see Figure 1.

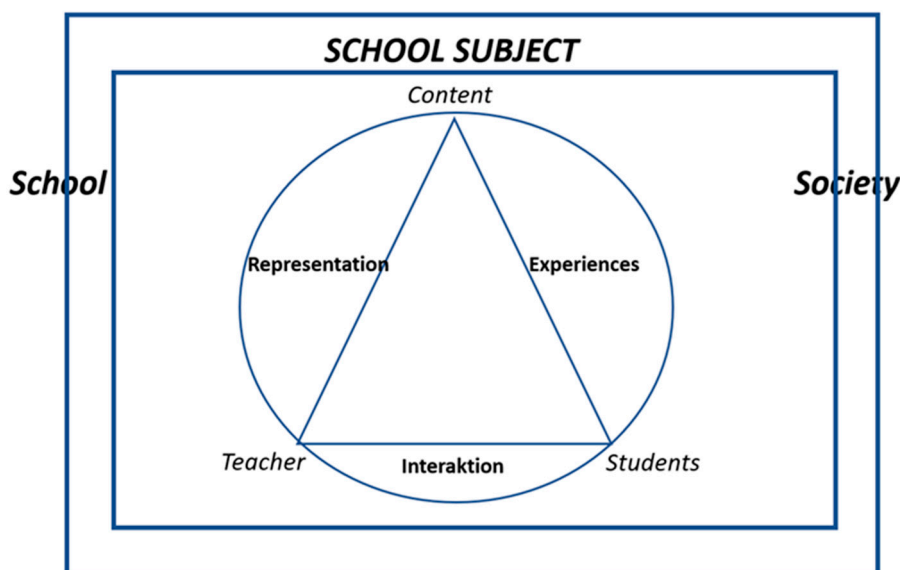


Figure 1. The didactic triangle.

To meet the overall purpose of the study, the transcribed classroom observations were analysed with a focus on how the content was represented and how students' experiences were used in teaching. The interviews were used to contextualize, elucidate and understand events and conversations that took place in the classroom practice. The results present various questions that can be potentially controversial, based on the above definition, with a focus on how they were addressed in order to understand whether they are represented as open or settled or in a nondirective or a directive way (Hand 2007; Hess and McAvoy 2015). The focus will be on how these issues are raised in the classroom and, to show this, rather long extracts from the classroom interactions will be presented.

4.3. Ethics

This study was reviewed by the Regional Ethical Review Board in Gothenburg, which decided that Swedish legislation on ethical review does not apply and, therefore, provided an advisory statement (Dnr 1081-16). The advice provided by the board has been followed, as well as general principles of research ethics. The teacher and the students are given fictitious names to protect their integrity.

5. Results: Controversial Issues in RE Classroom Practice

The result from this classroom study will be structured along open or settled controversial issues. The following themes: divergent interpretations, holidays in a multireligious society, forgiveness, the Israeli–Palestinian conflict and abortion were issues represented as open in a non-directive way. Issues related to female genital mutilation, forced marriage and child marriage and gender equality were represented as settled.

The teacher, henceforth called Tina, who teaches this class has the stated ambition of encouraging reflection and bringing in new perspectives, rather than influencing students' opinions. She has worked at this school for a long time and through her work she has gained experience and preparedness for the wide range of questions that might be sensitive among the students, and developed a readiness to deal with the situation when this happens. She describes how she constantly balances between challenging different ideas and affirming the right to have different views, even if they are fundamentalist or anti-democratic. The articulated goal of her teaching is to highlight different positions and that students should listen to each other, even if they do not share others' opinions.

The observed lessons mainly dealt with monotheistic world religions. Based on a painting depicting Abraham, Sarah, Hagar, Ishmael and Isaac, Tina tells the story of the origins of the Abrahamic

religions. Judaism, Christianity and Islam are recurrently referred to by the teacher as “the Abrahamic religions”, as Abraham is one of the central figures in the stories of these world religions. This was a description that students also started to use. Throughout history there are indeed examples of long periods of peaceful coexistence and enriching exchange between these three religions, but there are also plenty of examples of conflicts between Jews, Christians and Muslims. The religious stories about Abraham have differed somewhat in the different religious traditions, which has occasionally been a source of conflict. Tina tells about central people in the Jewish tradition and consistently uses the names in several languages; Noah/Noa/Nuh, Abraham/Ibrahim, Hagar/Hajjar, Sara/Sahar/Saraj, Isaac/Isak/Ishaq, Moses/Musa, and also when people from the Christian tradition are mentioned, such as John/Johannes/Yahya and Jesus/Isa. Students also contributed several names used in their native language. The students’ articulations showed that they knew these historical stories well and the stories of creation, Noah’s ark, Abraham’s covenant with God, the exodus from Egypt, etc., were repeated together.

This is not a controversial issue in terms of an open or settled issue, but can be understood as an example of context sensitivity and an intercultural approach that in turn creates the conditions for raising various controversial issues. Tina knows that there are different experiences and she confirms that the students’ knowledge is valid and also enhances the students’ intercultural competence. This also gives her legitimacy and respect when she later emphasizes that there are different interpretations and different versions of the same stories.

5.1. What Is Taught as Open Questions?

In the following sections, issues that were represented as open in a nondirective way will be presented.

5.1.1. Divergent Interpretations

This theme is not a political social issue like several of the other themes, but in RE, different interpretations and approaches to religious texts and regulations comprise a central content in the school subject and a field where there are strong opinions and different perceptions. This type of different interpretations of religious documents has also, throughout history, had political and societal consequences, both in the form of wars and conflicts, but also resulting in various ideologies of governing bodies and laws.

In cases where the stories or the interpretations in the Jewish, Christian and Muslim traditions differ, these differences were described. They also discussed why they differ, and what is the reason for this.

TINA: Mm, if you say, in the Old Testament, which is in Christianity, but also in Judaism, there Hagar or Hajjar, is more emphasized as a maidservant of Sara, Sahar. Some even claim that she was a slave, that she was a slave then given to Abraham, Ibrahim. While in the Qur’an, she is more presented as a second wife and being in a similar position, in principle equal with the first one. How come it is so different?

AIDAH: Because you have interpreted differently [. . .].

TINA: Mm, you must not forget that we have different interpretations with us into the room. What did you learn that it was a . . . they came to a king, Chadra [one of the students in the class] has written here? Has anyone learned anything else? One version does not necessarily mean that another version is wrong. It is about what interpretation you come in with. Okay?

Here we see how Tina highlights that there are several interpretations and that one interpretation does not mean that another interpretation is wrong. According to Tina’s experience, different interpretations could be a source of conflict in the classroom, and in class she repeatedly emphasized

that everyone was entitled to their own interpretation and that several parallel interpretations had to exist in the classroom.

Yet another example based on the story of Abraham/Ibrahim and Sara/Sahar, Tina explains that there are several ways to interpret and relate to religious stories and to a transcendent non-empirical dimension in existence:

TINA: But what happens is that she [Sara] gets pregnant. And then some might say “yes, but it is totally impossible, 99 years old, it goes without saying”, while others answer “but God is greater, God can do things that we ordinary people cannot do”. Then maybe there are those who say like this, “yes, although it says on the other hand that Noah was 800 when he died”. It is also not reasonable. It says that the world was created in six days and God rested on the seventh. It is also not reasonable. [. . .] Say that this word “day”, it’s wrong, six days. If it had been like this instead, yes, God created the world in six billion years, and the seventh billion years so . . . in the seventh year, then he rested. Then it would have made more sense, right? Yes, but that sounds reasonable. It fits quite well with the world’s emergence if you look at how the different things come to be. [. . .] But we spend a lot of time on the words and think that this is not reasonable. But maybe the words were wrongly translated, or is God so big that he could create in six days?

HANNA: But in the Bible, I think it says a day before God is 1000 years for humans.

TINA: A day for God is 1000 years for people. Mm.

HANNA: So, if you count . . . [. . .]

TINA: People are always trying to take old texts and try to predict different things or understand things. And then we must not forget that the texts are written by people. Do you follow? And even though there was a heavenly Qur’an, there are still people who have written it down. I’m not saying that Fatima was wrong, but we still have the human factor, right? Muhammad perceives, learns from Gabriel, or Jibril, what God or what Allah is saying, but he will then verbally pass it on to those who will write, and they will write down. That is the human factor.

AABID: But then, he writes exactly what he hears. So, the only thing [that is said].

TINA: Yes, exactly. But you know that no matter how much you hear it is not . . . You cannot guarantee it is 100% correct.

BAHAR: We believe in something called the Qur’an and Hadith. Hadiths, that is, it is kind . . . where you interpret in different ways.

TINA: Yes, the Qur’an is the pure word, I know.

BAHAR: And the Qur’an must not be interpreted in different ways.

ZINAT: Exactly.

TINA: Mm, and I . . . and you know what. I know that is what you believe in Islam. But I say . . . not to raise doubt. I’m just saying as pure facts. Do you follow? I do not question the words of the Qur’an, that these are the pure words. But I say that there is something called the human factor. We can’t ignore it. Right?

Here, different perspectives on both the Bible and the Qur’an emerge. The teacher reason about a literal interpretation in relation to reason. One of the students bring in a reference to the Bible where it says that “with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day.” (2 Peter 3:8) that opens up for different interpretations of timing information in the Bible. One of the other

students also emphasizes that there is a difference between the hadiths and the Qur'an—the hadiths and the stories of Muhammad's life can be interpreted in different ways, but the student Bahar puts forward the view that the Qur'an is God's pure word and should or cannot be interpreted in different ways. In the quote above, it is suggested by the teacher that although the Qur'an can be seen as “the pure word”, that is, the word of God, it is mediated through Muhammad and then written down it may have changed through what Tina here refers to as “the Human Factor”. This type of interpretation or approach to the creation of the Qur'an has, in other contexts, attracted considerable attention and led to major conflicts, both in past and present, for example, in connection with the novel *The Satanic Verses* and the fatwa against the book's author Salman Rushdie (Larsson 2006). Against this background, this type of perspective highlighted during this lesson could be a highly controversial issue and lead to upset feelings, but in this context it did not.

At a later lesson, a similar topic is addressed. To explain different interpretation paradigms and approaches to the Qur'an and Muhammad's example in the Sunnah, the teacher mentions that Muhammad cared about his dental health:

TINA: Some follow what he says, some follow what he did, right? What did Muhammad do to clean his teeth?

TAHZEEB: What did he do?

TINA: Do you think he had an electric toothbrush?

WABIBA: He had another type of toothbrush, one like this, stick . . .

[talking at the same time]

TINA: Muhammad had no electric toothbrush because there was no electricity at that time. Muhammad chewed on a twig. Do you follow? He chewed on a twig. And it is a very effective way. But then the question is like this, people who live today in a society where we have electric toothbrushes, we have regular toothbrushes, we have fluoride and we have everything possible, should we use an electric toothbrush, the latest modern technology, or should we chew on a twig?

TAHZEEB: Chew on a twig.

WABIBA: The modern one.

AABID: You can do whatever you want.

HASSAN: So, you can do both. But . . .

TINA: Exactly. You can do both. [. . .]

WABIBA: Look at me and my grandfather, for example, that I use an electric toothbrush and my grandfather used a twig. You see, there are differences.

TINA: I understand the difference. And what I mean is that you do this, for your grandfather, when he was growing up there were no electric toothbrushes. But you do it now because there are. And you have realized that it has the same effect. What was it that Muhammad wanted to say . . . why is he described as chewing on a twig? Well, because that's because we have to take care of our . . . dental hygiene. Right?

HASSAN: Exactly.

WABIBA: That's what I meant.

TINA: But is it how we do what matters, or is it that we do it?

HASSAN: *That we do it.*

TINA: *Yes, right? So that's why we have to understand that doing things is perhaps more important than how we do it. Muhammad, he walked everywhere. Right? Why did he do that?*

WABIBA: *To get somewhere.*

TINA: *Yes. If there were aeroplanes and cars in his time, do you think he would have continued to walk or would he have taken the plane?*

WABIBA: *The plane.*

TINA: *Yes. And that means somewhere that the vast majority of people think that we should adapt to what is today.*

WABIBA: *Exactly.*

TINA: *Right? But some people think that "no, we should do exactly as it was then".*

HASSAN: *That's their opinion and that's their choice.*

TINA: *Exactly. And I am not saying that one is right or wrong, but do you understand that there are different groups in all religions, and there are in Islam as well. We have the liberals who say, we live here and now, we use . . . you have to interpret the script based on the time it was but now have these conditions. And so I say, I'm a Muslim even though I live that way. While someone else who is more literal adheres to the old, a traditionalist, says "no, no, we should do as Muhammad did, as Muhammad said at that time".*

Here, modernist Muslim approaches in relation to traditional and fundamentalist stances are made visible (Hjärpe 1992; Larsson 2006). The students' experiences are used, and their answers show that these different positions are something they can relate to. While Tina is pushing for a more liberal or modernist interpretation and reasoning about Muhammad's motives for taking care of his dental hygiene, it is left to everyone to choose his own interpretation and this issue is taught in an open and non-directive way.

5.1.2. Holidays in a Multi-Religious Society

One issue that led to strong emotional expressions in the classroom was the issue of leave in connection with Eid al-Adha. The Swedish teacher came into the classroom before the lesson began and announced to the class that they would be given a task in Swedish that they would work on their own and that the lesson in Swedish would be cancelled because the vocational teacher, who also has lessons on Friday, had cancelled his lesson because of Eid al-Adha, which is one of the major holidays in Islam celebrated to honour the trials of Ibrahim's and his willingness to on Gods command sacrifice his son Ismael. The vocational teacher justified this decision with the argument that almost none of the students would attend class that day. The teachers discussed this during the lunch break and the Swedish teacher expressed annoyance at her colleague's decision. In the classroom she says to the students: "Eid is not a holiday, there is nothing more to discuss." The message is that this is not a public holiday and a day off in Sweden, but the way she expresses this makes the students really upset and angry—Eid al-Adha is obviously an important celebration for many of these students, surrounded by solemnity and tradition. Tina tries to calm down the emotions afterwards.

TINA: *I can say like this, that I think my colleague did not express herself so wisely when she said there is nothing more to discuss. I absolutely think there are things to discuss, and I can understand your frustration. I also think that at our school, above all, it is an important holiday, because there are so many [who celebrate this holiday]. Here we have a majority of the students who are connected*

to Islam, whereas if it had been, let's say in Södertälje, where the majority of the students at many schools are Orthodox Christians, and where they may think that their Christmas celebrations do not fall on the 24th, 25th, but later in January, that it may be important then. Or the Catholics who then have Saint Mary as a very, very important person. So somewhere, it's a give and take, but changes take a long time.

This question is clearly an example of the importance of context as to whether a question becomes controversial in classroom practice. This issue is entirely related to minority–majority relationships in the community in which the school is located. In a school where the majority of the students see themselves as part of the majority culture, the issue of holidays and school leave is probably not something that is reflected, as the holidays they celebrate are red days in the calendar. According to Tina, no matter what opinion you have on the matter, this is something you need to think about and relate to in a multicultural society. Thus, Tina took students' indignation seriously. Related to this situation, she described their opportunities to influence school-free days and how they could contact decision-making politicians. This question thus becomes an open political issue in classroom practice but also a potential conflict or controversy among the teachers at the school.

5.1.3. Forgiveness

It can be discussed whether forgiveness is a controversial issue in a political and societal sense. However, during the observations in this class, the question of forgiveness became very emotional and revealed divergent views based on religious identity. In the focus group interview, I asked a question about their experiences of how the conflicts in the Middle East were raised in the teaching. The conversation came to revolve around how they viewed some of these conflicts. One of the students, who described herself as a Christian, said that even though she considered both the state of Israel and ISIS wrong, her religion requires forgiveness of all people. This led to a heated discussion about right and wrong and whether to forgive or not.

SARA: I hate what they do because they [Israel] kill, the same as ISIS. But then, kind of if we hate them, then we are as bad as them. For they hate people and they kill. We must show . . . we must be able to show love. It's true.

CHADRA: But they do evil things!

SARA: I hate what they do.

CHADRA: But how can you show love for [such a man]? Want to show a love for the wicked who hate other people? No. Exactly.

SARA: So, I'll tell you. In my religion it says so, those who do evil things, you should love them. So as long as I'm a Christian . . .

CHADRA: Yes.

SARA: Yes, it is so in my religion.

CHADRA: Okay.

SARA: Because I'm a Christian, I'm not 100% perfect, I can't follow everything in the Bible. But I'll try to like them as much as I can. But that doesn't mean what they do is right. Those who kill people in Israel, they are wrong. [. . .] I don't hate ISIS because they have . . . what religion they have. I hate them for what they do. And I hate the Israelis not because they are Israeli, but for what they do. And they do . . . they kill people. Because of that I hate them. And you shouldn't even hate, but I do. That's the one I say. I hate on both sides for what they do. Not for their religion or what they believe in.

The interview was conducted in the classroom just before the lesson. In this situation, when the students were discussing loudly and heatedly, the teacher came into the classroom and interrupted the discussion:

TINA: But in the meantime, things have happened. It is true that you have had a discussion here now with Karin on controversial issues. And when I come here now, I notice that you have started talking about Israel and you have also started talking about Christianity. And the message contained in Christianity is that you should love your neighbour as yourself. You should treat others the way you want to be treated.

SARA: Exactly.

TINA: And how it might then conflict with an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth. Are you following?

CHADRA: Mm.

TINA: And I don't usually at a stage before teaching about [all] religions have these kinds of discussions, because I think you need to have facts first. Otherwise, it is easy to misunderstand one another. And I don't think that individual students should have to defend their religion, but first everyone gets knowledge, then you can discuss. Alright. [. . .] I do not want a discussion that separates, when we have not gone through all the religions, that make you split and start to look at each other in a different way.

Here we see how the teacher interrupts the discussion with the justification that no one should have to defend his or her religion and that conversations should not be based on identity and personal faith but on knowledge and facts. This attitude was Tina's strategy for dealing with the diversity of opinions and identities. In her thinking, it is not possible to distinguish what is said from how it is said. Tina's actions can be seen as an attempt to formulate this issue as open, as it is basically a political issue (Hess and McAvoy 2015).

5.1.4. The Israel-Palestinian Conflict

In research literature on controversial issues, international conflicts and the various sides are often raised as a controversial issue (Hanna 2017; Kello 2016). As we saw above, Israel's occupation of Palestinian territory and the treatment of Palestinians was something that the students in the class agreed was reprehensible and wrong. The majority of the students have a background in the Middle East or in Muslim majority countries, and when asked about access to classroom observations at this school, another teacher who worked at the school, but who did not participate in the study, answered that there were no tensions regarding the current Middle Eastern conflicts at the school but full consensus among the students—"Everyone hates Israel and ISIS." When I asked the students during the interviews, they confirmed that many were strictly critical both of Israel's policy towards Palestine and of ISIS, or Daesh, which was the term most used. However, this was a view that Tina sought to explain, nuance and challenge. The focus of the teaching on Israel and Palestine was on history, and Tina described how Jews were expelled by the Romans, how they were spread across the world, and through history, suffering from repeated persecutions that culminated during the Holocaust, but also how the Palestinians experienced Al-Nakbah in connection with the proclamation of an Israeli state in 1948 and a large part of the Palestinian population were expelled, which was the beginning of the refugee problem and the Palestinian diaspora. Thus, various aspects related to the conflict were highlighted:

TINA: And Jesus, he arises in Jerusalem after his death. And the Jews have their holy temple there. And in the same place that this temple stood is now the Al-Aqsa Mosque. Qubbat As-Sakhrah. And you wondered before why there are conflicts about Israel and Palestine. When I come into the room here, someone says "but does anyone know why they are arguing?" Do you understand that if all three religions have this place as sacred, there can be conflicts about it?

HALIMA: Yes.

TINA: *Should there be conflicts?*

HALIMA: No.

TINA: No. *Why not?*

HALIMA: *For everyone is there for the same reason, so instead of having conflicts, it should be quiet. So they can do their stuff and go from there.*

TINA: *Right? You should share the place and coexist.*

HALIMA: *Exactly.*

TINA: *Right? You believe in a God and the place is important to everyone. You should be together, but you don't. You fight about the place. Right? And the Israelis have been trying to make sure the place is just theirs. And they build walls. And then the question is, Israelis, who are the Israelis?*

ZINAT: *Jew.*

ROYA: *The Jews.*

TINA: *Mm. And then the question is this, is it all Jews who think like those who build walls?*

ZINAT: No.

TINA: *No, right?*

ZINAT: *But almost everyone.*

TINA: *Are you sure about that?*

ZINAT: *Yes. They are always together.*

TINA: *Are all Muslims ISIS?*

ZINAT: No.

ROYA: No.

TINA: *Why is there a difference between Jews then?*

HASSAN: *Oh, oh, oh. [laugh]*

The student who says “oh, oh” and laughs does so because he understands that this question challenges some of the students’ perceptions and a black and white worldview where Israel primarily represents the oppressor. The teacher was constantly striving to raise different perspectives and to increase understanding:

TINA: *And so, it is with this conflict. I'm not a Jew, I'm not a Muslim. But I still can imagine what it would be like if someone came to say that “you have to move out, I'll stay here”. Then I would be mad too. But I can also imagine what it would be like not to have a country, that all my relatives first had been thrown into a ghetto and then we were taken to a camp [. . .] So, what we must do as human beings here today is to try to understand.*

HASSAN: *And don't judge straight away.*

TINA: And don't judge right away. Do you understand?

HASSAN: Yes.

TINA: And then we can think of a lot of things, because we start from ourselves. But sometimes we must take a helicopter perspective, go back into history and understand why Jerusalem is important, why is this country so important?

As can be seen, the Israeli–Palestinian conflict is a highly sensitive issue for many of the students and it was also presented as a controversial issue in the sense that there are several parties involved who have different motives for their actions.

5.1.5. Abortion

The issue of abortion is yet another highly political and controversial issue where there are strong opinions and groupings. During the observations, abortion was not the subject of teaching, but in order to illustrate what Tina perceives as the important thing about teaching in RE, to understand and listen to others, she performs a small role-play with herself where she presents different views on abortion and where different positions emerge. In teaching, she draws legitimacy from the goal of the subject and the grading criteria concerning being able to conduct nuanced reasoning. Here she raises the issue of abortion:

TINA: When you gaggle and just express and feed your own opinions. If you want to get an A-grade, and that was what we started talking about 20 min ago, it is about being able to listen and being able to think like this, to say "aha, we don't think the same but it can be interesting to hear this opinion anyway." If you think I'm saying this, "yes, I think it's wrong, I think abortion is wrong, it's killing. It is killing a life." And then maybe someone else says like this, "yes . . . it's interesting to hear how you think. I myself think it's right that abortion exists, but it's about the woman's right to decide about her body." "Well, why do you think that? Can you elaborate on what you are saying?" "Yes, no, but I think like this, there are a lot of women in the world today who do not . . . who sometimes get raped or different things happen and should they have to keep the children and be reminded of that every day?" "Well, that's how you think. Is there no other solution then? A solution that allows you to give the child away? After all, there are a lot who miss . . . couples who long for children. Then is it better that they have that baby?" "I'm a Catholic and I think all children have the right to live." "Yes, but if it is in the stomach and it is only a few weeks old, then there is no life. In Islam, to which I belong, we believe that the soul enters the foetus on the 120th day." "Well, is that how you think about it? We see it as living already at the moment of conception, it becomes a life." "Well, that's how you look at it. But we think you can't live when . . . There is no life because everything could live outside the stomach." "No, although it can't be the 120th day either." Are you with me? You listen to each other and then it becomes an interchange. That does not mean that we need to agree. But this is a more nuanced discussion. So being nuanced and understanding how to reach the higher grades, it is also about listening to others, listening to other perspectives on the same thing. And that does not mean that you are more right or that I am more right. It is all about adding pieces to the puzzles. This is how we work in RE.

Tina frames and defines RE as a subject in which there will be questions where students have different opinions, and that the key is to listen to each other's views. She illustrates this overarching goal by showing different views of abortion rooted in various religious and ethical perspectives. The issue of abortion was not really the focus of the teaching in the quotation above, but can be seen as an example of non-directive teaching or an open political issue. In this situation, the teacher left no room for discussion or further in-depth on this issue and which opinions the students held on this issue is not possible to say. In this sense, the teacher decided that this should be an open political issue.

5.2. What Was Taught as a Settled Issue?

5.2.1. Female Genital Mutilation

The students in the class were studying on the Health Care Programme and after graduation were going to work as nurse assistants in health and elderly care. In the teaching of RE, rules and traditions related to, for example, funeral traditions and how to take care of the body of a deceased person were introduced. This led to a conversation about what to do and what not to do with one's body according to different religious traditions. The teacher stated that according to most Muslim law schools, plastic surgery is prohibited. Then she asked about makeup, if it is compatible with Islam. This issue led to intense discussions as to whether it was haram to use makeup. Several of the female students, themselves quite heavily made-up, became involved in the discussion. Most of the students claimed that there were no problems with makeup. However, perceptions were divided as to whether it was right according to Islam to use different hair removal methods. In this mode, the teacher introduced the theme of female genital mutilation:

TINA: But listen a little here now, now I want to say a few things, because it's interesting what you say. And if you look at Islam, for example, you don't want you to do an autopsy on a person unless ... Autopsy, you know, open up after death and so on.

HALEEMA: Yes.

TINA: Unless that person needs to be autopsied for forensic reasons. Do you follow?

HALEEMA: Yes.

TINA: Because you have to find out if someone has committed a crime against that person. Alternatively, if they had a very rare disease. Then there's an autopsy. But if you do that, you must also put back all the organs where they would have been. Right?

HALEEMA: Yes.

TINA: But then again, the question is, you know yourself that I have said that female genital mutilation is not in the Qur'an.

HALEEMA: Yes.

TINA: Right? It's not in the Bible.

HANNA: Yes.

TINA: And yet we know that many Muslims and Coptic Christians, for example, practise female genital mutilation. You remove something that you cannot then put back anyway.

HALEEMA: Yes.

TINA: Are you following?

CHADRA: Yes.

TINA: Do you understand that this legitimizes all women who say I should never sexually mutilate my daughter, all men who say "I should never sexually mutilate my daughter" because it is actually against Islam.

CHADRA: Exactly!

TINA: Do you follow?

CHADRA: *It really is!*

TINA: *And when you have a hard time arguing with relatives who think you have to do it otherwise you can't get married blah, blah, blah, now you have arguments for that. You must not remove anything [from the body].*

Worth noting is that the word used is genital mutilation and not female circumcision. During the teacher interview, the teacher said that there were many students at the school who had undergone genital mutilation themselves and that the school was actively working against this tradition and to help and strengthen these female students. Whether that was the case with this particular class is unknown, however, but Tina said that she always had this in mind when teaching. In the teaching, we see how the teacher introduces an internal religious argument against female genital mutilation because, according to (her interpretation of) Muslim religious rules, one must be buried with one's entire body, whereas female genital mutilation contravenes this rule. There is an ongoing debate among Muslim theologians and now many, for example, accept donations of organs (Ali et al. 2020) which means that there are different views on the interpretations of the rule to bury the entire body. Nevertheless, female genital mutilation is taught in a directive way, and that there are religious proponents for this tradition is not considered in the classroom discussion.

5.2.2. Forced Marriage and Child Marriage

When the class read about the ten commandments, the students were asked to consider whether they wanted to add any commandments. Some students thought this was difficult, a student thought it was *haram* (i.e., forbidden) and felt reluctant to change or add commandments. However, several of the added commandments that the students suggested were about forced marriage: "That you should not be forced to get married" and/ "Being able to marry whoever you want". The teacher confirmed the students' opinions and mentioned that about 70,000 young people in Sweden live in fear of being forced to marry, both boys and girls (Ungdomsstyrelsen 2016). The issue has also been widely discussed publicly in recent years and in Sweden a series of tightening penalties have been imposed against child marriage (Regeringens Proposition 2019/20:131 2020, Prop. 2019/20:131). In the classroom, this issue was raised as a matter of human rights which state that one should marry whomever one wants. The UN Declaration is cited as an argument for this view and it is represented as a settled political issue—all forms of forced marriage are wrong. This discussion led to a conversation about another issue that in many contexts is perceived as highly sensitive, namely Muhammad's marriage to Aisha:

TINA: *For example, something that is very much debated is his marriage to Aisha, right?*

AIDAH: *Yes.*

TINA: *She was nine years old when their marriage was completed. Right? She was six years old from the beginning and then when she was nine they had intercourse and then the marriage was consummated. And I think most everyone here today thinks that a nine-year-old, it's a child, that you definitely not should have sex with. A nine-year-old is not developed in such a way that she can cope with a pregnancy, nor does she have an adult relationship with one . . . and so on. Are you following?*

CHADRA: *If she's had her period, she can have it.*

TINA: *She may have, but is it . . . if you look at the Convention on the Rights of the Child and what is reasonable, if you meet a nine-year-old, you think that "oh, here we have a fantastic mistress, here we have a person who can certainly raise and take care of and take responsibility for a child and help that child to school", you think so?*

AIDAH: *But this one has nothing to do with religion, it's tradition. I think so, anyway.*

TINA: Absolutely.

CHADRA: Yes, yes.

TINA: But that's what Muhammad did. But I mean, if you choose to follow the Sunnah, what many do is that they pick out what suits themselves. And then you remove what does not fit. But there are also countries, such as Yemen, for example, and even IS, that want to establish a caliphate, that you know, they introduced the same thing, and the marriage age was set at nine years for girls. Just because Muhammad had a nine-year-old wife. And they see it as if he had this, then it is right.

AIDAH: But did he say that? He's ... I don't think he has said himself that one should marry a nine-year-old girl.

The above quotation highlights how a controversial issue is discussed in the classroom. In this case, it is the legal and not intra-religious arguments that come to the fore. One of the students highlights the perception that a girl becomes an adult in connection with menstruation. Another student also raises the notion that this is not about religion but that this is a cultural tradition; it is easier to change traditions than religiously grounded practices, which the teachers confirms. Tina states that, according to the story, Muhammad married a person that we today categorize as a child, but contextualizes and problematizes both this action and how different people relate to this fact. Thus, in relation to child marriage, different interpretations and readings of the story are not discussed as in the case of creation and Sara's age as in the example above (see the section *Divergent interpretations*) and here a rather fundamentalist interpretation is made. In the above reasoning, it is clear that child marriage is an issue that is represented as settled, and in a directive way—child marriage is wrong.

5.2.3. Gender Equality

Issues concerning gender, gender roles and gender equality are among the contentious and politically charged issues where there are strong opinions and opposing views in different societies. In the public debate in Europe, Islam often is associated with honour-based oppression and violence, oppression and control of women, and this is often used for political purposes, not least by populist parties (Lee Tomson 2020). Justice and gender equality emerged as institutionalized and superior values in the classroom conversations:

TINA: Sometimes people talk about people who have fought for women's rights, and then in fact Muhammad is one of those who has fought very hard for women's rights. Right? Among other things, he limited the number of marriage partners. He removed slavery or said that one should not pay for people and so on. Right? He said lots of stuff strengthening human rights. [...] And what happens if men die in war? If there are only two men left of these families, for ten of them go to war and only two of them come back? This means that there are eight families who have no livelihood.

ABDUL: Exactly.

TINA: That is why Muhammad said that they have to take responsibility for the other families because the women have the right to have a husband and the children have the right to have someone who provides for them. So that's why they introduced the rule that one man could have four wives. And it's not about "oh, he should have so many wives for him to have this much sex". And they also imposed a restriction on not having more, although Muhammad himself had several. So he said one thing to the people but he did something else himself. Are you following?

CHADRA: He meant that the other women should have the opportunity to get married, instead they should just stay home until they grow old and die. Isn't that so?

ABDUL: No, but ... No, you have ... the men usually went to war and then ... like, since they died in the war, it was kind of 20% that came back. The women didn't have so many men.

CHADRA: *No, that's why they . . .*

TINA: *And that's why they arranged it in this way. But then the question is that in society today, when there are about as many men as women, does one have to apply the same principle then?*

ABDUL: *No . . .*

BAHAR: *No!*

TINA: *Are you following?*

ABDUL: *No, but it's religion.*

TINA: *Mm, and then the question is like this, if we're going to adapt to electric toothbrushes, aeroplanes, then we're going to adapt to that . . . because what would happen if a man has four wives, then there would be a bunch of men who don't get any wives at all, right?*

ABDUL: *Yes. [laugh]*

Gender equality and human rights are here related to Islam. Traditionalist Islamist groups dismiss all forms of Muslim feminism as a Western belief and thus incompatible with Islam. Secular groups occupy the same position, but based on their view of Islam as the problem and the obstacle to equality (Fazlhashemi 2006). In the quotation above, we see examples of a resonance that can be attributed to a Muslim debate, where Muhammad is emphasized as a moral example supporting justice and gender equality, but where patriarchal Muslim representatives have distorted and suppressed the original ideal of equality and the path of justice contained in the Qur'an, according to Tinas interpretation. Consequently, this example illustrates how an internal religious argument for values as stated in the curriculum that the school should outline and transmit (Skolverket 2011b).

6. Concluding Discussion

The overall purpose of this article is to analyse how some issues, that in public debates are perceived as controversial, are represented in the teaching of non-denominational and integrative RE in a multicultural classroom practice where the majority of students have a Muslim cultural background, based on the debate about how controversial issues should be addressed in school—as empirically or politically open or settled (Hess and McAvoy 2015) or in a directive or non-directive way (Hand 2007).

In the analysis of the empirical material, a number of issues emerged, such as, for instance, divergent interpretations of religious narratives and religiously motivated rules, holidays, views of forgiveness, the Israeli–Palestinian conflict and abortion, as open political issues in classroom practice, and these were in the classroom of this study taught in an open, non-directive way. These issues were represented in a way so that one could have different opinions and that everyone has the right to think differently. In this sense, teaching can be described as taking “fairness” into account (Cooling 2012). However, this did not apply to teaching that addressed value issues related to female genital mutilation, forced marriage and gender equality, which were represented as settled. Equality was held up as a superior value and with reference to the UN Declaration of Human Rights, but especially by religious arguments against female genital mutilation and polygamy. This is particularly interesting as the teaching was conducted within the framework of non-denominational RE. She could have cited a number of other arguments in relation to female genital mutilation, for example, related to health, the right to sexuality or religious freedom for children and Swedish law that prohibits female genital mutilation, but here the teacher chooses to cite a religious argument. By being understanding and listening, many conflicts can be resolved, but here there is a risk that the teacher contributes to conflict. If, for example, relatives can point to other theological arguments in support of female genital mutilation, how should students relate to these theological arguments? By relying solely on intra-religious arguments, she risks having her legitimacy as a teacher questioned. Although she has

extensive knowledge of various Muslim interpretations and narratives, she does not position herself as a Muslim, but in the classroom, she is in many ways a representative for the majority Swedish society, largely absent in the neighbourhood where the school is located. The teacher uses religious arguments when these support her values or the values found in the curriculum, but she leaves the religious arguments when she has no theological arguments that can support the views and values stated in the curricula. Then, it is the Swedish law that applies. The teacher is listening and accommodating to a certain degree and in relation to some issues, but when it comes to the value-oriented issues, she states that this is how it is, which can also be understood as an exercise of power. However, this way of reasoning is not unique to RE teachers, and one could argue that this is an intercultural and highly professional approach by a teacher in a democratically regulated school, that is, to convey the values of society. An issue that is recurring in the subject of RE is the distinction between religion and culture and how boundaries are to be understood between these (Flensner 2019). In classroom practice in this study, this distinction was used to talk about controversial issues. Traditions were highlighted both by students and the teacher as possible to change and with greater opportunity for individuals to behave in different ways, while religion appeared to be more static and with a different authority.

At the same time, a majority of the students in the classroom had a Muslim cultural background and in the teaching it became apparent that within Islam (as well as in all religious and non-religious views) there are a number of possible interpretations and approaches. Unlike in many other Swedish classrooms, it was an unspoken premise that the majority of the students in the classroom positioned themselves as believers (see, for example, Flensner 2017; Holmqvist Lidh 2016). The teacher had an explicit intercultural ambition with the overall aim of elucidating and problematizing opinions, values and prejudices that might be rooted in culture, religion, tradition, social class or gender (cf. Franck and Thalén 2018). However, at the same time, these students also need to know about non-religious arguments, since religious arguments are the ones that dominate in the non-Muslim majority community where they live, but non-religious arguments were not very frequent in the teaching of RE in this classroom. By more clearly presenting different arguments, religious and non-religious, and clarifying what these were based on, students' intercultural competence could have developed and they would be better equipped to participate in discussions with different parties (Lahdenperä 2004; Löfstedt 2018). With this said, however, I want to emphasize that these students in many ways have greater intercultural competence and competence in religious literacy than many other students in Swedish schools, where the majority of students identify as part of a secular majority culture and this position is taken for granted and not problematized or discussed.

In the analysis of classroom observations, an attempt has been to assess whether a question was taught as directive or non-directive (Hand 2007). I find that it is somewhat unclear what it really means to teach something directly, when teaching should be objective and comprehensive and also take into account students' religious freedom and freedom of opinion. From this follows the question of whether a completely neutral position is possible in teaching that concerns ethical, moral, religious and socio-political issues (cf. Jackson and Everington 2017). I am inclined to think it is doubtful and would rather advocate a more comprehensive teaching that clarifies and problematizes different positions rather than the ambition to try to make a neutral teaching. However, the school is supposed to outline and convey certain values such as democracy, everyone's equal value and equality. There is research showing that teaching aimed at influencing students' values and opinions in a certain direction and, for example, counteracting xenophobia often has the opposite effect and rather reinforces the views and positions it seeks to counter (Mattsson 2018). Thus, "directive teaching" is not so uncomplicated in practice. Katarina (2019) recognizes the importance of emotions for learning, which is an aspect related to teaching about controversial issues. On the one hand, emotional commitment is needed for a student to learn something. However, Katarina also shows that if emotions become too strong in relation to a certain issue, students learn nothing, and they do not perceive the teacher's attempt to nuance or problematize the question. The teacher in this study balanced the emotions in the classroom and when discussions became heated and emotional, her main strategy was to focus on issues and

to highlight different positions and avoid statements based on personal experience and identity. In the discussion of forgiveness, for example, she ended the discussion because she thought that no one should have to stand as a representative of a religion and defend an entire tradition.

This article is based on ethnographic empirical data from one single school. So, what knowledge and what conclusions can be drawn from this limited qualitative study of teaching about controversial issues RE? One of the limitations concerns the content that was represented as politically closed or open issues in a directive or non-directive way. In this article, I tried to show how different types of content were represented and not only what was presented in directive or non-directive ways. However, teaching must be understood as a context-dependent and relational practice, which is why I believe that controversial issues, at least in educational contexts, must be understood as contingent. It is therefore not possible to draw any conclusions as to whether these issues will or should be taught as controversial in another classroom. Whether content becomes a controversial issue in classroom practice depends partly on how it is presented, but also on the knowledge, experiences, opinions and identities that are represented in the classroom among teachers and students, but also on the pedagogical approach that the teacher manages to implement in teaching. A teacher may try to present an issue as “settled” or “open”, but when making classroom observations of teaching, it is clear that whether it will be represented and perceived as a controversial issue in the classroom depends on how the interactions and discussions are conducted in the classroom. In the classroom presented in this article, there were not very strong differences of opinion between the students in the classroom. It is possible that it existed, but this did not come up in the classroom. In classrooms where there is a greater diversity in terms of identities related to worldviews and religion, there is potential for a greater exchange of opinions and perspectives. However, it is my experience from our research project that even in these classrooms, there is a strong strive for consensus and that it is difficult to achieve a conversational climate that includes a diversity of opinions and positions (Flensner 2019; forthcoming; Flensner et al. 2019). In many other classrooms, secularist and atheist views on religion and religious worldviews and identities dominate the discussions (Flensner 2017). These views and approaches to religion are central and fully legitimate in RE, especially in a secularized society. However, even these points of departure are not neutral approaches and thus also need to be made visible and problematized. Furthermore, many teachers, like Tina in this article, have a conscious pedagogical strategy that no one should have to alone stand as a representative of a whole religious tradition, in order not to be socially exposed or harassed.

It is also clear that classroom conversations in all schools are characterized by, or at least relate to, societal discourses and debates. One implication of this is that issues, where there are polarized discussions in the public debate, will be more difficult to have nuanced conversations about in the classroom. However, one conclusion I believe can be drawn from this limited study is that it is of central importance that the teacher reflects on her or his own starting points and strives to present different positions and opinions as fairly as possible. In this endeavour, it is also important, as far as possible, to try to clarify distinctions between opinions and facts and point out the dividing lines that exist and what they are based on.

This leads to questions about the goals of teaching in specific school subjects and education in general. Is the goal to understand the surrounding world and central societal issues from different perspectives and meet the arguments that actually exist in the public debate in order to be able to take a stand and engage in the issues that students find important? Or is the goal to analyse arguments related to questions to judge their logical validity? The issue with Hand (2007) approach is which questions are controversial, and the rational arguments for the conflicting perspectives. With Hess and McAvoy (2015) definition, the question rather concerns which questions become controversial in a specific classroom context, because the question either is presented as encompassing divergent views or there is controversy because the students in the class have different views on the issue. From my perspective, it is the latter that is of interest, because it is here the difficulties arise and here teachers need to manoeuvre both the content and form of the teaching in the specific teaching context, which

requires a great deal of professional competence. Obviously, it is important to learn how to analyse the reasoning and also perform logical and well-founded reasoning. However, it may matter less if the question is “settled” in the rational sense if this is problematic to address in the classroom and discussed in a nuanced way—teachers must somehow handle the controversies anyway. Furthermore, the question remains whether this is an accessible and constructive response to a student to state that his or her arguments are irrational. Will this reach out to the student and will this develop and enhance the student’s critical thinking and logical reasoning, by dismissing the argument in this way? We still have to live in the same society, and I think that consensus on different issues of worldview cannot be an end in itself in RE. This sheds light on the challenges of democratic multicultural society—what can we agree to disagree on, on what issues do we need to agree and how do we express ourselves to our opponents? How can we live together equally and differently?

In the issues that were taught openly or non-directively, the focus of teaching was on empathy and sympathy and respect for everyone’s right to their own opinions, rather than an argumentation analysis of the rational arguments that different positions entailed. Reiss (2019) points out that certain questions will arouse strong feelings among certain groups, regardless of the rational arguments that exist, while the same question will be completely unproblematic to discuss with other students. Against this background, he suggests that instead of using the concept of controversial issues, the concept “sensitive issues” should be used. I am inclined to agree with him, as he argues that it is more constructive to shift the focus from epistemology to pedagogy when it comes to controversial issues. Instead of focusing the issue per se, the focus turns to the students and their learning and reasoning about these issues and to practice dialogue about issues where the debate often is polarised. The teacher, Tina, summarizes this pedagogical approach:

TINA: A good lesson, it is when they have more questions than answers afterwards. And what I do is that I plant questions. And then they can still find that, after discussing with each other, that no, my opinion is right. Yes, so be it. My job here is not to change their whole worldview, but it is to add some things so that they can make better decisions.

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