[37] Religious Diversity and Education in Europe

Jari Ristiniemi, Geir Skeie,
Karin Sporre (Eds.)

Challenging Life: Existential Questions as a Resource for Education

WAXMANN

Religious Diversity and Education in Europe

edited by

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Jari Ristiniemi, Geir Skeie, Karin Sporre (Eds.)

Challenging Life

Existential Questions as a Resource for Education

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Contents

Robert Jackson
Foreword 9

Jari Ristiniemi, Geir Skeie and Karin Sporre
Introduction 13

'Life Questions', Pedagogy and Research

Sven Hartman
Children Searching for a Philosophy of Life.
A Retrospective Review of Six Research and Development Projects 21

Sven-Åke Selander
Existential Questions in Research and Education in the Shape of a
Response to Sven Hartman 47

Pedagogy of Life Questions – Reflections on a Passed Époque and Contemporary Issues

Gunnar J. Gunnarsson
Is a 'Life Question Approach' Appropriate when Religious
Education has Become a Part of Social Studies? 69

Malin Löfstedt and Anders Sjöborg
Addressing Existential Issues through the Eyes of Swedish Religious
Education Teachers 83

Staffan Nilsson
Tonåringen och livsfrågorna (1969) Revisited.
Reflections on 'Life questions' in Contemporary Religious
Education in Swedish Schools 101

Signild Risenfors
Liberal Muslim, Atheist Hindu and Born-again Christian.
Identifications in Relation to Religion among Three Upper
Secondary Students with Experiences Connected to Migration 119

World Views and Education

Siebren Miedema
Personal World View, Existential Questions and Inclusive Pedagogy. Theological and Pedagogical Underpinnings 137

Oddrun Marie Hovde Bråten
World Views in Norwegian RE 157

Judith Everington
Should Religious Education Include the Exploration of Existential Questions through Non-Religious World Views? The Views and Experiences of English Secondary School Teachers 177

Existential Issues of Children and Youth

Maria Szczepska-Pustkowska
The Image of God in Children's Epistolography 193

Caroline Gustavsson
Life Issues Among Young Adults. An Empirical and Methodological Example 211

Jari Ristiniemi
Existence and Education. A Relational and Interactional Model 227

Ethics, Children, Youth and Students

Olof Franck and Annika Lilja
Being *and* Becoming. Challenging Dichotomous Conceptions of Ethical Competence within Democratic Ethics Education in Compulsory School 247

Iris Ridder
The Ethical Aspects of Using Jokes for Learning Purposes as Seen from a Historical Perspective 261

Karin Sporre
Ethical Concepts according to 12-Year-Olds. Students' Responses, National Tests, and Ethics Education 279

Camilla Stabel Jørgensen
Ethical Excursions and Philosophical Dialogues in Teacher Education.
A Waste of Time or a Wise Way to Necessary Knowledge? 297

Into the Future

Annika Manni
School Children Envisioning Future Knowledge and Agency within
the Context of Education for Sustainable Development 313

Bodil Liljefors Persson
The Position of (S-)EXistential Questions in Religious Education in
School and in Teacher Education in Sweden 329

Birgitta Silfver
Narratives and Haiku as Didactic Tools in Clown Work and Drama . . . 347

Ole Andreas Kvamme
Blurring the Image of the Other?
The Recontextualization of Environmental Ethical Values in
Norwegian Education Policy Documents 359

Geir Skeie
Why should Religious Education Include Exploration of Existential
Questions and Personal Values? 383

Karin Kittelmann Flensner
Existential Questions in Religious Education.
Opening up Discussions in Upper Secondary School 397

Robert Jackson

Foreword

It was a privilege to participate in the conference ‘Existential questions in research and education’ in Sigtuna, Sweden. The chapters in the present volume are developed from papers presented by conference participants.

In a meeting packed with interesting and original papers, it was especially a pleasure to listen to Sven Hartman, reflecting on his various research and development projects relating to children’s search for a philosophy of life. It was equally a pleasure to hear the response of Sven-Åke Selander, another outstanding Swedish religious education scholar. Hartman’s approach has been seen as an example of a broadly based ‘inclusive’ religious and values education, especially suitable for schools, which are required to take learners from any background, regardless of religion or belief. Of course, there are those who would argue against the high level of personal involvement by learners in their religious and values education, which characterises Hartman’s work, and who today support what I have described as an ‘information-based, neutral and detached’ approach (Jackson, 2019), which confines the subject to imparting information about religions and beliefs. Such critics would employ study methods emphasising neutrality and scientific objectivity, and would discourage student-to-student dialogue, since its content might be interpreted as potentially influencing contributors.

Hartman’s approach, while recognising that religious and values education should be concerned with informing young people about religions and philosophies impartially, also provides opportunities for students to discuss what they have learned, with peers and the teacher, under the teacher’s guidance and moderation, and also to reflect on their learning. Concerns about inappropriate influence upon student participants are addressed through adopting methods which aim to promote impartiality, rather than detachment or neutrality (Jackson & Everington, 2017). Such an approach combines the liberal education idea of initiation into the full breadth of human knowledge and experience with opportunities for interaction and personal reflection, thereby potentially contributing to students’ personal and social development.

In writing a text for the Council of Europe concerned with the religious dimension of intercultural education (Jackson, 2014), I found Sven Hartman’s work very pertinent to the Council of Europe's dialogical view of education. It was also highly relevant to an issue under current discussion in a range of European and other Western countries, namely whether it is possible to integrate studies of religions in schools with studies of other world views, such as secular humanism. I looked at some important and valuable recent work which distinguishes between 'organised' world views (such as the religions and secular humanism) and 'personal' world views of individual students (eg van der Kooij, de Ruyter & Miedema, 2013; see also Miedema, this volume), noting that personal world views can be complex, sometimes including elements from both religion and non-religion (see also Wallis 2014, 2015). This reading prompted me to re-visit the Nordic tradition which goes back to Anders Jeffner, and especially to look again at Sven Hartman's work. Thus I found that in the mid-1980s, Hartman, in discussing the Swedish term *livsåskådning* for English speaking readers, translated it as 'world view' (Hartman 1986). Hartman also made a distinction '... between a world view as an established religious or political doctrine and a personal world view as it functions in an individual' (Hartman 1986, p. 21). As he says:

> An established world view or doctrine is one that has been written down. It is a construction of thought such as Christianity, Islam, Marxism, Liberalism, Anthroposophy, Naturism etc. It is a collection of traditions that one, so to say, can put between covers.
>
> A personal world view is something else. It can of course be affected by one or more of the established world view traditions, but it chiefly says something about *the individual's* way of understanding existence and relating to it. Such an understanding and way of relating is within every one of us. In this sense, I believe all human beings have a personal world view, though they may not necessarily be aware of it in such a way as to be able to formulate clearly what it implies (Hartman 1986, p. 21).

Hartman's research and writing proved highly relevant for the Council of Europe book which combines the study of religions and other world views with an existential element, focusing on the personal development of students, as well as on generic accounts of religions and philosophies (Jackson 2014). Hartman's observations, together with findings of younger researchers, such as van der Kooij and Wallis, provided research support for this approach.

The present volume includes a thoughtful introduction by the editors, which argues against a narrow view of education, which emphasises the measurable, and appeals for an education that relates broad social, political and moral issues to the personal development of individual students, helping them to live with difference. The following section of the book includes chapters dealing with pedagogy in relation to life questions, including reports of research studies conducted with teachers and school students. The next chapters explore the concept of world view, in relation to pedagogy, national context and the views of teachers. These are followed by a group of explorations of existential issues concerning children and young people, and then by a section providing some different perspectives on ethics and ethical competence in the school setting. The final section of the book looks to the future, raising important issues for consideration in classrooms, such as environmental issues and sustainable development, and others related to classroom interaction and the personal development of students.

Overall, this inspiring collection of writings provides a welcome antidote to the current preoccupation with the measurement of educational attainment, exemplified in Pisa rankings. It provides examples of an education which integrates an acquisition of knowledge with opportunities for students' personal and social development, and is a fine tribute to the contribution of Sven Hartman.

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Jari Ristiniemi, Geir Skeie and Karin Sporre

Introduction

We are living in challenging times. The long history of life on earth and the much shorter history of human beings seem to be colliding and questions arise about how we as humans can handle the upcoming situation with climate change, asking for us to care for nature and endangered species. Part of the challenges are due to the activities of humans, that we live in the époque of Anthropocene, the period of time when human beings significantly impact life and future on the earth. The future for the entire globe has become much more of a human responsibility.

This, and many other things, urges human beings to ask questions about the earth, about other living beings and ourselves. Several chapters in this book express the need to incorporate environmental issues as well as social challenges in teaching and learning about world views and religions. Such issues make us reconsider the understanding of the past, but also point towards the future and the need to build a sustainable local/global society. In times when the political scene seems hijacked by inhuman and xenophobic forces, we ask what the future of humanity, solidarity, and justice is. And, when those who have been entrusted political power use it for their own interest, or ridicule the political power that was entrusted to them so reducing belief in democratic structures, what do we do? Finally, how do we orient ourselves in the midst of new internet-based technology that influences how we relate to one another and maybe makes speaking and listening face-to-face, human communication, less common? In these challenging times a number of existential questions are raised and our understanding of ourselves as social human beings is challenged.

The questions about life on earth and future of human society are not only political issues and the responsibility of national and multinational institutions and companies, they are also felt by individuals, most of us with a sense of limited opportunities to change the world. As people we ask questions about the meaning of life, within the context we live and influenced by the challenges we face. Such existential questions are not ready made or necessarily universal. They are specific and concrete and anchored in daily life. This points to how diverse existential questions can be and that the answers we sometimes find also differ. More so, the diversity of questions and answers can be of existential importance themselves. We may find clashes of life-interpretations, from the individual level through societal, cultural and religious dimensions to the environmental dimensions of life. Some seek answers to challenges through violence, radicalization and consumerism. This book is about the way education and learning could deal with diverse life-interpretations: to identify clashes of interpretations is already a step past them.

A key concern behind this book, is that we believe issues like the ones described above should have a place in education. Rather than being a safe haven from the difficulties of the world, we see education as a place to mirror and address the challenges of society. In order for this to happen, we should support students' and teachers' efforts for autonomy, at the same time acknowledging the fact that education is governed through curriculum and syllabus, not to talk about different kinds of evaluation systems that authorities implement. The educational systems have over the last decades undergone changes. Outcome-based education, performativity and employability are terms connected to these changes when the role of education in a global market system is emphasized. The question of how these factors affect education, knowledge process and interaction between people and between people and society need further exploration. How do the educational systems meet children and young persons? How are their questions and responses taken care of in school in relation to what they encounter today and will face in the future? Many teachers experience a clash between the challenges of the classroom, where they have certain autonomy, and the governmental policies that they are expected to implement.

Educational philosopher Gert Biesta (2009) writes about the purposes of education and argues that the role of education is not only to provide merits for an individual ('qualification'), nor is it only to involve a young person in the society ('socialisation'). Education is also to contribute to personal growth, to individual development ('subjectification'). Contemporary educational systems with their emphasis on what is measurable, on tests and marks, run the risk of neglecting the goals of socialisation, acculturation, and personal growth, transforming education into providing only the kind of knowledge that can be measured through tests. Here, the present volume provides the reader with another focus, namely on the importance of linking the questions that evolve from the everyday life of children and youth with the general teaching and learning in school, but also in particular to religious education.

Given the contemporary changes in educational systems we know through research of children's own narratives that many have started to understand themselves as test-takers, more or less successful ones (Löfgren & Löfgren, 2017). It is obvious that school provides children with interpretative frames that influence the identities they can form, or not form. In an unusual retrospective Swedish study, 16 year old teenagers were asked to write their narratives of their life paths through preschool and school (Torstenson-Ed, 2007). They were also taken back to visit their former preschools and schools to see what was brought back to their mind when coming there. What they remembered was for example moments of freedom, of play (not least in preschool), but also friendships and relationships with teachers. At the centre of what the teenagers remembered as meaningful was:

> … the meetings and actions where you can engage with feelings, thoughts, values, your own intentions, choices and actions. That means to be able to have a dialogue with both persons and contents. (Torstenson-Ed, 2007, p. 61)

What is here referred to as 'content', could be school subjects, varying activities with animals or things, play, or for that matter, computer games. What this study reminds us of is the complexity of learning, how it involves the whole person in a social context.

Research also shows that the complex contemporary questions of climate change and natural resources engage the growing generation and intricately mix questions of knowledge, values and ethics. The questions also take on existential dimensions and awake emotions like hope and worry (Ojala, 2012). In the meaning-making processes of learning at school, experience, emotions and values are integrated when sustainability issues are brought up among children aged 11 to 12 years old (cf. Manni, Sporre & Ottander, 2017). This means that in learning, in education, ethics and values, facts and knowledge, form a whole together with the existential underlying dimensions when meaning-making takes place. Because of this, existential questions are not only present in the school subject where you might expect to find them – in forms of Religion or World View Education, but also in Social Science and Natural Science studies as well as in the study of Languages and Mathematics.

The contributions of this book are placed in six sections, in order to show that they approach the common themes from different perspectives. Still, they all in one way or another, refer to the history of religious education research, going back to the late 1960s, where the first signs appeared of a student-oriented religious education in Sweden. Sven Hartman became a key figure in this research with a long lasting influence on both policy and practice and many of the contributors have been strongly influenced by Sven's work. Several contributions even address the history and background of research on the Swedish life-question based religious education, including the first section with chapters written by Sven Hartman and Sven Åke Selander, two central actors through decades of religious education research and debate. The second section of the book follows up on this, presenting Staffan Nilsson's historical reflections on the Swedish scene, and Gunnar J Gunnarsson who discusses how recent curricular reform in Iceland may influence dealing with existential issues in school. Further, we are offered empirical investigations of both teachers by Malin Löfstedt and Anders Sjöborg and students' views by Signild Risenfors.

In addition to 'life-questions', the concept of 'world view' has also played a significant role in the Swedish discussion about how we can approach existential issues in education. In the next section, three international researchers share some of their views on possibilities and limitations of the 'world view' concept, based on research by Bråten, Everington and Miedema. This ranges from discussion on curricular issues to analysis of secondary school teachers' views. The following section focuses on the existential issues of children and youth, first in a chapter by Maria Szczepska-Pustkowska from Poland who looks into children's images of God, then Caroline Gustavsson who discusses research into young adults' existential questions in Sweden. Jari Ristiniemi addresses similar questions from a philosophical point of view arguing that in late-modern societies our understanding of what science is and its role are changing, considerably opening up for new existential understandings of life.

As should be clear from the initial remarks in this introduction, questions about ethics and values are intimately related to existential issues. We have dedicated one section to the focus on ethical perspectives, starting with a discussion about how to conceptualise ethics education, by Olof Franck and Annika Lilja. Iris Ridder provides us with a rare example of historical investigation into moral education when she presents a study of how jokes have been used for educational purposes in the middle ages. Karin Sporre has a contemporary perspective in her study of 12 year old students' ethical concepts and finally Camilla Stabel Jørgensen presents a didactical innovation, namely 'ethical excursions' in teacher education.

The concluding section contains a varied group of contributions, where the common theme is that they discuss issues that we expect to be of special importance in the future. Annika Manni points to the existential dimensions of education about sustainable development and Ole Andreas Kvamme addresses environmental ethical values in religious education policy documents in Norway. Bodil Liljefors Persson argues that religious education and sex education have things in common dealing with existential issues. Geir Skeie attempts to justify the inclusion of existential and personal issues in religious education on a level of principle, while Karin Kittelmann Flensner discusses this in relation to educational practice, revisiting data from a former research project in upper secondary school.

We hope that the many perspectives offered in this book may serve as a contribution to a renewed interest in existential issues as part of education in general and religious education in particular. We also hope that we have succeeded in showing the relevance of Swedish research in this field over several decades, updated here with contributions from colleagues located in other countries.

In concluding we want to thank our own universities and departments for supporting in various ways our work with this book project, including economical support.

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‘Life Questions’, Pedagogy and Research

Sven Hartman

Children Searching for a Philosophy of Life

A Retrospective Review of Six Research and Development Projects

Abstract

In this chapter a series of six RE research projects, conducted from 1968 to 2002, is presented. Children's existential questions and children's philosophy of life have been studied in various ways and in relation to the RE subject in the Swedish primary school. It is argued that it is important to study these worlds of thought, because it affords valuable knowledge of children and their life situation. Children's thoughts mirror not only the infant soul but also the surrounding world of the child and society itself. The child's right to freedom of thought and speech, and right to be heard, were stressed in the research projects. From a professional perspective the issue of children's reflections, questions and interests becomes a matter of professional ethics, for both teachers and researchers. Some underlying theories that have influenced the different projects are discussed in retrospect. The different contexts of the projects are also dealt with in short; school politics, curriculum development, paradigm shifts within the pedagogy discipline.

1. Introduction

My first contact with religious education in the Swedish primary school was made in a little red wooden building in a small town outside Stockholm. There Miss Eriksson taught us The Three R's, reading, writing and arithmetic, but she certainly never forgot the forth R, religious education. (Hartman, 2012)

She had graduated in 1911 as an infant school teacher, which means that during her own six years in primary school and her two years of teacher training she had experienced an extensive religious education, dominated by the swotting of Luther's Small Catechism. In her first eight years as a teacher she was supposed to teach religion in the same way, but an important turning point in the history of the Swedish school came with *The 1919 course of study*. Through this reform one wanted to vitalize stiff school life and adopt new teaching methods. Religion lost its predominant place in the curriculum and catechism was removed from school teaching. Within the different school subjects 'the great narratives' were emphasized, not least in religious education.

I think Miss Eriksson adopted the new ideas. As far as I can remember from her teaching there was no trace of catechism in it but a lot of narratives, and she was a great storyteller. She told us about Jacob and his brothers, about how it happened that the crown prince became a teetotaller, about Moses on the Nile, about her walking tours in the forests in the north, and so on. The stories merged with one another. I especially remember her exegesis of the story about Jesus in the temple, when he was twelve years old: he was such an exceptional boy, not only because he was so unbelievable good and well behaved. He was also so smart, that he could ask such difficult questions about life and everything, that not even the most learned priests and professors could answer them. – Many years later this story would get quite another meaning to me.

In this article I will present a series of six research projects in which the focus – in different ways – was on children's existential questions and world view.

2. Six Research and Development Projects

In Sweden, like in most other western countries, the educational system had its roots in the church. In 1842, when the elementary school (*folkskolan*) became compulsory, the vicar became the head of the elementary school teachers, and religious education with Luther's small catechism became the most important subject.

During the 20th century the school underwent a long process of secularisation. The Swedish school system was subjected to far-reaching reforms after World War II. The first and foremost goal was to educate a democratic people; the secularisation process of the school was completed. The aim and content of religious education became problematic and politically sensitive. Above all it was the demand of objectivity in the teaching of religious education (RE) that was an obstacle for teachers and authors of textbooks. Probably this was one reason for the Swedish school authorities to invest in the funding of a series of research and development projects listed below in table 1.

Table 1. Research and development project; year of departure and granting authority

1.	UMRe	Undervisningsmetoder i religionskunskap (*Teaching methods in RE*)	1967	SÖ
2.	Bali	Barn och livsfrågor (*Children and existential questions*)	1974	SÖ
3.	UBOL	Utvecklingen i barns omvärldsorientering och livsåskådning (*Development in children's environmental orientation and philosophy of life*)	1978	HSFR
4.	Balil	Barns livssituation och livstolkning (*Children's living conditions and life interpretation*)	1987	SÖ
5.	Balikob	Barns livstolkning i komparativ belysning (*Children's life interpretation in a comparative perspective*)	1994	Skolv
6.	Värde-proj.	Barns och ungdomars livstolkning och skolans värdegrund (*Children's and youth's life interpretation and the basic values of the school*)	1999	HSFR/VR – UVK

All the research projects have, in one way or the other, focused on problems connected with pupils' motivation and interests, especially on children's interest for existential questions (*livsfrågor*). In retrospect you can see that the projects have been interdependent of RE curriculum development; empirically, and sometimes theoretically, the projects have elucidated central concepts in the curricula. At the same time, they may also have legitimized some parts of them.

Focusing on the pupils' existential questions became, with the benefit of hindsight, a way to continue the secularisation of RE in the Swedish school. On the other hand, I would argue, it was a manifestation of children's right to religious, philosophical and personal growth.

2.1 Teaching Methods in RE and Pupils' Development and Motivation

The point of departure of the first research project *Teaching methods Religious Education* (UMRe) was not a theory or a research problem, but an investigative task at the request of the school authorities. Later, however, the project led both to theoretical considerations and several empirical studies.

The aim of the UMRe project was to 'investigate how the schools goal for an objective religious education might be fulfilled in a didactical, proper way and to design and evaluate teaching methods for this education'. The project was directed at the middle-school level of the comprehensive school, with pupils 10 to 12 years old. The development work followed the teaching principles from the 1962 curriculum for the comprehensive school, the so-called MACIC formula – Motivation, Activity, Concretisation, Individualisation and Cooperation.

The teaching materials produced should motivate pupils for RE – which had turned out to be the most unpopular of the school subjects. It was necessary to find new working methods to activate pupils, since the traditional way of working in the classroom during the RE lessons had not succeeded. 'Concretisation' was a central concept in the project. Ronald Goldman's *Religious Thinking from Childhood to Adolescence* (Goldman, 1968) had drawn attention to one main question in RE research: how to teach concrete thinking pupils about abstract ideas and phenomena (Westling, & Pettersson, 1973), which could be considered as a core problem in RE research since the days of John Dewey (Dewey, 1903).

A great deal of the project work was devoted to investigating the pupils' interests. The task of these studies was to try and see traditional religious teaching through the eyes of the pupils. The purpose was to give a picture of middle school pupils' attitudes to school instruction in the subject of RE and to investigate their interests in certain problem areas linked to the subject.

The material in the first interest investigation was gathered using teacher-administered questionnaires answered by 2 081 pupils at 89 randomly selected schools throughout Sweden. In its entirety the first interest study gave a picture of the prerequisites for teaching in RE at the middle-school level. On the one hand, most pupils showed very little interest in the subject as they had experienced it. As mentioned before, RE was the most unpopular subject in the curriculum. On the other hand, there seemed to be a very great and widespread interest in existential questions.

The low interest in the RE-subject was not a surprise for us since many teachers had experienced this lack of interest for many years. But after the results from the questionnaire we knew this for certain. The pupils' great interest in existential questions, however, caused some astonishment. Our observations did not tally with the common picture of 10 to 12 year-old pupils at all. I became a bit sceptical about the investigation myself, not so much about the results, but about the research method. We had no reason to doubt the reliability of the results: we had administered a retest with good outcome, but what about the validity? After all, large-scale questionnaires did not seem to be appropriate for communicating interests in the existential field. For this reason, we wished to check our results by making an inventory of children's spontaneous thoughts using a different and less structured method.

The study covered 377 children aged 10 to 12 from five schools in different parts of Sweden. The pupils were shown nine slides of children of their own age. Each picture was connected to a short, unfinished story. The pupils were asked to write down what they thought the boy or girl in the picture was thinking about and finish the little story. The short texts gathered in this way were analysed for content.

The content analysis showed both depth and breadth in the children's texts. In their answers to the nine completion items, they had specified a wide variety of different themes. A large part of the answers treated existential questions. These themes occurred side by side with other simpler and more light-hearted topics.

The two most common themes concerned problems of loneliness, of violence and of suffering in the world. Texts concerning loneliness were often written by the children that had experienced or witnessed mobbing. In the texts about war two opinions could be discerned: war is something horrible and frightening, and war is something that is clearly unnecessary and insane.

The research material contained many other themes: the meaning of life and death, the origin of the universe, questions about the functions of nature or the human body, and many texts about beautiful horses, thrilling hockey games, and meatballs and mash potatoes for dinner.

The investigation was repeated later in our subsequent research, all with similar results. The first study was also replicated in Norway and Finland. (Monstad, & Sætre, 1977; Tamminen, 1988)

The results should not be viewed as a fixed catalogue of themes of concern for children at a certain age. According to our findings children's interests are not

Table 2. What do children think about? Some examples of answers from sentence completion items from interest investigations from different years

Why is he so lonely? And he wants to know why his mates are so mean to him. That's what you think about when you see Andrew so lonely. He hasn't been any trouble to anyone, but he's wondering why it's HIM that must be outside everything all through his time at school.

Girl, 5th year, 1970

How can it be that our teacher knows such a lot and she's so good at nearly everything? That's something you start thinking about when you're sitting in school, working.

Girl, 4th year, 1970

He's wondering about how he and all the animals, trees, seas, stones, mountains, grass, sky, sun, moon came to be. That's what you think about when you see a child being born and when animals are born, and trees grow.

Boy, 6th year, 1970

How animals and man came to be and what man and the animals looked like and how Man made weapons.

Boy 2nd year, 1987

He's wondering about how the earth came about. And how it's possible to walk on the moon without slipping out in space and disappear. And no one will find you afterwards.

Girl, 5th year, 1987

He's wondering about if he some time will become a better person. That's what you come to think about when you are alone.

Boy, 5th year, 1987

How can there be such idiotic things like war? Does anybody in the world want war? No, but there are many wanting more power!!!! That's what you think about when you watch the telly news that shows pictures telling about the war in foreign countries!!!!

Girl, 5th year, 1987

When I am alone I use to wonder about all bad things I have done and how I can make it good so that I get a better conscience and feel better.

Girl, 6th year, 2001

In families there often used to be unfairness but that unfairness is not as dangerous as injustice out in the world.

Boy, 5th year, 2001

primarily related to their development stage, but rather to their circumstances, their *Sitz im Leben*. We were struck by the expressiveness and significance of the children's short texts. The language was plain, straightforward, inventive and rich in colour. The message was sincere and free from ingratiation.

2.2 Small Children and Existential Questions

The second project, *Children and existential questions (Bali),* started in 1974. The task was to make an inventory of children's spontaneous thoughts as we had done in the first project in the interest studies, but this time we wanted to focus on pupils from the first school years and on preschool children. This aim required that we developed new methods for communicating with the children taking part in the investigation. We designed an interview manual based on pictures, open-ended questions and sentence completions.

Interviews with 96 preschool children and 127 pupils from the 2^nd^ year in primary school showed that there seemed to be a similar interest in existential questions among the younger children as we had found among the older primary school pupils. But as you can see in table 3 it was obvious that the younger children had a narrower life-world from which they took examples illustrating existential problems. There seemed to be a sort of 'problem fellowship' between the younger and the older children. Children of different age differ in experience and knowledge. The horizon gradually opens on new worlds, but the old questions about the Beginning and the End remain, even though children learn to formulate them differently.

This investigation showed that it is hard to develop workable instruments that help to get to know children's worlds of thoughts and ideas, most difficult in the case of preschool children – difficult but not impossible.

During the 70s and 80s the education discourse was dominated by cognitive psychology. As mentioned before, in the RE-field Ronald Goldman's works on religious development during adolescence were studied in many countries, including Sweden. In those days every teacher student knew Piaget's stage theory by heart. Jean Piaget, in his studies on children's cognitive development, focused on the cognitive structure of children's thinking. The theory described the formal structure of children's thinking, but what about the *content* in children's thoughts? In a time when everybody talked about *how* children were thinking, the didactic task of our projects demanded that we studied *what* pupils were

Table 3. What preschool children and primary school children find difficult to understand. Some slightly edited answers from interviews from 1975.

Preschool children

- I don't know how there came to be people. Lots of things are made of plastic and that.
- How can animals live?
- Why do they pull down houses? Why do people have flowers? Why are there weapons?
- How is that butterflies can fly? Why is the sun up in the sky?
- What a flower looks like inside.
- When mum's cross …
- People who come from another country are difficult to understand.

2nd year school children

- What's the most important thing in the world that you don't know by yourself? I mean, the very most important. Everybody who fights – about anything. Why must the grown-ups always decide? That's a hard question, too.
- Before, multiplication was difficult, but now I can do it.
- How does a war start, perhaps? Why do they let out all the sewage into fresh water?
- Where do storms come from?
- Why can't I have a kitten?
- What happens when you die? But I suppose they don't know either. How everything starts, in your body – yes, where does everything come from?

thinking, or pondering, or philosophising about. I think that was the reason why we started to look for an additional theory frame for the content analysis of our research materials.

2.3 Environmental Orientation and Philosophy of Life

The third project started in 1978, *Development in children's environmental orientation and philosophy of life (UBOL)*. Overall it had three aims: the first was to reanalyse earlier research materials and conduct new interest investigations to test the validity and the stability of the results of the studies we had made ten years earlier. Another aim was to strengthen the theoretical basis for the study of the development of children's environmental orientation and philosophy of life.

A third task was to summarize the research on children's existential questions in the Nordic countries.

A survey containing 70 multiple-choice questions about interests and attitudes, and two open-ended questions was delivered to 725 primary school pupils. The results showed an almost complete conformity with the former interest investigations; there was a rich variation in the children's interests and attitudes, they disliked RE and showed a big interest in existential questions. (Ekström, & Odencrants, 1980)

When we combined the results from interviews and two sentence-completion tasks from the three different groups of children, altogether 383 2nd and 3rd year pupils, we got a ranking of the most frequently occurring themes in the pupils' answers.

Table 4. Ranking of the most frequently occurring themes of early primary school children's answers from interviews and sentence-completions. (Hartman 1986a, p. 59)

Ranking	*Themes category*
1	Loneliness, forsakenness
2	Play and other activities
3	Life in school
4	Death
5	Conflicts
6	Bullying, being teased
7	War and international conflicts
8	Fear, sorrow/general
9	Being given presents/birthdays
10	The future, growing up
11	How the natural world functions
12	Happiness, security
13	Literature, TV, language, music
14	Being given, having, a pet
15	How everything started
16	Technology
17	The universe

Concerning the theoretical basis there was a need to adopt a broader approach to our research problem. In addition to the psychological development perspective we looked for a theoretical frame for analysing and conceptualizing the *content* in our research materials. We wanted to investigate not only *what* children are thinking about, but also *why*; what is the *intention* underlying their existential questions? A theoretical frame for such an investigation was constructed based on a combination of the concepts 'existential question' (*livsfråga*) and 'personal world view' (*personlig livsåskådning*). The meaning of the concept existential question was settled by the following operational definition:

> An existential question is one concerning the fundamental conditions for human life and for existence in general. The form an existential question takes may vary, but it is always a personal expression of the need to process and formulate experience of one's surrounding and of existence in a wide sense. Thus, it is also a step in a person's endeavour to interpret and understand life. (Hartman, 1986b)

The human endeavour to interpret and understand life may lead to a philosophy of life or a world view of some kind. In a Swedish context the term 'livsåskådning' stands for this process. The concept 'livsåskådning' has no direct English equivalent. The German 'Lebensanschauung' is, however, a direct linguistic parallel. The more frequently used term 'Weltanschauung' has more or less the same meaning, and its English equivalent 'world view' is, I think, a more relevant rendering of the Swedish 'livsåskådning' than the literal translation 'life view'.

An established world view has been codified and written down. It is a collection of representations and traditions that one, so to say, can print and put between covers – like Marxism, Christianity, Islam and Anthroposophy etc. Youngsters' struggles with existential questions and their search for answers is something else entirely, I think. I have found it useful to distinguish between a world view as an established religious or philosophical doctrine, and a *personal* world view.

Following Jeffner (1988) and others there are three important aspects of a personal world view worth bearing in mind. First a theoretical one, consisting of a person's *convictions* and *conception of the world* – what one believes in and what one knows and what has significance for one's personal world view. Here one may count faith and knowledge within several areas, all relating to different aspects of existence: conception of man (anthropology), conception of society (sociology), conception of God (theology), conception of reality (ontology), conception of knowledge (epistemology) etc. Elements like these are usually found in different world view systems and, as has been seen from examples from research materials presented earlier, such elements could also be found in children's existential questions and other kinds of philosophical thoughts.