

Introduction

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Arguably, the emergence or invention of school has been a very powerful factor in the development of human culture. School has become the symbol of education and learning which explains why it has also become a cultural universal. Increasingly, there are no societies left in the world which have not introduced schools and made it mandatory for all children and youth to attend school for many years. Yet at the same time, another even more powerful source of education still remains. As many people have testified for themselves and in their biographies, despite the influence of mandatory school attendance, life itself has been the most important educational influence. The many hours spent in school classrooms seem to fade once their influence is compared to the unplanned experiences that have come with life – good and bad experiences, sometimes beneficial for a person and sometimes devastating.

Human learning cannot be reduced to what happens in schools. Calling life an educator, however, is only possible figuratively and metaphorically. Moreover, life is beyond all intentional planning in this respect. It just happens. Nevertheless, there is an important insight to be gained from considering the limits of school-based learning compared to experiences outside of school. In spite of the monopolising tendencies of the equation between learning or education and school, there are other fields and opportunities which deserve new attention, for example, educational programs offered by non-state actors like the churches or other associations and institutions of civil society.

It is the intention of the present volume to strengthen the awareness of the importance and influence of learning and education beyond school. Moreover, it pursues the more specific question what this kind of education means in terms of religious education. Contrary to other fields, religious education has never been limited to school and to the school subject of Religious Education offered there. Educational programs outside of the school have continued to be offered to children and youth in many places, often in addition to Religious Education at school. But what can be said about the reality and influence of such programs? What research findings are available to answer this question?

1. The focus on non-formal religious education

So far, religious education research has clearly had its focus most of all on the context of school. This is true for most European countries where Religious Education as a school subject plays a major role and therefore seems to define the scope of the respective research as well. The situation in countries like France or,

beyond Europe, in the United States of America where there is no such subject offered in state schools, is naturally different but the research from such countries is also comparatively limited once the fields of general research on youth and religion or on the psychology of religion are excluded which are more independent of institutional presuppositions. Even if this has never been discussed explicitly, research in religious education seems to equal school-oriented research, at least in most cases.

In recent years, however, the awareness of the meaning and scope of education outside of the school has clearly grown, in general as well as concerning religious education. This new awareness applies to both the influence of the family and of everyday processes of learning, for example, with electronic media on the one hand and on the other hand, the importance of educational programs and experiences outside school which are often sponsored by non-state associations and organizations. This new awareness implies that there is a certain imbalance between the importance of religious education outside of school and the lack of research on such areas, especially concerning empirical research. With few exceptions, very little is known about the processes and effects of non-formal religious education. Valid research results which would allow for general insights into such effects have remained rare. Research has not kept pace with the new awareness of the importance of non-formal religious education.

In other words, the traditional focus on Religious Education at school should no longer be the only guiding principle for religious education research if this research is meant to do justice to the reality of religious education in general. The present volume makes this observation its starting point by putting the emphasis on non-formal religious education. The understanding of the concept of non-formal education is based on the threefold distinction between informal, non-formal and formal education. This distinction will be discussed in more detail and in terms of different national contexts in the chapters contained in this volume. In a preliminary manner it can be stated that *formal education* means all kinds of educational processes that are based on formal educational institutions, i.e. in most cases school. Formal education is compulsory, it is achievement-oriented and closely connected to grades and degrees which may be of decisive influence on the future course of life. Moreover, formal education is highly regulated by a binding curriculum and is characterised by the dominance of professional teachers while the pupils are treated as clients who have to comply with the expectations set by the teachers and the curriculum. Opposed to this, *informal learning and education* refers to all processes of education and learning that occur without an institutional basis especially designed for educational purposes. While the family, for example, can be called an institution it is obvious that its purpose cannot be reduced to education, in spite of its enormous impact on all later education. Most of what can be said about the characteristics of formal education does not apply to informal education which operates without grades and certificates as well as without professional teachers. *Non-formal education* stands between the two fields of formal and informal educa-

tion in that it depends on educational programs (as opposed to informal education) but is much less formalised than education in the context of school. Again, most of the characteristics of formal education do not apply in this case while its often intentional character distinguishes non-formal from informal education.

It has to be admitted, however, that the three concepts and the characterizations summarised here are somewhat vague. In many cases it remains ambiguous if a certain educational program or institution belongs to the one field or rather to another. Kindergartens, for example, clearly show traits that fit with both, formal education as well as non-formal education (which is why research on religious education in kindergartens has been included in this volume). There are clear cases like (Christian) youth work (non-formal education) and school (formal education) but in many other cases the distinction is blurred. This is why the editors of this volume decided to make the meaning of the three concepts – formal, informal and non-formal religious education – one of the topics which is treated in the different chapters of the book, rather than presupposing a clear-cut definition which may turn out to be not applicable in many cases. Some of the chapters include detailed discussions of this question as well as an analysis of existing publications (cf. especially Simojoki in this volume). A summary evaluation of what the concept of non-formal religious education should mean and what belongs to it and what not, will be attempted in the conclusions at the end of this volume.

2. The need for researching non-formal religious education

That an exclusive focus on Religious Education at school is too narrow and fails to do justice to the reality of the field of religious education in general can also be grasped from recent discussions in general education as well as in politics. The distinction and appreciation of three kinds of education – formal, informal and non-formal – is becoming a general standard in this field (cf. OECD 2010; as an example from Germany: Bundesministerium 2008). Yet especially with religious education this new understanding has not yet engendered sufficient research in order to arrive at well-grounded understandings and data-based evaluations in the non-formal sector.

In recent years, religious education has become a discipline that sees its task not only in using research results from other fields, for example, from theology and religious studies or from general education and psychology that traditionally have been the most important partner disciplines for religious education. More and more, religious education is willing and able to do its own research, in terms of historical, analytical and empirical research at different national and international levels. Special international research conferences like the Lund (Sweden) Conference (Larsson and Gustavsson 2004) as well as international associations like ISREV (International Seminar on Religious Education and Values) or ISERT (International

Society for Empirical Research in Theology) with their usually bi-annual meetings testify to this development. In 2016, a very successful symposium supported by the “German Research Foundation” (DFG) was held at Tübingen (Germany), “Researching Religious Education: Classroom Processes and Outcomes” (publication: Schweitzer and Boschki 2018).

As mentioned above, however, in most cases, be it in public debates or in with research consultations like the ones just mentioned, religious education is understood in terms of the school subject which goes by this name, at least in many European countries. This limited understanding does not do justice to the importance of other fields and contexts of religious education outside of school, like families or congregations. The international studies on confirmation work, for example, which were carried out in nine European countries showed that about 500000 young people take part in this program every year (cf. Schweitzer et al. 2015 and 2017; Simojoki et al. 2018). Consequently, there is a growing interest in the meaning and impact of non-school educational programs in the field of religious education, not only in the case of confirmation work but also other programs offered by the Churches or other religious organizations (cf. Ilg 2011). Without research, this interest will necessarily remain abstract and without empirical basis.

Due to a number of factors concerning the respective research traditions as well as the political and religious situation in these countries described in the chapters of this volume, Finland, Norway and Switzerland (Kanton of Zurich) have developed approaches for researching non-formal religious education which are of special interest in the present context. In Finland, such approaches can be viewed most appropriately in the context of advanced Finnish research traditions in religious education which have included empirical studies in many fields beyond school, among others concerning diaconal work and volunteerism in youth work or / and in confirmation work. In Norway and in Switzerland, similar approaches have been developed and used, at least in the first place, for evaluating the effects and the effectiveness of different projects and models of religious education in congregational contexts as part of general reform initiatives in these countries (in both countries, these initiatives respond to new needs after Religious Education at school lost its traditional denominational or confessional emphasis). It can be expected that the experiences in these countries will also be of interest for other countries where no such research traditions exist in the context of non-formal religious education.

In many European countries and beyond, there is also a growing interest in non-formal religious education in the context of non-Christian religions, especially Islam. In this case, however, negative views often seem to play a role in this context (cf. Ulfat in this volume). There is concern about possible fundamentalist influences transferred by religion teachers who are active in the context of mosques or similar Muslim institutions addressing young people. Yet very little empirical data is available concerning the actual effects of non-formal religious education in Islam. Again, the main focus of research on Muslim education has been on the school sub-

ject of Islamic Religious Education while the informal and the non-formal sectors have been widely neglected.

Sometimes the question is raised if it is even possible to do empirical research in the non-formal sector and to come up with valid results. This critical view is based on the lack of structure and institutionalization which, from the perspective of non-formal education, not only is characteristic of this field but has to be counted among its decisive strengths and advantages over other forms of education. The question of feasibility of research on non-formal religious education therefore is another focus in the present book. Due to its characteristic institutional shapes as well as to the organizational forms of non-formal religious education, research in this field requires methodologies and approaches which are designed to be sensitive to the special object of research in terms of presuppositions of non-formal religious education. It should indeed not be assumed that research procedures developed in the context of school can just be transferred to the non-formal sector without explicitly considering their suitability and without making changes and adaptations. This is why there is a strong emphasis on research designs and methods in all of the contributions to this volume. The aim must be to achieve valid research results based on methodologies which may be different from those used in the context of school but which are no less rigorous and trustworthy in terms of the results.

In sum, empirical research on non-formal religious education must be called a neglected field, at least in most countries. Although the importance of non-formal education in general has come to be acknowledged because of its individual as well as social and societal impact and in spite of the awareness of its public significance, research has been rather slow to develop in this area. The present volume is the first international publication with a clear focus on empirical research concerning non-formal religious education. It offers a forum for summarising the state of the art, for a critical review of existing research as well as of current research projects, for developing (methodological) criteria and perspectives for future research in this field as well as for bringing together insights on educating, teaching and learning in religious education that might be valid beyond particular countries. In this sense it may be viewed as an attempt to what recently has been called international knowledge transfer in religious education (Manifesto 2019).

The fact that empirical approaches to religious education have widely tended to neglect the non-formal sector, is also the reason for the emphasis on empirical research in the present volume. This emphasis does not imply, however, that research should be limited to just one approach. Other approaches, for example historical studies or hermeneutical-analytical studies can be of no less importance for advancing the work of non-formal religious education. Moreover, religious education should always be based on an interplay between, among others, theology, insights from the philosophy of education and empirical research (for a recent example cf. Simojoki et al. 2018). Yet in order to give this volume a clear focus, it was decided that empirical approaches should be the main topic to be addressed here.

3. Aims of the volume

The main aim of this volume is to bring together experiences and results of empirical research in the field of non-formal religious education in different European countries. There also is the hope that this endeavor can help to generate new research projects which could be carried out in international cooperation.

The focus of the different chapters is on two aspects:

- The reality of non-formal religious education as it can be grasped from empirical research.
- Research-based evaluation of presuppositions and effects of non-formal religious education.

Given the state of research in this field, the first question must concern the reality of non-formal religious education. This question is of special interest because it refers to the availability of such education as well as to its shape, its structures and its functioning in different countries. To say it again, very few data and empirical insights are available concerning all of these aspects so far.

However, since the availability of non-formal religious education can only be considered a presupposition for the actual educational work and its possible effects, the second question must also be asked: What can be said, based on research, concerning the effects of non-formal religious education?

One background of the present volume has been the successful research carried out on confirmation work in nine European countries over the last ten years. Since this research has been previously presented internationally (cf. the volumes in English: Schweitzer et al. 2010, 2015, 2017), it will not be the main focus of the present book but will be presented together with the research on other fields of non-formal religious education. All religious programs for children and youth offered by the Churches or different religious communities are of interest here – be it in the sense of traditional children and youth work or of other programs which have different names (Catholic First Communion groups, mini-confirmands, Sunday School, Islamic programs, interreligious project groups, etc.).

Moreover, one important realization of recent research in some of the countries refers to the pivotal role of young volunteers, both for the quality and attractiveness of programs of non-formal education but also as a starting point for voluntary commitment in church and society at large (cf. the reports from the different countries in Schweitzer et al. 2017). This is why this book also includes research on non-formal religious education in the context of training and working with young volunteers.

The different chapters include presentations on specific research projects carried out by the authors themselves as well as summary accounts of the pertinent research in different countries. The aim is to:

- consider the state of the art concerning research on non-formal religious education,
- to critically review existing research,

- to bring together insights into this field of research that might be of interest beyond particular countries,
- to develop (methodological) criteria and perspectives for future research in this field,
- to stimulate national and international research on non-formal religious education.

4. The background of the volume: Research on non-formal religious education at Tübingen University and at the Comenius Institute

Concerning Protestant religious education, it is probably fair to say that the Department of Religious Education at the Protestant Faculty of the University of Tübingen and the Comenius Institute in Münster have played a pioneering role in respect to researching religious education in the non-formal sector in Germany. While the Comenius Institute has pursued an interest in theoretical questions of religious education in congregational contexts for several decades, sometimes also with smaller empirical research projects, in recent years it has developed a focus on data-based reports on different fields of church-related educational programs (cf. Schreiner in this volume). These fields also include Religious Education at school and church-sponsored schools but, more importantly in the present context of non-formal religious education, the reports refer to Sunday School, kindergartens and adult education. Altogether, the expertise concerning research on non-formal religious education to be found with the Comenius Institute can be called unique for the context of Germany.

In the case of the Department of Religious Education at the University of Tübingen (Faculty of Protestant Theology), there has also been both a strong theoretical interest in religious education beyond the school as well as a clear research focus in this area (cf., for example, Nipkow 1990; Schweitzer 1996 and 2006, also Schweitzer in this volume). The research projects carried out in this context over the last 15 years examined confirmation work, religious education in kindergartens, Christian youth work, young volunteers, and faith-related programs in adult education (cf. the respective chapters in this volume). All of these projects included empirical studies which, in part, are described in this volume.

Given their previous work and experiences, the two institutions could serve as organizers of the present volume as well as contribute a number of chapters describing this work. Yet the volume is not limited to the Protestant tradition which is characteristic of them. Instead, from the beginning, it was considered important to include Roman Catholic research projects (cf. Altmeyer and Boschki; Könemann and Sajak in this volume) as well as other religious traditions which could be realised for Muslim religious education (cf. Ulfat in this volume).

5. How the volume developed

Beyond the general ideas and aims described so far in this introduction, the actual starting point for this volume was an international symposium on “Researching Non-Formal Religious Education in Europe” which took place at the University of Tübingen in March 2018. Yet the book is not simply intended to document the contributions and discussions of this symposium. Instead, the authors were asked to actually write their chapters after the symposium and to include the results of the symposium discussions about the initial presentations from the different countries. Moreover, additional authors were invited to contribute in order to broaden the scope of the volume, again in light of new insights from the symposium and other considerations. All manuscripts were carefully reviewed by the editors and were then revised by the authors.

The choice of authors for this volume is based on general criteria such as international scope (contributions from nine European countries), gender, religious background (Protestant, Catholic, Orthodox, Muslim) and pertinent research experience. Moreover, the special interest and expertise in research approaches concerning non-formal religious education in Finland, Norway and Switzerland also played a role. In general, the attempt was made to represent at least all major research projects in the field of non-formal religious education in Europe. While it is certainly not possible to claim exhaustive coverage in a field which, by its designation as non-formal itself, defies clearly defined boundaries, an attempt was made to include as many research approaches and results as possible. The editors are grateful to the colleagues in different countries who were willing to advise them with respective choices and invitations of contributions.

6. The breakdown of the volume

A volume on researching non-formal religious education in Europe could be organised in a number of different ways. It could try to make the different countries the organising principle. The chapters could also be grouped according to the different methodologies used by the respective research projects. Still another possibility would be to order the chapters in terms of the age groups involved in the different programs under study.

While all of these possibilities would have been real options, the final decision was for a rather simple and straightforward order of the chapters which may be most useful for different readers. The first part of the book brings together general descriptions and research overviews. All other parts are grouped according to the programs they refer to: kindergarten, Sunday School, First Communion preparation and confirmation work, young volunteers. The sequence of the different parts roughly corresponds to the increasing age of the participants in the different programs but there is no claim that this could be a sequence in any strict sense. Many of

the programs address different age groups at the same time or as part of a diversified program.

It must also be emphasised that the somewhat institutional ordering of the different parts of the book should not be taken to mean that non-formal religious education is secretly governed by a formal structure. As a number of the chapters in this volume show the opposite is true today. The traditional structures which used to exert quite a bit of influence in the non-formal sector are actually losing importance more and more as most programs tend to become more flexible and sometimes also more permeable for each other. This situation implies that there may also be new potentials for cooperation between the different fields but the research results reported in this volume also indicate that each of the different programs continues to be interested in maintaining itself as a distinct field of work.

7. A note of thanks

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