

Keeping Education Non-Confessional While Teaching Children about Religion

Authors : Tünde Puskás, Anita Andersson

Abstract : This study is part of a research project about whether religion is considered as part of Swedish cultural heritage in Swedish preschools. Our aim in this paper is to explore how a Swedish preschool balance between keeping the education non-confessional and at the same time teaching children about a particular tradition, Easter. The paper explores how in a Swedish preschool with a religious profile teachers balance between keeping education non-confessional and teaching about a tradition with religious roots. The point of departure for the theoretical frame of our study is that practical considerations in pedagogical situations are inherently dilemmatic. The dilemmas that are of interest for our study evolve around formalized, intellectual ideologies, such as multiculturalism and secularism that have an impact on everyday practice. Educational dilemmas may also arise in the intersections of the formalized ideology of non-confessionalism, prescribed in policy documents and the common sense understandings of what is included in what is understood as Swedish cultural heritage. In this paper, religion is treated as a human worldview that, similarly to secular ideologies, can be understood as a system of thought. We make use of Ninian Smart's theoretical framework according to which in modern Western world religious and secular ideologies, as human worldviews, can be studied from the same analytical framework. In order to be able to study the distinctive character of human worldviews Smart introduced a multi-dimensional model within which the different dimensions interact with each other in various ways and to different degrees. The data for this paper is drawn from fieldwork carried out in 2015-2016 in the form of video ethnography. The empirical material chosen consists of a video recording of a specific activity during which the preschool group took part in an Easter play performed in the local church. The analysis shows that the policy of non-confessionalism together with the idea that teaching covering religious issues must be purely informational leads in everyday practice to dilemmas about what is considered religious. At the same time what the adults actually do with religion fulfills six of seven dimensions common to religious traditions as outlined by Smart. What we can also conclude from the analysis is that whether it is religion or a cultural tradition that is thought through the performance the children watched in the church depends on how the concept of religion is defined. The analysis shows that the characters of the performance themselves understood religion as the doctrine of Jesus' resurrection from the dead. This narrow understanding of religion enabled them indirectly to teach about the traditions and narratives surrounding Easter while avoiding teaching religion as a belief system.

Keywords : non-confessional education, preschool, religion, tradition

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