



“Life” and Democratisation in the Swedish Welfare State School: Experimental Research Projects on Children’s “Life Questions” in Religious Education, Late 1960s to Early 1990s

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Abstract • “Life questions” (*livsfrågor*) was inserted in religious education in the Swedish curriculum for comprehensive school in 1969. This was in line with the democratisation aspirations of one school for all, in which both modernisation and secularisation were important aspects. In relation to this, the National Board of Education commissioned a large experimental research project on teaching methodology in religious education that was later followed by a series of projects focusing on children’s life questions. This article explores the history of three of these projects and their knowledge production and discusses how the recontextualisation of religious education and the pedagogic interest in life questions related to school reforms during 1960–1990s. Life questions as a student-centred pedagogical model had its peak in the 1980s but lost its central role in the new prescriptive model of knowledge that was launched in the curriculum of 1994. Life questions aspired to the ambitions of democratisation through individualisation and can be seen as a continuation of earlier school reforms aiming at the individualisation of religious practice.

Keywords • existential questions, secularisation, recontextualisation, school reforms, individualisation

Introduction

After World War II, the Nordic societies increased their focus on developing democratic societies. This was, on the one hand, a reaction to European fascism and Nazism and its defeat, but, on the other hand, also in line with the development of the welfare state. Raising democratic citizens through schooling was part of this.¹ This development can be seen in all five Nordic countries, although Sweden seems to have had a leading position.² Simultaneously, an increasing focus on the individual child can be seen in school reforms and school pedagogies, which included an interest in the questions of the child. In 1967–1973, the project of *UMRe: Undervisningsmetodik* –

- 1 Mette Buchardt, Pirjo Markkola, and Heli Valtonen, “Education and the Making of the Nordic Welfare States,” in *Education, State and Citizenship*, ed. Mette Buchardt, Pirjo Markkola, and Heli Valtonen, NordWel Studies in Historical Welfare State Research 4 (Helsinki: Nordic Centre of Excellence NordWel, 2013), 7–30; Christian Ydesen and Mette Buchardt, “Citizen Ideals and Education in Nordic Welfare State School Reforms,” in *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Education* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020).
- 2 Bo Lindensjö and Ulf P. Lundgren, *Utbildningsreformer och politisk styrning* (Stockholm: Liber, 2014), 61–63; Alfred Ofedal Telhaug, Odd Asbjørn Mediås, and Peter Aasen, “The Nordic Model in Education: Education as Part of the Political System in the Last 50 Years,” *Scandinavian Journal of Education* 50, no. 3 (2006), 248–50.

Religionskunskap, (Instruction Methodology – Knowledge of Religion), was conducted.³ It was a project that was financed by the state through the National Board of Education (*Skolöverstyrelsen*) aimed at developing new teaching methods for the new curriculum that was about to be launched in 1969. Within the frame of UMRe, several studies with different scopes were conducted. One sub-study led by Sven G. Hartman aimed at gathering information about 9–12-year-old children's life questions (*livsfrågor*)⁴ and how to integrate such questions in teaching. This was the beginning of a series of experimental studies on children's life questions based on the same methodology carried out over a period of 50 years until today.

The aim of this article is to show how these experimental data-generating projects about children's life questions developed during the first 25 years, and how they evolved in relation to the central school reforms, debates in society, dominant pedagogical ideas, and research interests over time. This is interesting since the first three large projects illustrate what took place at the intersection of commissioned research from the state, researchers, and school reforms in Swedish religious education. Strong state control in the 1960s was seen as important to guarantee a fair society and a modern welfare state, and the projects can be seen as examples of ideological centralisation, aiming at introducing a modern, secularised, and more equal school.⁵ This centralisation was more evident in Sweden and Norway than in the other Nordic countries,⁶ and Sweden was the first Nordic country to introduce non-confessional religious education in compulsory school.⁷ An overall aim of the article is also to discuss how the recontextualisation of religious education and the pedagogic interest in life questions, and thus the life of the students, played along with the intention of raising citizens for a democratic society.

The first part of the article provides a short historical background in the light of previous research. This is followed by a presentation of the material used in this study and the methodological approach for studying it. The three projects chosen for exploration in this article are thereafter historically contextualised and analysed. The analysis of the projects focuses mainly on the aims and aspirations of the projects, as well as their designs and influences. In the last section of the article, conclusions are drawn from the analysis regarding the recontextualisation of religious education, and the knowledge production in the projects. This is discussed in relation to the shifting position of life questions in the curriculum, the shifts in values and pedagogical ideas, and the role of democratisation in Swedish educational policy over time.

3 Mette Buchardt and Katarina Kärnebro, "Experimental Education Projects and their Data Collection: Policy History on Experiments with 'Children's Life Questions' in Welfare-State Sweden Late 1960s to Early 1970s," *Paedagogica Historica* 60, no. 6 (2024), 1144–56.

4 "Livsfrågor" is not easy to translate into English. "Livsfrågor" refers to vital issues but might extend traditional existential questions. "Life questions" is the term used throughout this text to translate "livsfrågor," except when "livsfrågor" is described as a concept; then the Swedish term is used instead.

5 Lisbeth Lundahl, "Sweden: Decentralization, Deregulation, Quasi-markets – and Then What?," *Journal of Education Policy* 17, no. 6 (2002), 687–97.

6 Oftedal Telhaug, Mediås, and Aasen (2006), 250.

7 Karl-Göran Algotsson, *Från katekestvång till religionsfrihet: Debatten om religionsundervisningen i skolan under 1900-talet* (Stockholm: Rabén & Sjögren, 1975), 372–86.

Historical background in light of previous research

In the middle of the century, the Swedish school system undertook many changes according to reforms aimed at educating for democracy. In the 1940s, two major investigations – the 1940s school report and the 1948 School Commission – proposed a completely new structure for the school system that was eventually decided upon and implemented in the 1960s.⁸ The investigations suggested a nine-year compulsory school that was centralised in the sense that the schools should provide the same structural possibilities for learning, and decentralised in the sense that it would make rural and urban schools more equal by handing over some of the responsibility to the municipalities.⁹ The aspiration of the reform was to create a new unified school system in which all students, regardless of socio-economic background, should be given the same possibilities to acquire knowledge. The new generation of students should become all-round educated, and this would increase the affinity between citizens and obliterate traditional class divisions. The overall assignment of the Swedish school should be to foster citizens with democratic values that can be resistant to anti-democratic movements.¹⁰

The Swedish school reforms in the post-war era are often described as unique in the sense that they were carried out in collaboration between the state and pedagogical research.¹¹ Research projects financed by the state were a governmental tool in the preparation and implementation of the new, unified comprehensive school (*Grundskolan*). This transition was prepared for during the 1950s through large-scale trials of the new type of school and launched through the new curriculum in 1962, but the reform was not fully completed until 1970.¹² There was a strong belief in scientific methods as a base for new teaching practices, and theory and methodology from the rather newly formed academic disciplines of sociology, pedagogy and psychology were influential. In line with, for example, Piaget, both student activity and individualisation were foregrounded as methods in the new curriculum.¹³ Individualisation was advocated to accomplish differentiation in an unstreamed school but was also promoted as a means to educate the individual for society.

State funding for research was given through Swedish state agencies according to a sector research model, and the education system thus relied on the National Board of Education for initiation and funding of research projects on pedagogical develop-

8 Gunnar Richardson, *Svensk utbildningshistoria: Skola och samhälle förr och nu*, 8th. rev. ed. (Lund: Studentlitteratur, 2010), 72–73.

9 Johan Prytz and Johanna Ringarp, "Local Versus National History of Education: The Case of Swedish School Governance, 1950–1990," in *Transnational Perspectives on Curriculum History*, ed. Gary McCulloch, Ivor Goodson, and Mariano González-Delgado (New York: Routledge, 2020), 131–48.

10 Richardson (2010), 73.

11 Anders Burman, Joakim Landahl, and Anna Larsson, Introduction to *Pedagogikens politik: Utbildningsforskning och utbildningspolitik under efterkrigstiden*, ed. Anders Burman, Joakim Landahl, and Anna Larsson (Huddinge: Södertörns högskola, 2024), 7.

12 Prytz and Ringarp (2020), 135–36; Kjell Härnqvist, "Comprehensiveness and Social Equality," in *Struggle for Democratic Education: Equality and Participation in Sweden*, ed. Stephen J. Ball and Staffan Larsson (New York: Falmer P., 1989), 18–31.

13 Ingrid Carlgren et al., "Changes in Nordic Teaching Practices: From Individualised Teaching to the Teaching of Individuals," *Scandinavian Journal of Educational Research* 50, no. 3 (2006), 301–26.

ment.¹⁴ Since the National Board of Education was also responsible for teacher education, many of the research projects were assigned to teacher education institutions.¹⁵

The welfare-state reforms during the 1960s also included taking further steps in the secularisation process since the Education Act of 1919.¹⁶ The school subject *kristendoms-kunskap* (knowledge of Christianity) was changed to *religionskunskap* (knowledge of Religion) in the new curriculum for comprehensive school in 1969.¹⁷ The idea was to modernise the school subject, and the content in the new syllabus was supposed to better reflect society and motivate the students' learning, for example by addressing the students' own existential questions. Hence the concept of *livsfrågor* was inserted in the syllabus, which was unique from an international perspective.¹⁸ However, *religionskunskap*, with its new content and demand for objectivity in teaching, was politically contentious and put extra pressure on teachers.¹⁹ This was the reason behind UMRe, which aimed at helping teachers by researching and testing new teaching methodologies.²⁰

As for previous research on the experimental and development projects on life questions, a historical overview of the projects has been presented before, but only by Sven Hartman, who was involved in the projects himself.²¹ Several researchers have also written about the concept of *livsfrågor*. However, these studies predominantly focus

14 Sebastian Piepenburg, "Den politiska styrningen av Skolöverstyrelsens och Skolverkets forskningsprogram," in *Pedagogikens politik: Utbildningsforskning och utbildningspolitik under efterkrigstiden*, ed. Anders Burman, Joakim Landahl, and Anna Larsson (Huddinge: Södertörns högskola, 2024), 169–92.

15 Ulf P. Lundgren, "Educational Research and the Language of Education," in *The Struggle for Democratic Education: Equality and Participation in Sweden*, ed. Stephen J. Ball and Staffan Larsson (New York: Falmer P., 1989), 191–210.

16 Mette Buchardt, "Cultural Protestantism and Nordic Religious Education: An Incision in the Historical Layers Behind the Nordic Welfare State Model," *Nordidactica: Journal of Humanities and Social Science Education*, no. 2 (2015), 131–65; Mette Buchardt, "Lutheranism and the Nordic States," in *Luther: Zeitgenössisch, Historisch, Kontrovers*, ed. Richard Faber and Uwe Puschner, *Zivilisationen & Geschichte* 50 (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2017), 285–95; Mette Buchardt, "The Nordic Model and the Educational Welfare State in a European Light: Social Problem Solving and Secular-Religious Ambitions When Modernizing Sweden and France," in *The Nordic Education Model in Context: Historical Developments and Current Renegotiations*, ed. Daniel Tröhler et al. (New York: Routledge, 2023), 107–24.

17 Algotsson (1975), 489–96.

18 Karin Sporre, "Children's Existential Questions—Recognized in Scandinavian Curricula, or Not?" *Journal of Curriculum Studies* 54, no. 3 (2022), 367–83.

19 This was during a period when the position of Christianity and the power of the state church were very much debated in society. Algotsson describes some of the public protests that took place in relation to the reform. For example, over two million people signed a petition against the reduced time for Christianity in the new curriculum. Algotsson (1975), 389–402.

20 Sven G. Hartman, "Children Searching for a Philosophy of Life: A Retrospective Review of Six Research and Development Projects," in *Challenging Life: Existential Questions as a Resource for Education*, ed. Jari Ristiniemi, Geir Skeie, and Karin Sporre (Münster: Waxmann, 2018), 21–45.

21 Hartman (2018); Sven G. Hartman, *Barns tankar om livet* (Stockholm: Natur & Kultur, 1986); Sven G. Hartman and Tullie Torstenson-Ed, *Barns tankar om livet*, 3rd ed. (Stockholm: Natur & Kultur, 2013).

on the development of Swedish religious education, or on different interpretations of the concept in Sweden or in other countries.²²

There is extensive research available that describes the welfare-state reforms and the shifts in Swedish governance policy from the 1960s and onward, especially within the field of curriculum theory research, where historical perspectives on governance processes are common.²³ There is also historical research on the relationship between educational research and educational policy during the time of the Swedish comprehensive school reform. For example, Susanne Dodillet and Sverker Lundin show how educational research that was established during the 1960s and 1970s was influenced by a particular view of educational science that had ties to notions of economic growth and technological development, as well as to the idea that educational systems should be constructed, managed, and monitored by scientific experts.²⁴ Sebastian Piepenburg examines the particular role of the National Board of Education and how the sector finance model rose in the early 1960s until it was wound down in the year 2000. He shows how the political interest in controlling research with relevance to school and education was particularly evident during this period and how the finance model contributed to an expansion of research on school and education.²⁵ However, the role of the National Board of Education was already in the 1970s being criticised by the political opposition for not evaluating the school reforms enough. This critique grew and by the end of the 1980s, it was being heavily criticised by educational researchers as well, mainly for excessive bureaucracy and a lack of transparency.²⁶

Johan Prytz and Johanna Ringarp have highlighted New Mathematics, one example of a large-scale experimental project aimed at developing teaching methodologies, driven by the state.²⁷ New Mathematics aimed to modernise school mathematics by suggesting new, detailed teaching models that were based on pedagogic theory and tried out scientifically. New textbooks were produced in the project and were tested in a large number of school classes. Yet a decade later when the results from the large

22 About *livsfrågor* in Swedish religious education: Sporre (2022); Sven G. Hartman, "Hur religionsämnet formades," in *Livstolkning och värdegrund: Att undervisa om religion, livsfrågor och etik*, ed. Edgar Almén et al., Skapande Vetande 37 (Linköping: Linköping University Electronic Press, 2000), 212–51. About the concept of *livsfrågor* in Sweden: Sven-Åke Selander, *Livstolkning: Om religion, livsåskådning och etik i skolan i ett didaktiskt perspektiv: En förutsättningsanalys* (Malmö: Lunds Univ., Lärarhögskolan i Malmö, Utvecklingsavdelningen, 1994); Christina Osbeck, *Kränkningens livsförståelse: En religionsdidaktisk studie av livsförståelselärande i skolan* (Karlstad: Karlstads universitet, 2006); Björn Falkevall, *Livsfrågor och religionskunskap: En belysning av ett centralt begrepp i svensk religionsdidaktik* (Stockholm: Stockholms universitet, 2010). In other countries: For example, Pia Böwadt has studied the concept of "life philosophy," which is central in Danish religious education, and how "life philosophy" rests on a Lutheran Christian creation theology in Pia Böwadt, "The Courage to Be: The Impact of Lebensphilosophie on Danish RE," *British Journal of Religious Education* 31, no. 1 (2009), 29–39.

23 See, for example, Lundahl (2002); Lindensjö and Lundgren (2014); Eva Forsberg et al., "Curriculum, Code, Arena, and Context: Curriculum and Leadership in Research in Sweden," *Leadership and Policy and Schools* 16, no. 2 (2017), 357–82.

24 Susanne Dodillet and Sverker Lundin, "När skolan blev ett utbildningssystem: Pedagogisk forskning, systemteori och politisk styrning," in *Pedagogikens politik: Utbildningsforskning och utbildningspolitik under efterkrigstiden*, ed. Anders Burman, Joakim Landahl, and Anna Larsson (Hudinge: Södertörns högskola, 2024), 115–45.

25 Piepenburg (2024), 169–91.

26 Ibid.

27 Prytz and Ringarp (2020), 131–48.

project were ready to be implemented, it was soon abandoned as the central authorities decided to open up for alternative teaching methods.²⁸

In relation to this, there are also a few studies on the role of textbook and textbook producers in Swedish governance processes. For example, Henrik Åström Elmersjö has investigated the role of the National Textbook Review Board in the school subject of History from 1938 to 1991. He shows how strikingly little importance new curricula have had for the negotiations on the school subject of History, and finds that, in practice, the changes of textbooks have been slow.²⁹ The development of textbooks that took place in the 1960s was based on the new form of comprehensive school that included all students (unlike the previous parallel school forms), and which demanded new teaching materials that were more self-paced and provided tasks that the students could solve without the teacher needing to direct the work. However, from the 1970s, there was a shift in the teachers' view of textbooks, and the textbooks went from being a clear authority to becoming one text among others that could be used.³⁰

Johan Prytz has analysed the role of textbooks in the reforms of school mathematics from 1919 to 1970.³¹ State-driven development projects in mathematics during the 1960s introduced a science-like process for creating textbooks. This reduced teachers' influence over text production but also provided a new, collective method for textbook creation, allowing more teachers to impact school mathematics teaching through a bottom-up design approach. However, little is known about the experimental projects on life questions, and what agents and influences actually had recontextualising functions in the "new" pedagogic discourse of *livsfrågor*. The ambition with this article is therefore to empirically investigate and contextualise three projects on life questions and contribute to a new understanding of their ideational aspects and their relation to the school reforms of the 1960s to 1990s.³²

The sources: The experimental projects and their context

There were a total of six research projects related to students' life questions carried out from the late 1960s to the turn of the millennium (see Table 1).³³ The collected data and other papers stemming from the six projects are today stored at Umeå University Library, and have Sven Hartman as the archival creator, meaning that the papers written after the projects were selected and collected by Hartman, and handed over to the archive by him.³⁴ Although all projects have been influential on the knowledge

28 Ibid.

29 Henrik Åström Elmersjö, *En av staten godkänd historia: Förhandsgranskning av svenska läromedel och omförhandling av historieämnet 1938–1991* (Lund: Nordic Academic Press, 2017).

30 Ibid.

31 Johan Prytz, "Towards a New Understanding of Swedish School Reforms: A Sociological Analysis of Textbooks' Role in Reforms of School Mathematics, 1919–1970," *Nordic Journal of Educational History* 10, no. 1 (2023), 145–69.

32 Ibid.

33 Hartman (2018), 25.

34 In this sense, our study also follows only the parts of projects that Hartman was involved with himself. This is on the one hand a limitation: it (re)produces a picture of Hartman as the key player in establishing *livsfrågor* in a Swedish context, and it means that different activities of other actors are not included in the analysis. On the other hand, the archival collection gives unique opportunities to follow a development in pedagogical knowledge production and its interplay with the political and social context over three decades.

production of children's life questions, this article will concentrate on the first three of the larger projects: UMRe, BaLi, and Balil. These projects are interesting since they were financed by the National Board of Education and were influenced by both the state and by public debates, as well as by the shifts in pedagogical ideas and in research methodology.

The sources for the explorations are the remains of the projects, such as project descriptions, publications, correspondence between agencies and actors involved in the projects, and the data material the projects generated – most of which were stored in the collections at the University Library Archive at Umeå University, except for a few of the publications that have been traced to other libraries. The emphasis will be on project papers, and less on the concrete data collections, where it is mainly the format of data production that is of interest to this study.³⁵

Table 1: Research projects related to students' life questions

UMRe (1967–1973) Undervisningsmetodik – Religionskunskap [Instruction methodology – Knowledge of Religion]
BaLi (1973–1978) Barn och Livsfrågor [Children and Existential questions]
UBOL (1978–1980) Utvecklingen i barns omvärldsorientering och livsåskådning [Development in children's environmental orientation and philosophy of life]
Balil (1987–1992) Barns livssituation och livstolkning [Children's living conditions and life interpretation]
Balikob (1994) Barns livstolkning i komparativ belysning [Children's life interpretation in a comparative perspective]
Värdeprojektet (1999–2001) Barns och ungdomars livstolkning och skolans värdegrund [Children's and youths' life interpretation and the basic values of the school]

Analytical approach and research questions

A ground for the experimental projects analysed here was the process through which a new concept such as *livsfrågor* was selected, implemented in curriculum, and reshaped to fit as subject content in religious education. According to Basil Bernstein, it is critical to study the practice in which discourses are incorporated in an educational context and transformed into objects of teaching.³⁶ Bernstein's theory of the "pedagogic device" conceptualises how a discourse or concept is pedagogised, i.e. recontextualised into pedagogical practice. The theory highlights the aspects that form official, legitimate knowledge and enables analyses of power and control. The pedagogic device consists

35 The content of the data production has been analysed in other articles by the authors. See for example: Mette Buchardt, Katarina Kärnebro, and Christina Osbeck, "'Outer space' as Cold War Spirituality: Students' Drawings and Texts on 'Life Questions' in 1980s Welfare-State Sweden," *IJHE Bildungsgeschichte* 12, no. 2 (2022), 138–56; Christina Osbeck, Katarina Kärnebro, Annika Lilja, and Karin Sporre, "Children's Existential Questions and Worldviews: Possible RE Responses to Performance Anxiety and an Increasing Risk of Exclusion," *Journal of Religious Education* 72 (2024), 51–72.

36 Basil Bernstein, *Pedagogy, Symbolic Control and Identity: Theory, Research, Critique*, Rev. ed. (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2000), 25–39.

of three fields: the fields of knowledge production, recontextualization, and reproduction.³⁷ Bernstein identified two fields of recontextualisation: ORF = the official recontextualisation field, and PRF = the pedagogic recontextualisation field. Both fields contain agents who influence the transformation of knowledge from their origin to pedagogic discourse. ORF consists of national agents and ministries selected for developing curriculum, assessment, inspection, and supervision. PRF consists of pedagogues, researchers, teacher education, journals, textbook writers, and others who transform texts for teachers. These two fields may align with each other or not. If PRF does not have a close connection to ORF, there is usually autonomy and struggle over pedagogic discourse between agents in PRF.

In the light of Bernstein's concept of recontextualisation, this article explores the history of the experimental projects on life questions and how they played into the school reforms and developments in Sweden, which, in the three decades in which the projects took place, had as one of their overarching goals to nurture democratically-minded citizens for the welfare state.³⁸ The following empirical questions are asked: What were the aims and aspirations of the projects? How were the projects designed and conducted? and What were the underlying pedagogical ideas? On this basis, it will be discussed how the education political aim of democratisation influenced the knowledge production about children's life questions, and to which extent results from the projects can be said to have washed back on school reforms.

Three experimental projects on children's life questions

In the following section, the three selected projects will be contextualised and analysed in chronological order with particular focus on the aims and aspirations of the projects, the projects' designs, and their pedagogical ideas and influences.

UMRe – research on instrumental pedagogical methods and the aspiration of studying children's life questions for the first time

UMRe was the first large experimental education research project aimed at teaching in the intermediate stage that was financed by the National Board of Education.³⁹ The appointed subject expert at that time was John Ronnås, who was an important agent in changing the old syllabus for religious education.⁴⁰ He collaborated with a theologian and suggested that the students' life questions should be the starting point for teaching the new, objective school subject. Ronnås conducted research himself to substantiate this direction of teaching. The UMRe project was an extension of his research and was commissioned to the Stockholm Institute of Education in 1967, even before it was decided which people it would involve. All in all, the project involved 22 researchers,

³⁷ Bernstein (2000), 33.

³⁸ Bernstein later became a source of inspiration and collaborator to some of the actors in the projects but was never directly involved in the projects. See the discussion in Buchardt and Kärnebro (2024), 1151.

³⁹ According to Sven Hartman, evidence for this is the large number of publications that were produced in the project.

⁴⁰ Karin Sporre, Katarina Kärnebro, Annika Lilja, and Christina Osbeck, "Livsfrågor' – A Swedish Narrative From the 1960s. What About Its Status in the 2020s?" in *The New Pluralist We in Religious Education: Old Narratives in New Contexts*, ed. Kåre Fuglseth, Ina ter Avest, and Geir Skeie (Münster: Waxmann, 2025).

teacher trainers and student teachers at the Department of Pedagogy and Psychology.⁴¹ At that time, Stockholm Institute of Education was an important arena for research and development programmes, which were characterised by a strong influence from educational technology.⁴²

The UMRe project can also be seen as a response to the public and political debate that raged in the 1960s about the changes to the subject of religious education, and which led to protest actions and agitated voices on the subject's position in school overall.⁴³ Throughout the whole century, the old subject of *kristendomskunskap* and its position, content and space in the curriculum had been under regular debate and this was due to societal changes and increasing secularisation among the population. Religion had more and more become something private for most people, but school was still assigned the job of providing a knowledge basis, especially in Christianity.⁴⁴ The debates were heated several times during the 1960s, mainly about four changes: 1) the demand for objectivity in religious education, which was launched already in the 1957 School Commission and was included in the curriculum of 1962; 2) the change of the subject's name to *religionskunskap* in 1960 for upper-secondary school, which also led to a decrease in teaching hours since church history was included in the school subject History instead.⁴⁵ The integration of themes in other social science subjects was suggested to guarantee objectiveness in the new subject; 3) the control of teaching materials by the National Textbook Commission in 1965, which reported a serious lack of objectivity in textbooks; and 4) the changes in curriculum for compulsory school in 1969 when the subject was named *religionskunskap* here as well, which launched an idea of subject blocks and inserted life questions in the subject, as well as an increased space for other world religions than Christianity.⁴⁶ When UMRe started, the debate about objectivity had petered out somewhat but the new curriculum, Lgr69, was about to be launched, which was a motive for the large investment in UMRe with the intention that the project would develop new methods for teaching and new teaching materials.

Another influence in UMRe was the idea of increased student centring.⁴⁷ The project was grounded on the teaching principles "MACIC" (short for Motivation, Activity, Concretion, Individualisation, Cooperation). These principles had once been developed by progressive elementary school teachers and were elaborated on by researchers at the Stockholm Institute of Education.

41 The Department of Pedagogy and Psychology separated into two departments in 1970 and the UMRe project had its base at the Department of Education.

42 Lundgren (1989), 197–200.

43 Algotsson (1975), 353–508.

44 Sven G. Hartman, "Med eleven i blickfånget – en aspekt av läroplansutvecklingen," in *Livet tillfrågas – teoretiska förutsättningar för en livsfrågeorienterad religionsundervisning*, ed. Gunnar Gunnarsson, Kirsten Grönlén Zetterqvist, and Sven Hartman, Gem-rapport 7 (Stockholm: Stockholms universitet, 2009), 86.

45 Algotsson (1975), 385–86; Martin Berntson "Ämnesområdet kristendomens historia och dess plats i Svenska kyrkans prästutbildning: En historisk undersökning," in *Teologisk utbildning*, ed. Thomas Girmalm (Umeå: Umeå universitet, 2020).

46 Gunilla Dahlberg, Sven G. Hartman, and Sten Pettersson, *Barn och livsfrågor: Lärares erfarenheter från förskola, lågstadium, fritidshem* (Stockholm: Natur & Kultur, 1977), 19–26.

47 Hartman (2018), 24.

Professor Torsten Husén was the scientific leader of UMRe while Ingemar Fägerlind was appointed as the formal project leader.⁴⁸ Other members of the team were Gordon Westling and Sten Pettersson, both experts on teaching methodology at the department of Pedagogy and Psychology, and the ones who informally directed the work in the project group. Sven G. Hartman was newly employed in the department and became a research assistant in the project. UMRe also involved external experts who reviewed texts and results, for example theologians, culture workers and agents from youth organisations.

The UMRe project was designed to consist of three parts: analysis of the conditions for teaching, teaching methodology development, and try-outs of a teaching material.⁴⁹ The first part, analysis of the conditions for teaching, was the largest part of the project and involved an extensive review of the research field as well as different analyses of the pedagogical problem. For example, the researchers conducted historical analyses of the subject of Christianity with regard to the concept of objectivity, surveys of both students and teachers about students' attitudes and the teaching conditions, surveys and interviews with students about religious concepts and ideas in relation to their age and maturity, research overviews of experimental methods of relevance to teaching, observations of teaching methods, as well as analyses of the syllabus and of commonly used teaching materials and Biblical texts.⁵⁰

The "maturity problem" was particularly in focus in UMRe since religious education included subject matters of an "abstract nature" that the children might not understand due to their immaturity.⁵¹ This was presumed to especially create problems for intermediate children who were in a developmental stage where their ability to think and reason in abstract ways was considered limited. The relationship between children's cognitive development and how to teach religious education was seen as a core problem by many of the researchers. Ronald Goldman's ideas on religious development during adolescence became influential in the project, and both intellectual and emotional factors were considered to interoperate at some level.⁵² At the end of the project, a new understanding of the maturity problem was presented by the project group:⁵³

48 According to project descriptions.

49 Gordon Westling and Sten Pettersson, *Barn och religionskunskap: En bok om barn och undervisning med utgångspunkt från arbetet i religionskunskap på grundskolans mellanstadium* (Stockholm: Esselte studium, 1973), 1–2.

50 The publications from the project show the main research interest areas.

51 Sven Hartman and Sten Pettersson, *Livsfrågor och livsåskådning hos barn: Några utgångspunkter för en analys av barns livsfrågor och livsåskådning samt en presentation av några delstudier inom området*. (Stockholm: Högskolan för lärarutbildning, 1980), 11.

52 Ingemar Fägerlind, Gordon Westling, and Sten Pettersson, *Mognad och undervisning i religionskunskap: En sammanställning av några undersökningar samt en del undervisningsmetodiska synpunkter*, Rapport från Pedagogiska institutionen 52, Lärarhögskolan i Stockholm (Stockholm: Pedagogiska institutionen, Lärarhögskolan i Stockholm, 1970), 1–41.

53 Sven G. Hartman, Sten Pettersson, and Gordon Westling, *Vad funderar barn på? Ett försök att inventera mellanstadieelevers tankar och frågor inför tillvaron och världen*, Skolöverstyrelsens rapportserie Utbildningsforskning 3 (Stockholm: Utbildningsförlaget, 1973), 74.

Perhaps it is a question of underestimating the student's possibilities and interest in engaging in the basic problem of the teaching content [...] The teaching methodology that has been developed in our project is characterised by the conviction that even students at the intermediate stage have the capability to be interested in and engage in questions that are prevalent in different ideologies and worldviews.⁵⁴

Sven G. Hartman's assignment in the project was to conduct surveys among students about their interest in the subject, their interest in existential questions, and overall religious engagement. In 1969–1970, a survey was distributed to 2081 10- to 12-year-old students from 89 random schools.⁵⁵ The results from the survey indicated that the students were interested in religious and philosophical questions, but these results were later questioned for their reliability since the results did not comport with the common views of the intermediate students as immature or unmotivated.⁵⁶ The question was whether a survey with predetermined response options could capture children's real interest in existential matters.⁵⁷ Hence, a follow-up study was conducted. In this study, called the "What do children think about? – study" (*Vad funderar barn på? – studien*), a new research methodology was developed to limit the risk of steering the students' responses in a particular direction. The method developed, later named sentence completions (*satskompletteringar*), was described as an inventory instrument with some psychological projective elements.⁵⁸ The study involved 377 10–12-year-old students from six different schools in the spring of 1970. When asked to finish sentences, the children wrote about a wide variety of themes, many of existential natures. The results showed that the children's life questions were not based on their age or maturity but rather on circumstances of life.

Gordon Westling, one of the teaching methodology experts in the project, was responsible for constructing the teaching material that was developed in UMRe. It consisted of nine parts, three areas of content for each grade in grades 4, 5, and 6, and some were constructed as interdisciplinary with, for example, the school subjects of History and Geography. In addition to the teaching material, guidebooks for teachers were also constructed. 54 teachers and their 1339 students tried out the material in 1972, and it was evaluated through surveys of both the teachers and the students.⁵⁹ Although scientifically tried out, the teaching material that was developed in UMRe did not enjoy widespread use by teachers. Yet it gave examples of how to work in a student-centred way according to the new curriculum.⁶⁰

Both UMRe and the research project that followed, BaLi, were commissioned and regulated research in the sense that they were intended to both investigate ongoing

⁵⁴ Ibid., 74.

⁵⁵ The study was part of Sven G. Hartman's licentiate thesis: *Eleverna och skolans religionsundervisning: En intresseundersökning på grundskolans mellanstadium* (Stockholm: Pedagogiska inst., Lärarhögsk., 1971).

⁵⁶ Hartman (2018), 25.

⁵⁷ Hartman and Pettersson (1980), 13–14.

⁵⁸ Hartman (2018), 24–27.

⁵⁹ Westling and Pettersson (1973), 57–284.

⁶⁰ Hartman (2009), 91.

teaching activities in schools and find new teaching methods.⁶¹ The research commissioned by the National Board of Education at that time was mainly empirical and legitimised by its research methods, and the theories used were predominantly educational psychology theories.⁶² The research was mostly carried out by people who had backgrounds as elementary school teachers, and by some who even were sceptical of academic research.⁶³ However, the arena slowly changed during the time of the projects since they lasted during a period when pedagogy as an academic field eventually emerged from the alliance with psychology.⁶⁴ During the 1970s, pedagogy as an academic field started to change from a social engineering science to a more critical social science discipline, and social theories and factors were gradually introduced into the discipline.⁶⁵ This meant that the researchers in the projects had to relate to these changes. They also had to navigate in the clash between dominant quantitative research methodology and the influence of new qualitative research, while simultaneously developing their own research methods that were workable in studying children's life questions. This undoubtedly affected the researchers' focus in their following project, BaLi, which will be explored in the following section.

BaLi – research on young children and the aspiration of constructing a theoretical base for life questions in a time of tensions

BaLi followed directly upon UMRe and was a consequence of The Childcare Inquiry (*Barnstugeutredningen*), an ongoing public investigation of preschools and leisure centres that launched ideas for pedagogical programmes at that time.⁶⁶ It also proposed the legislation of a public preschool for all in 1973, which led to a lively debate in the media on how this could affect children's conceptions of life and religion. The BaLi project was conducted by a smaller group of researchers at the Department of Education at the Stockholm Institute of Education than the UMRe project and consisted of several sub-studies that replicated parts of the methodology used in UMRe. Those who worked in the project were Sten Pettersson, Sven G. Hartman, Gordon Westling and Siw Vinstrand, all four from UMRe, and, among others, also Gunilla Dahlberg, who was a child psychologist at that time and became a research assistant in the project.⁶⁷ The scientific leader for the project was pedagogy professor Bert-Olov Ljung, who seems to have had a more administrative role in the project. In addition to them, eight students were later involved in both conducting sub-studies and analysing the mate-

61 Inger Green and Sven Hartman, *Barns livssituation och livstolkning: Projektpresentation* (Linköping: Linköping Univ., Institutionen för pedagogik och psykologi, 1992), 17.

62 Tomas Englund, "Nya tendenser inom pedagogikdisciplinen under de senaste tre decennierna," *Pedagogisk Forskning i Sverige* 9, no. 1 (2004), 37–49.

63 Sven G. Hartman, "Läraryrket: Uppgång och fall – några intryck," *Vägar i skolans historia*, no. 3–4 (2021), <https://undervisningshistoria.se/lararhogskolans-uppgang-och-fall-nagra-intryck/>.

64 Joakim Landahl and Anna Larsson, "Pedagogy and the Humanities: Changing Boundaries in the Academic Map of Knowledge, 1860s–1960s," in *The Humanities and the Modern Politics of Knowledge*, ed. Anders Ekström and Hampus Östh Gustafsson (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2022), 81–103.

65 Englund (2004), 38–40.

66 Dahlberg, Hartman, and Pettersson (1977), 19; Bodil Rosengren, *Vad vill Barnstugeutredningen?: Sammanfattning av betänkandet Förskolan, del 2, SOU 1972:27* (Stockholm: Askild & Kärnekull, 1972).

67 Hartman (1986), 10.

rial. Two experts from the Central Bureau of Statistics were involved in the work with the surveys conducted during the project to make sure that the research could not be questioned. Lennart Koskinen, a theologian at Uppsala University, was involved as an expert on theorising the concept of *livsfrågor*.

As mentioned above, the public investigation of preschools and leisure centres and the legislation of a public preschool for all in 1973 led to a renewed debate about religious education. Some people argued that a public preschool for all would negatively affect children's religious upbringing and worldviews. The criticism was either about the risk that religious education could turn into something insignificant in the pedagogical programme, or about the risk that the pedagogical programme would affect the children's worldviews in another direction than those of their parents. Christian alternatives to a public preschool were campaigned for by certain groups, and the debate was sometimes harsh.⁶⁸ Ideas about the parents' freedom to choose preschools were set in opposition to ideas about a democratic society with less segregation and more equality. The debate mirrored a split between parental authority and religious freedom in society, as well as different views of the role of family and society.

The definitions and concepts used in the curriculum from 1969 and statements from the public investigation were used as starting points for the BaLi project, but the differences between preschool and compulsory school were also acknowledged.⁶⁹ The aim of the project was to study the conditions for preschool children and primary school students to understand and deal with questions within the field of worldviews.⁷⁰ The project also aimed at studying the methodological problems that may arise when these types of questions are discussed.

In BaLi, the researchers stipulated that the field of life questions extends schools' traditional subject borders.⁷¹ The starting point for teaching should be the individual student and his or her world and the existential questions that the student him- or herself carries, not a predetermined subject content. The pedagogy should address these questions in different ways that can give the students new knowledge and experiences that can help them on their way to reach the goal, which is a personal worldview of some kind. A wide definition was constructed in the project: "Life questions is about the fundamental conditions for human life and for existence in general."⁷² It was important though that the teacher did not start in classical existential questions and project them onto the children. The questions should start from the children's concrete lives and their lived experiences, and teachers should give them possibilities to reflect upon these matters. The role of reflection was motivated through ideas of children's cognitive development from Piaget, Bruner, Allport, and Eriksson combined with ideas about cultural and social factors. A key position was to provide the children with "pedagogical supplies."⁷³ In such supply, the teacher should highlight and work with

68 Sven G. Hartman, Gunilla Dahlberg, and Sten Pettersson, *Små barn och stora frågor: En probleminventering bland lärare om livsfrågor i förskolan, på lågstadiet och på fritidshem: En rapport från BaLi-projektet*, Rapport från Pedagogiska institutionen 15, Lärarhögskolan i Stockholm (Stockholm: Pedagogiska institutionen, Lärarhögskolan i Stockholm, 1975), 17–23.

69 Dahlberg, Hartman, and Pettersson (1977), 19–46.

70 Hartman, Dahlberg, and Pettersson (1975), 13.

71 Hartman and Pettersson (1980), 23–77.

72 Ibid., 28.

73 Ibid., 25.

concepts and help the students develop the language that is necessary for a personal worldview and an understanding of others. This means that concepts that can be used as tools to help thinking and reflecting should be developed, not factual concepts. The concepts must be subjectively experienced by the students themselves and cannot be taught otherwise. Here, the project group also was influenced by the ideas on reflection as presented by philosopher Alf Ahlberg and by educational psychologist Björn Sandgren's work on children's cognitive and moral development. Ronald Goldman's influence was still strong in the BaLi project, especially in the ideas on how to teach religious education in relation to different maturity levels.

BaLi was comprised of seven sub-studies.⁷⁴ First, a large survey was distributed to preschool teachers, primary school teachers and leisure schoolteachers. The purpose of this was to capture the teachers' experiences of what happens when questions related to worldviews were actualised in discussion with the children. 1000 teachers answered the survey, and the results were used as a representative base for a pedagogical starting position in the other sub-studies that were conducted. The results from the survey showed that children's questions on concrete topics, such as relationships, were more common than abstract ones. Primary school teachers also reported on fewer life questions than the other teachers. Another result showed that teachers who were religiously active themselves noticed more interest in these types of questions among their students than other teachers did. The teachers also expressed concerns about how to handle the parents' beliefs and wishes when it came to teaching religion.⁷⁵ What became evident was that not only the children's maturity, but also their social background, made teaching religious education to young children a tricky business for the teachers.

In an interview study with 224 children aged 5–9, new experimental methods were used.⁷⁶ The interviews were named "inventory interviews" and were conducted in two parts. The first part consisted of a series of 15 pictures and a story about two children, Pelle and Lena, who were put in eight different situations and emotional moods. During the interviews, the children were asked to talk about what they would think about if they were in the same situation as the children in the stories. In the second part of the study, another series of pictures was shown to the children, but this time without predetermined stories. In addition to this, the children were also asked to fill in 12 sentence completions of the type "I think the best thing is..." The second part was concluded by the children being asked to make up the hardest questions they could think of for a quiz programme on TV. They were also asked to combine pictures of twelve different objects and describe why they thought certain pictures belonged together and others did not. These tests were originally constructed by Björn Sandgren to determine a child's cognitive developmental level. The interview study was followed up with a written assignment in which the children were asked to write about five pictures. This sub-study was a version of the "What do children think about?" – study conducted in UMRe but adapted to younger children. In 1976, children in the ages of 4–6 were also observed by student teachers, to find out what life questions the children might spontaneously come up with.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 93–113.

⁷⁵ Hartman, Dahlberg, and Pettersson (1975), 47–120.

⁷⁶ Hartman and Pettersson (1980), 93–103.

Sven G. Hartman conducted a new survey of 800 children aged 9–13, asking them about what matters in life they thought were relevant.⁷⁷ He also wanted to know more generally what they thought about school, their interests in their spare time, and their thoughts on some questions on worldviews. The intention of this survey was also to compare with previous ones in UMRe. In 1977, Hartman also, with the aid of two students, asked 745 students aged 9–12 to write texts based on the theme: One time when I thought about God.⁷⁸ This method was inspired by a similar study about children's religious views that was conducted in the 1940s. The child was introduced to a theme to write about, and the idea was that the method could give insight into the children's "inner" dialogues, as contrast to the interviews that were more of the character of "outer" dialogues. In the later projects, Hartman and his colleagues developed this method further, calling it theme assignments (*tema-skrivningar*).⁷⁹ Methodological reflections that were discussed in BaLi in relation to this were how to formulate the assignments to suit the children and whether the assignments should also encompass the context of the child.

Gunilla Dahlberg was one of the researchers who were responsible for interviewing the youngest children in BaLi, but she also conducted a sub-study where the focus was on how children's knowledge, values and attitudes were reproduced from generation to generation, particularly how the children's views of the world could be related to their social background and the divisions of labour in society.⁸⁰ This study reflects the influence of the New Sociology of Education, which was critical to psychological theories that did not encompass the child's context or sociological perspectives.⁸¹ Although Dahlberg's study was conducted within the frames of BaLi, the results were not published in the project but became a part of her dissertation in 1985.⁸² The study is still mentioned in the project reports from BaLi as an important part of the project since it takes the children's social backgrounds into account.

The choice to use many and different research methods in the BaLi project was based on the idea that the methods together could describe the knowledge area of children's life questions, which otherwise is hard to study. Another problem that the project group wanted to avoid by using different and rather broad methods was to steer the children to write or talk about things they spontaneously would never do by themselves.⁸³ Sven Hartman later wrote about the challenges in inventing methods that could work in inventorying younger children's spontaneous thoughts.⁸⁴ Not only was it challenging to develop instruments that could work for communicating with young children, but the type of qualitative research methodology that the researchers developed was also

⁷⁷ Ibid., 104.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 106–9.

⁷⁹ Hartman (2018), 32–36.

⁸⁰ Hartman and Pettersson (1980), 111–13.

⁸¹ Englund (2004), 39.

⁸² Gunilla Dahlberg, *Context and the Child's Orientation to Meaning: A Study of the Child's Way of Organizing the Surrounding World in Relation to Public, Institutionalized Socialization* (Stockholm: Stockholms universitet, 1985).

⁸³ Hartman and Pettersson (1980), 128–33.

⁸⁴ Hartman (2018), 38–39.

new and therefore met with some scepticism within the discipline of pedagogy, where quantitative methods were still dominating.⁸⁵

As mentioned previously, Lennart Koskinen, at that time a doctoral student of theology, became involved in the project to help the project group do a conceptual “cleansing” and analysis. The BaLi project group met with him and a group of experts on the philosophy of religion at Uppsala University over a period of time. As a result of the dialogue, Koskinen wrote a report in which the concept of *livsfrågor* and world view were connected to the syllabus and discussed in relation to The Childcare Inquiry.⁸⁶ Hence, the concepts were included in a pedagogical and psychological frame: “The results can be described as a synthesis of a behavioural science view and theoretical considerations of the subject in a sort of philosophy of religion.”⁸⁷

Balil – commissioned research on life questions as part of an evaluation of the curriculum and with the intention to document children’s culture

In the new curriculum from 1980 (*Lgr80*), life questions were given more space.⁸⁸ The new subject was titled “Human beings’ questions about life and existence: The knowledge of religion.” In this curriculum, subject integration was foregrounded and it was recommended that life questions should be the starting point in teaching, to increase the students’ motivation for learning. This change, from subject content centring to student centring needed a follow-up study, and the National Board of Education commissioned this to Sven G. Hartman. The new research project, named Balil, was general in its focus on children’s life questions and attitudes and less focused on teaching methodology than the previous projects, even though a part of the aim was to relate the results to the curriculum.⁸⁹

Sven Hartman became scientific leader of the project, which he conducted together with Inger Green at Linköping University. The project also included student teachers or master’s degree students, who based their degree projects on material from the project.⁹⁰ Balil was less influenced by development psychology than the previous projects. One aim of Balil was to deepen the knowledge of children’s living conditions, and through influences from ethnographic methodology, the project applied a methodology using many different assignments and methods (surveys, sentence completions, theme assignments). The research design also involved some of the assignments being repeated over time. The intention was, among other things, to document different aspects of children’s personal worldviews in a soft database. The material was collected with the aid of teachers. 231 students in grades 3–5 from 12 classes at 8 schools in four municipalities with different characteristics agreed to participate. The intention was to follow the children over a period of three years.

85 Cf. Englund (2004), 38–40.

86 Lennart Koskinen, *Försök till precisering av några termer i livsåskådningsdebatten i avsikt att finna en enhetlig terminologi för BaLi-projektets olika delar* (Stockholm: Lärarhögskolan i Stockholm, Stencil, 1975).

87 Hartman and Pettersson (1980), 23.

88 Sporre (2022), 372; *Lgr 80, 1980 års läroplan för grundskolan: inledning: mål och riktlinjer* (Stockholm: Liber Förlag/Allmänna förl., 1980), 127.

89 Hartman (2018), 32–36.

90 Green and Hartman (1992), 13.

The research approach in Balil was signified by a child-centred perspective and more rigorous research ethics than previous projects. The children's parents were informed about the project and the researchers wrote letters to the participating children, calling them assistants in the project. The researchers were also rigorous with the confidentiality of the students' assignments. Although the teachers were instructed to introduce the assignments to their classes, they were not allowed to read what the students had written. The students were instructed to put their texts in envelopes that were sealed and then sent to the researchers.⁹¹

The material that the project collected consisted of a total of 17 assignments over three years. These comprised a survey in three parts, four sentence completions, and theme assignments on the themes: *On justice, How I think about the universe, One time when I thought about God, Things that are good to know, How I think one should decide, This is me, This is how I think about faith and living in other countries, What I think about time, What is a human being*⁹², *What is school good for, and How I think about life and death*. In the last year, there was also an attitude survey, and the assignments on the themes *On justice, When I think about God, and This is me* were repeated once more. Unfortunately, the material from Balil was never analysed in full as Inger Green passed away.

The results that were reported from Balil were conclusive with previous projects: young students are not simple-minded but rather have many questions about life that reflect their conditions for living and their experiences.⁹³ Existential questions appear together with more trivial everyday questions in the students' texts and the questions vary a lot, both individually and across groups. Life questions are ways to find meaning and construct individual worldviews. Although the form of expression may vary depending on the age group, much of the content is still similar across ages. The results also showed that children's interest in the surrounding world expands when they get older, and some gender differences could be detected due to girls usually maturing before boys. Moreover, the children participating in Balil expressed engagement for other people and for the world; for example, compassion for the weak in society and anger towards injustices.⁹⁴

More school reforms took place during the time of Balil. In a *Riksdag* resolution in 1989, a new model of school organisation was decided on that meant an almost complete redistribution of responsibility from the state to the municipalities. This decision was not without debate, and teachers went on strike.⁹⁵ This conflict affected Balil and at the end of the project in 1989/1990, only 150 children were still participating in the study. The large number of dropouts was caused by several more unpredictable factors. It was, for example, difficult to follow up the students when they changed schools in grade 7 or when teachers were replaced. Some students also got tired of the

⁹¹ According to letters from the archive.

⁹² Material from this assignment has been analysed in Buchardt, Kärnebro, and Osbeck (2022), 138–56.

⁹³ Hartman and Torstenson-Ed (2013), 10.

⁹⁴ Sven G. Hartman, *Små barn i det stora rummet – Om barns kosmologi* (Stockholm: Centrum för barnkulturforskning, 1999), 28.

⁹⁵ Johanna Ringarp, "Skolans lärarkårer," in *Utbildningshistoria: En introduktion*, ed. Esbjörn Larsson and Johannes Westberg (Lund: Studentlitteratur, 2019), 368–69.

assignments and wanted to opt out of the project.⁹⁶ Letters in the archive also reveal that some classes with mixed ages were excluded by researchers themselves to downsize the project.

As part of the *Riksdag* resolution in 1989, the National Board of Education was no longer needed, and it was later replaced with a new organisation, the Swedish National Agency for Education (*Statens skolverk*), which was given completely new assignments. The National Board of Education had been criticised for bureaucratisation and lack of transparency in decision-making for some time.⁹⁷ And from a long period in which the relationship between educational research and politics had been closely intertwined, this shifted to them being completely separated.⁹⁸ In 1991–1992, the Swedish parliament made a series of decisions that opened for a market of independent schools. These reforms were not grounded in research in the same way as the previous reforms and not prepared in an ordinary manner.⁹⁹ The reforms of the school system made it necessary to also change the curriculum to better suit the neo-liberal management of schools. The new curriculum (*Lpo94*), was different from the previous ones since it focused on general knowledge in a traditional sense, included all types of schools, only contained goals and guidelines and nothing about methods or specific subject content, and explicitly stated a value system based on Western and Christian traditions. Another major shift was in the view of students' learning, where the responsibility for this was put on the students themselves. Consequently, self-regulative methods of working eventually became more popular methods of teaching, such as "own work."¹⁰⁰

When it comes to the position of life questions in the new curriculum from 1994, it changed drastically, from being considered a centre of the school subject in the syllabus of 1980 to occupying a marginalised position in the new syllabus.¹⁰¹ It is only mentioned once in the syllabus of 1994 as a goal for students in grade 9, prescribing that they should be able to reflect over and express themselves concerning existential questions. Hence, the connection to the students' own lives was no longer put to the front, and emphasis was on knowledge about religions and worldviews instead.

Conclusion

One aim of this article is to explore the history of three experimental projects on life questions and their knowledge production in relation to school reforms, debates in society, pedagogical ideas and research interest over time. The analyses presented in the previous sections show that the projects were involved in the implementation and transformation of life questions and thus have been closely linked to school policy all along. The democratisation of school, the crisis of the subject *kristendomskunskap* in the 1960s, and the debate on secularisation contributed to life questions becoming first a teaching methodology and then a subject area of its own in religious education. Life

96 Green and Hartman (1992), 37–38

97 Piepenburg (2024), 177–81.

98 Burman, Landahl, and Larsson (2024), 8.

99 Nafsika Alexiadou and Lisbeth Lundahl, "The Boundaries of Policy Learning and the Role of Ideas: Sweden, as a Reluctant Policy Learner?" in *Beyond erziehungswissenschaftlicher Grenzen: Diskurse zu Entgrenzungen der Disziplin*, ed. Ulrike Stadler-Altmann and Barbara Gross (Opladen: Berliner Wissenschafts-Verlag, 2019), 63–77.

100 Carlgren et al. (2006), 304.

101 Sporre (2022), 373–74.

questions can also be seen as a sign of the times of the 1960s concerning new pedagogical ideas that promoted student-centredness and individualisation, MACIC. Among other things, this model of teaching was considered to be a solution to the problems associated with teaching mixed-ability classes that had arisen for teachers in the new comprehensive school for all.¹⁰²

As the analysis of the projects has shown, the first project, UMRe, was designed to help teachers implement the new objective school subject *religionskunskap* by providing expert knowledge that could meet the new pedagogical demands that were put on teachers.¹⁰³ The degree of state involvement was strong in both UMRe and BaLi, and this was not only because the National Board of Education allocated a considerable amount of money for research and development at that time.¹⁰⁴ Both UMRe and BaLi were also carried out in a time when religious education was recurrently debated in society by people with little knowledge about the actual work in schools and where teachers' experiences and children's perspectives were not considered.¹⁰⁵ The aims and aspirations in the projects were closely connected to contemporary reforms or public investigations, and the sanctions from the National Board of Education can be viewed as a top-down process from central school authorities to enforce changes in teaching methodology, and as such, the projects relied on ideas of social engineering and were coloured by the secular climate of the 1960s.¹⁰⁶ The belief that a modern society, in order to be democratic, must take the form of a controllable system that is constructed, managed and monitored by scientific experts, was tied to this.¹⁰⁷

The close connection between The National Board of Education and these two experimental research projects indicates that there was strong alignment and not much struggle between the agents in the official recontextualisation field (ORF) and the pedagogical recontextualisation field (PRF).¹⁰⁸ One can conclude that researchers in PRF influenced ORF, as the new interest in students' life questions from UmRe and BaLi impacted the 1980 curriculum reform, giving life questions a central role and promoting a student perspective in teaching.¹⁰⁹ However, the actual teaching material that was tried out in UMRE seems to have had little influence on the teachers in PRF, possibly due to "objectivity cramp" among teachers, slowing down changes.¹¹⁰ This might also reflect teachers' scepticism towards centralised materials and a general decline in textbook authority that took place during this period.¹¹¹ At least this was the case in other projects funded by the National Board of Education, such as New Mathematics.¹¹² The new curriculum stipulated that the different school subjects should be studied in cohesive work areas, so it was no longer desirable that the teaching materials

102 Carlgren et al. (2006), 302.

103 Cf. Lundgren (1989), 198–200.

104 Piepenburg (2024), 169.

105 Hartman and Pettersson (1980), 10–19.

106 Cf. Englund (2004), 38.

107 Cf. Dodillet and Lundin (2024), 144.

108 Cf. Bernstein (2000), 33.

109 Hartman (2009), 92.

110 Hartman (2000), 246–47.

111 Åström Elmersjö (2017), 278.

112 Prytz and Ringarp (2020), 141.

presented a coherent narrative that could direct the teachers' work. Instead, learning materials with a lot of tasks and references to side reading for the independent student were preferred, since it suited the idea of individualised teaching.¹¹³

The alignment between ORF and PRF weakened in the late 1980s during the Balil project. The Balil project aimed to evaluate the 1980 curriculum reform and study children's life questions. The emphasis on evaluation reflected a shift in research orientation due to criticism against the National Board of Education and the finance model.¹¹⁴ In the 1990s, the National Board of Education was dissolved, new agents emerged, and the centralised governance model's alignment between ORF and PRF did not last long.

The struggles in the pedagogical recontextualisation field (PRF) were mainly disciplinary. Research at the Stockholm Institute of Education was mostly conducted by former elementary school teachers,¹¹⁵ leading to a focus on psychology and pedagogy rather than theology in the new subject of religious education. This was an effect of the social and behavioural sciences having advanced their positions in teacher education, while the humanities and theology had slowly lost their importance.¹¹⁶ Over time, dominant theories in pedagogy shifted as well, with the BaLi project incorporating developmental psychology and sociological theories. Gunilla Dahlberg, and later also Sten Pettersson, collaborated with Basil Bernstein and his research group in sociology of education at the University of London.¹¹⁷ An interesting fact is that both Dahlberg and Pettersson became influential actors in the official recontextualisation field (ORF) in Sweden during the 1990s.¹¹⁸ Despite this, their insights gained from their involvement in the life questions projects were overlooked in the 1994 comprehensive school curriculum reform, resulting in life questions losing its central importance.

Another aim of this article is to discuss how the recontextualisation of religious education and the pedagogic interest in life questions, and thus the lives of the students, played along with the intention of raising citizens for a democratic society. From the 1990s, there was a shift towards individualistic citizenship, focusing on liberty of choice rather than societal education.¹¹⁹ This dramatic change reversed earlier efforts to centralise and equalise the school system. The 1990s reforms introduced independent schools, with secularisation now supporting confessional schools.¹²⁰ Individualisation evolved from the 1960s' educated citizen concept to the 1980s' active citizen idea,¹²¹ and finally to the 1990s' neo-liberal individuality, emphasising personal responsibility, competition, and free choice.¹²² The new curriculum, influenced by German didactic

113 Åström Elmersjö (2017), 264; Carlgren et al. (2006), 306.

114 Piepenburg (2024), 175–78.

115 Hartman (2021).

116 Landahl and Larsson (2022), 81–103.

117 In 1983, their research was published in a book that Basil Bernstein edited together with Ulf P. Lundgren. Basil Bernstein also supervised Dahlberg's PhD thesis work.

118 Sten Pettersson was entrusted with managerial responsibilities at the Swedish National Agency for Education, while Gunilla Dahlberg became influential in the process of curriculum development for preschools.

119 Carlgren et al. (2006), 304–7.

120 Tomas Englund, "Två artskilda perioder för pedagogisk forskning," *Pedagogisk Forskning i Sverige* 23, no. 5 (2018), 20–42.

121 Englund (1989), 56.

122 Englund (2018), 26–34.

traditions, focused more on subject content and positioned schools as cultural carriers, a move that was criticised for potentially undermining democracy, equality, and citizenship education.¹²³

Bernstein argues that every time a discourse moves from one position to another there is a space where ideology can come into play.¹²⁴ To summarise how the concept *livsfrågor* was selected, implemented in curriculum and reshaped to fit as subject content in religious education it is evident that the process all along has been shaped by school policy, and that its position today is the result of a new social order, neo-liberalism.¹²⁵ Life questions was at the outset selected to meet demands of school policy aiming at democratisation. The student-centred, secularised approach had its peak in *Lgr80* and the broad focus on "life" drew not only on religious education as a singular discipline, but also on a range of other disciplinary sources. It also allowed for a more symmetrical relationship between teacher and learners. That is one reason why life questions were well-suited for the interdisciplinary and constructivist approach of *Lgr 80*, but not that suitable for the more prescriptive model of knowledge that was launched in *Lpo94*.

Final remarks

As such, the analysis of the development in the projects shows a close connection between shifting political and institutional interests and the pedagogical knowledge production on life questions in the Swedish welfare state context, including how secularisation and individualisation were closely linked to the aim of democratisation. Life questions connected these three ambitions through the 1970s and 1980s school reform waves but did not to the same extent meet the more rationalised and sharply disciplinary classified knowledge definitions that were launched from the 1990s onwards. This highlights the significant influence of shifting political interests on educational research, as well as the crucial role that research projects have historically played in shaping educational policies.¹²⁶ While this analysis focuses on Sweden, the insights are also applicable to other Nordic countries due to similarities in school reform processes.

The finding calls for further studies on life questions in relation to school's democratic aspirations and different teaching models; for example, a study of ideological school governance and the role of textbooks in religious education 1960–1994. This article also highlights the significant roles of various people and institutions in influencing the projects and school reforms. A history of knowledge perspective¹²⁷ could enrich our understanding of the life questions approach even more by investigating the circulation of knowledge in relation to political and ideological circumstances

123 It was, for example, criticised by Sven Hartman in *Lärares kunskap. Traditioner och idéer i svensk undervisningshistoria* (Linköping: Linköpings universitet, 1995) and by Bernt Gustavsson in *Bildning i vår tid: Om bildningens möjligheter och villkor i det moderna samhället* (Stockholm: Wahlström & Widstrand, 1996).

124 Bernstein (2000), 32.

125 Cf. Lundahl (2002), 687–97.

126 Cf. Piepenburg (2024), 169–91.

127 This perspective is, for example, promoted in *Histories of Knowledge in Postwar Scandinavia: Actors, Arenas, and Aspirations*, ed. Johan Östling, Niklas Olsen, and David Larsson Heidenblad (London: Routledge, 2020).

more thoroughly, and by considering power dynamics between different agents in influential arenas.

Finally, this article suggests that, as a form of knowledge, the life questions approach played highly into the ambition of democratisation, but in a way in which individualisation came to the fore and thereby continued the elements of early 20th century religious education reform, which tended to lean religious instruction more in the direction of morality than in the direction of confessional upbringing. In this sense, it can be argued that the knowledge production concerning children's life questions aimed at producing an individuality-based set of morals for the modern democratic welfare-state society.

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