

Article

A Proposal to Incorporate Experiential Education in Non-Confessional, Intercultural Religious Education: Reflections from and on the Norwegian Context

Thor-André Skreftsrud 

Faculty of Education, Inland Norway University of Applied Sciences, 2318 Hamar, Norway; thor.skreftsrud@inn.no

Abstract: In Norway, religious education (RE) is a non-confessional and common core subject that should be taught in an objective, critical, and pluralistic manner. As a primary school subject, students learn about a variety of religions and worldviews together in the same classroom. The inclusive framing intends to provide an intercultural space in which the students can enhance their understandings of the beliefs of people whose worldviews differ from their own. Consequently, the subject has privileged an outsider approach, wherein students should learn about religion in a non-partial way, that is, not from religion. However, the claim for objective, critical, and pluralistic teaching still calls into question the role of learning from religions. First, an outsider approach has been criticized for promoting a dated view on learning, ignoring pedagogical knowledge on how students learn. Second, the latest national curriculum states that RE should not only provide students with in-depth knowledge about world religions, but also foster personalized learning experiences. Against this background, the paper asks how the concept of experiential learning in the tradition of Freire, Dewey, and Vygotsky invites a reflection on the ways by which the Norwegian RE subject is passed on most meaningfully in a diverse learning context.

Keywords: religious education; experiential learning; critical thinking; learning about and from religion



Citation: Skreftsrud, Thor-André. 2022. A Proposal to Incorporate Experiential Education in Non-Confessional, Intercultural Religious Education: Reflections from and on the Norwegian Context. *Religions* 13: 727. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel13080727>

Academic Editors: Geir Skeie and Øystein Lund Johannessen

Received: 14 June 2022

Accepted: 9 August 2022

Published: 10 August 2022

Publisher's Note: MDPI stays neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.



Copyright: © 2022 by the author. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

1. Introduction

A notable challenge for research within the field of subject didactics is to develop a bridge between discipline and profession (Cramer and Schreiber 2018). Research in religious education (RE) thus needs to link subject-specific academic knowledge to pedagogical and educational science, for example to theories on how students acquire new understandings and knowledge during processes of learning. However, in the Norwegian context, which is the starting point for my reflection in this paper, research contributing to the field of RE has paid remarkably little attention to the role of pedagogical theory (Johnsen 2017; Skeie 2022). Although in recent years there has been a scientific shift from theology to religious studies within this field of research, a more in-depth understanding of learning seems to be underdeveloped, resulting in didactical approaches to RE that are largely detached from contemporary educational and pedagogical reflections. Thus, as noted by Johnsen (2017), Skeie (2022), and others, there is a need for a more nuanced and in-depth understanding of learning within the research field of RE.

In response to this challenge, the purpose of this paper is to promote a dialogue between the subject-specific discipline of RE and pedagogical theory. In the paper, I explore the contributions of an experiential theory of learning to a didactical reflection on the non-confessional RE subject within the Norwegian context. Drawing attention to how such an approach to learning may deepen the understanding of the distinction between learning *about* and learning *from* religion, the research question for the paper is as follows: *What can a non-confessional teaching of religions and worldviews in Norwegian public schools learn from an experiential theory of learning?*

Experiential education stands in contrast to what Freire (2005) calls a banking model of education, which states that teaching is the transmission of abstract knowledge from someone who knows to someone who does not, thus isolating knowledge from practice and personal experiences. In this paper, I ask how a theory of experiential learning, wherein personal experiences and critical reflections are cultivated, can provide a constructive contribution to a reflection on the ways by which the Norwegian RE subject is passed on most meaningfully in a diverse learning context. The discussion highlights that an experiential theory of learning has the potential to challenge a teacher-centered approach to education where teachers pre-determine students' responses. Moreover, an experiential approach to RE leaves room for students to reflect and respond from personal experience, thereby creating opportunities for exploring encounters between themselves and the subject content.

Methodologically, I apply a hermeneutical–analytical approach, which entails that I engage in interpretative and understanding-oriented dialogues with positions and theories to interpret, understand, and propose possible answers to the question raised in the study (Alsaigh and Coyne 2021; Paterson and Higgs 2005). The analysis is explorative in the sense that I draw on recent and former syllabuses for the Norwegian RE subject, scholarly debates regarding the didactics of the subject, and theoretical texts, but without conducting a rigorous review or in-depth analysis of the materials. Based on Gadamer's (2003) philosophical hermeneutical underpinnings, the discussions and reflections in this paper aim to enhance an understanding in which the results are open to alternative analyses. Therefore, the findings should be considered argumentative contributions to the debate on RE didactics that, hopefully, can stimulate further discussions on the relations between pedagogical theories of teaching and learning and non-confessional RE didactics. The paper is organized as follows: first, I set the scene for the discussion by presenting the political and educational background of the Norwegian RE subject. Moreover, I introduce what has been a main line of discourse in didactical research on the subject, including in the Norwegian context, namely, Grimmitt's (1987) well-established distinction between learning *from* and learning *about* religion (Andreassen 2016; Bråten 2009, 2015; Vestøl 2017). After identifying what has been seen as both the strengths and limitations of such a distinction, I then turn to conceptions of critical and experiential learning in the tradition of Freire (2005), Dewey (1961, 1963), and Vygotsky (1962, 1978) and ask how an objective, critical, and pluralistic approach to the teaching of RE may be interpreted from such a perspective.

2. Religious Education in the Norwegian Context

In 1997, RE was introduced in Norway as a compulsory and non-confessional subject that granted parents limited rights to withdraw their children from being taught such a subject. The new RE subject replaced a twofold model of religious education from 1974, wherein students were allowed to choose between two strands: the first concentrating mainly on Christianity and the second on other religions and worldviews (Gravem 2004; Skeie 2022). The new common subject should be taught to all students at the primary and secondary education levels. As a common school subject, the students should learn about a variety of religious, non-religious, and secular philosophies and worldviews together in the same classroom. The inclusive framing intends to provide a space in which young people can reflect on philosophical questions and enhance their understandings of the beliefs and perspectives of people whose worldviews, life stances, and values differ from their own.

The reason for Norwegian school authorities introducing a new common and compulsory RE subject was the gradual reshaping of traditional classrooms occurring in Norwegian schools in the last two decades. In Norway, as in most other countries, cultural, linguistic, and religious diversities have informed an increasingly complex transformation of the global landscape of education. In 1997, when the subject was introduced, immigration, globalization, and internationalization were already having substantial effects on Norwegian education, resulting in a more diverse student population with a broader variety of needs. At the same time, the government recognized the growing social and cultural frag-

mentation of society, potentially threatening national unity and social cohesion. Therefore, to separate students into different groups when learning about religion, as in the earlier model, could send a negative signal that religion is dangerous to be discussed as part of a comprehensive school's contributions to developing a more diverse and inclusive society. Against this background, the new RE subject should emphasize the significance of religion in building a common, national identity that could counteract a host of negative effects on society and the communities within (Engen and Lied 2010). Hence, aspirations and ambitions were high for the new RE subject, which was supposed to make students better equipped to face the contemporary challenges of a diversified society.

However, the new compulsory subject was highly debated and was revised accordingly by the government both in 2002 and 2005 (see, for example, Bråten 2009; Engen and Lied 2010; Gravem 2004). The revisions underlined that the subject should be taught in a pluralistic and unbiased manner, and that religions and beliefs should be introduced according to their own particular characteristics with the same pedagogical principles (Lied 2009). Nevertheless, minority groups were still concerned that the subject was highly influenced by Christianity. The subject was also criticized internationally as the Human Rights Court of Strasbourg found that the subject violated Article 2 of Protocol No. 1 of the Convention of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms (ECHR 2007; Lied 2008). According to the verdict, there was a problematic relation between the quantitative amount of Christianity in the syllabus and the purpose of schooling in the way that it was formulated as part of the Norwegian Education Act. Consequently, the court was doubtful about whether Norwegian teachers were able to conduct their teaching of the subject in a pluralistic and non-biased way. The subject underwent another round of revision in 2008 after the court case in Strasbourg, after which it incorporated significant changes and was specified to provide an objective, critical, and pluralistic approach to the teaching of religions and worldviews.

Since then, the controversies surrounding the subject have gradually diminished, although the government's reintroduction of Christianity as part of the subject's title in 2015 induced some reactions. These mainly came from minority groups and scholars who were satisfied with how the subject had been accepted by schools, students, and parents. However, despite the name change, Christianity cannot be said to have a privileged position within the subject, and recent understandings of the subject and its didactics have been more informed by religious studies perspectives than Christian theology, which used to dominate the subject curriculum (Bråten 2015; Skeie 2022). As noted by Skeie (2022) and others, the clarification of RE as a common school subject has privileged didactics wherein students learn *about* religions and worldviews in a non-partial way, including information and knowledge about how religion constitutes an important part of diversity in a plural society. In this sense, the intercultural dimension remains an integrated part of the subject. As an ordinary school subject, RE aims to give students intercultural competence to prepare them for interactions with people from diverse backgrounds, to enable them to understand people from other cultures, and to help them see that such interactions are an enriching experience (Ministry of Education 2020).

However, framed as a non-confessional RE subject that aims for intercultural understanding, it is still necessary to discuss the role of learning *from* religion within the subject. As for all other subject contents, students' engagement with religion and worldviews is not a passive process wherein learners receive objective knowledge; rather, accessing new knowledge is an active process connecting new contents to previous knowledge and experiences. Such an approach to learning is also emphasized in the latest curriculum of the Norwegian RE subject, in which the government has specified some key elements for the subject, such as exploring existential questions and considering others' perspectives (Ministry of Education 2020). The government thus signals that the RE subject should draw on learning theories wherein students are seen as imaginative and creative individuals who are receptive in their responses to the subject content. Accordingly, although the learning *about* approach has led to increased support for the Norwegian RE subject and reduced

polarized positions (Bråten 2015; Skeie 2022), there are reasons to ask how perspectives on students' learning through personal engagement and reflections correspond with the claim of objective, critical, and pluralistic RE teaching.

Before reflecting upon the contributions from an experiential theory of learning for non-confessional RE, I now turn to the well-established and lengthy scholarly distinction between learning about and learning from religion. Although such a distinction has played an important role in the discussion of not only the Norwegian RE subject, but also in the development of different international teaching models of RE, the same distinction may reinforce an outdated and simplistic view of learning. As I show in my theoretical argumentation, the distinction between learning from and learning about religion can thus be more confusing than useful when discussing non-confessional intercultural RE.

3. Learning from or about Religion?

Grimmitt's (1973, 1987) distinction between learning from and about religion has played a decisive role in the shift toward a multifaith and intercultural approach to religious education in Norway (Bråten 2015; Skeie 2022). In 1973, Grimmitt (1973) proposed a pedagogy for non-confessional RE in a British context and described the different needs and intentions of religious organizations and governments in secular societies. For Grimmitt, it was important to introduce pedagogical thinking that clearly differed from that of the Church, which until that time had dominated discourses on religious education (see also Engebretson 2004). While the approach of the Church was to instruct the learner with the intention of leading to belief and commitment to Christianity, RE in state schools should educate the learner about religion (Grimmitt 1973, p. 18). For schools to effectively educate their students, Grimmitt proposed some guiding criteria that were deemed valid not only for a non-confessional RE subject, but also for the curriculum as a whole. According to Grimmitt (1973, pp. 9–10), subjects in public schools should incorporate a unique mode of thought that is valuable to human development; they should also contribute to students' personal development and be taught in ways that foster the latter's independent and critical thinking.

Against this background, Grimmitt (1973, 1987) called for a balance between prescriptive approaches, wherein teachers provide students with knowledge about the different aspects of religions and worldviews, and student-centered approaches that lead to inquiries into the existential dimension. For Grimmitt (1987), such a pedagogical balance implies that students' study of religion is more than just learning about the various dimensions of world religions, including their rituals, beliefs, traditions, esthetics, and complex histories. Learning from religion means that students are given opportunities to discuss ultimate questions and reflect upon how these correspond with their own lives. As such, non-confessional religious education can give students a deeper understanding of religion as a phenomenon, while simultaneously helping them explore what it means to be human (Grimmitt 1987).

In the Norwegian context, the distinction between learning from and learning about religion has played an important role with regards to defining the purpose and didactical design of the Norwegian non-confessional RE subject (Bråten 2015; Skeie 2022). Historically, the teaching of religion in Norwegian schools was characterized by a learning from approach, in the sense that students' learning about Christianity in schools was meant to strengthen their faith and Christian life. In 1739, Norwegian schools were established, with reading and Christian catechesis as the two main subjects, for the purpose of preparing students for the Christian sacrament of confirmation. After 150 years, in 1889, the Compulsory School Act was implemented, which stated that Christian confirmation should no longer be part of public schools' objectives. However, although a variety of subjects were added to the curriculum and indicated wider cultural content than the church school of the eighteenth century, the subject Christian Knowledge remained a central part of the Church's baptismal instruction until 1969 (Gravem 2004; Lied 2009). In 1974, when the twofold model was introduced, it marked the first time Christianity and the Church's instruction lost its hegemonic and dominating role in Norwegian public schools. In this

way, learning from religion has been a dominant principle in religious education in Norway for more than 230 years.

The comprehensive RE subject introduced in 1997 implied a change in this regard. Constructed as a common compulsory school subject, the Norwegian RE subject was intended to initiate students into what [Grimmitt \(1987, p. 225\)](#) framed as “an impersonal or public mode of understanding,” apart from stimulating self-awareness and personal knowledge. Revisions of the subject content in 2008, which specified that teaching in the subject should be conveyed in an objective, critical, and pluralistic manner, underlined this priority. Since then, scholars such as [Andreassen \(2008, 2016\)](#), [von der Lippe and Undheim \(2017\)](#), and others have highlighted a diverging discourse between learning from as a theological-oriented pedagogy, in the tradition of [Asheim and Mogstad \(1977; Asheim and Mogstad 1987\)](#), and learning about as a didactical approach that draws inspiration from a secular religion of science. Such a line has been established in several didactically oriented doctoral dissertations that explore different aspects of what it can mean to learn about religion within the Norwegian RE subject ([Anker 2011; Bråten 2009; Jørgensen 2014; Husebø 2013](#)). In recent years, it thus seems that learning about has been established as a legitimate way of approaching the contemporary subject, while learning from signals a more problematic and complicated approach in line with earlier forms of the RE subject oriented mainly toward Christianity (see also [Skeie 2022](#)).

However, as indicated in the introduction to the article, the distinction between learning from and learning about may not sufficiently clarify analysis and discussions of the purpose and design of the Norwegian RE subject. As emphasized in the latest national curriculum ([Ministry of Education 2020](#)), the RE subject should not only provide students in-depth knowledge about world religions and worldviews, but also an arena that allows them to explore existential questions and stimulates their personal engagement with the subject’s content. Moreover, [Vestøl \(2017\)](#) has accentuated that learning about most often also involves learning from, as the process of learning is seldom characterized by a one-dimensional transfer of knowledge from the teacher to the student. [Johnsen \(2017\)](#) highlighted a similar point, as she criticized [Andreassen’s \(2008, 2016\)](#) outsider approach to the teaching of religion, as formulated in the latter’s influential didactical approach to the teaching of RE in a Norwegian context. According to [Johnsen \(2017\)](#), [Andreassen’s](#) approach is designed in such a way that it is largely detached from contemporary educational and pedagogical thinking, resulting in a superficial and simplified understanding of the processes of learning. Interestingly, [Johnsen \(2017\)](#) directs a similar critique toward [Asheim and Mogstad’s \(1987\)](#) traditional learning from approach, which, in [Andreassen’s](#) work, forms an opposition to his own contribution. Although proposed as opposites, both [Andreassen’s \(2008, 2016\)](#) learning about and [Asheim and Mogstad’s \(1987\)](#) learning from approaches conceptualize learning mainly within a limited sender–receiver model of communication ([Johnsen 2017](#)). Hence, both didactical approaches seem to overlook the significance of educational theory in understanding and discussing the purpose and design of RE education in public schools.

Addressing [Johnsen’s \(2017\)](#) challenge of bringing educational theory on learning closer to a reflection on the didactics of the Norwegian RE subject, I now turn to an experiential and critical theory of learning in the traditions of Freire, Dewey, and Vygotsky. My argument is that adopting an experiential perspective on learning can help us recognize the intercultural dimension of the Norwegian RE subject—one that runs the risk of being overlooked when teachers rely merely on an outsider approach in their teaching of religions and worldviews.

4. An Experiential Approach to Learning

The concept of experiential learning has inspired a wide range of international research and has materialized in a variety of educational practices ([Fleming and Walter 2004; Dodman et al. 2022; Kolb 2015](#)). Characterized by its attention to the social and dialogical sides of educational processes and the deliberate link between learning and reflection, the

concept is rooted in the works of classic education thinkers, such as Freire (2005), Shor and Freire (1987), Dewey (1961, 1963), and Vygotsky (1962, 1978, 1987). While the philosophies of education introduced by Freire and Dewey have experienced revitalization in recent years due to their elaboration on the connections between learning in everyday situations and in school (Carter 2013), Vygotsky's attention toward the social and dialogical preconditions for children's development has continued to challenge simplified understandings of teaching and learning. This is particularly true in relation to his idea that human development is a socially mediated process wherein children acquire knowledge, values, beliefs, and strategies through collaborative dialogues with their parents and more knowledgeable others (Dafermos 2016). Hence, although Freire, Dewey, and Vygotsky's theories clearly differ in their approaches to learning, a common trait is the idea that processes of learning are not context-less activities that take place in isolation, but are rather closely related to students' everyday experiences which are socially and culturally situated.

Furthermore, their contributions to a modern theory of experiential learning center on the process of learning through experience and, importantly, through critical reflections on such experience. As noted by Shor and Freire (1987), within conventional academic instruction, teachers present information to students who are expected to passively receive and reproduce it afterwards. Within such a concept of education, teachers 'deposit' knowledge into students' minds; the curriculum is already set, and the students simply adapt to it. However, such an approach to education is highly problematic, as it sees the teacher as the subject of the learning process and the students as the objects (Freire 2005). From this perspective, students are perceived as empty vessels representing a tabula rasa to be filled with information, as the teacher deposits content and knowledge into their minds. For Freire, the banking model of education is an oppressive model that mirrors the attitudes and practices of a society that uses dominance and subordination to allow inequalities to continue.

Dewey raised a similar critique, as he outlined a distinction between an experiential theory of learning and the conventional approach to learning in American schools adopted at the beginning of the twentieth century. While working as a teacher in Chicago, Dewey discovered that some of the students from the suburbs attending the rural school were alienated from classroom teaching, as the content did not mirror their previous knowledge or interests. In later writings, Dewey (1961, 1963) criticized traditional schooling for ignoring the role of children's everyday experiences as an academic starting point for learning. From Dewey's perspective, traditional schooling was more concerned about teachers prescribing a pre-defined understanding of what comprised relevant knowledge than how students were learning and how the content may correspond to their previous knowledge and experiences (Dewey 1963). According to Dewey, students' learning in school was seen as a distinct experience, separated from the rest of the students' lives, making it difficult for those students who were unfamiliar with the subject content (see also Bourdieu and Passeron 1990).

For Vygotsky, who developed his ideas within a Marxist Soviet educational system, the call for an experiential-based approach to education took a different path than that of Freire and Dewey. In particular, Vygotsky developed his theories in contrast to a behaviorist and later a cognitivist model, which claims that children respond to development and learning in a pre-defined and universal way, either through classical conditioning as it is outlined in, for example, Skinner's work, or in the distinct stages of cognitive development in Piaget's developmental theory (Dafermos 2016). Moreover, Vygotsky marked a distance from what he saw as a reductionist Marxist idea that a child's development was a product of history and a result of the sociocultural circumstances surrounding the child (Bruner 1987). Hence, in line with Freire's and Dewey's work, Vygotsky's pedagogical thinking challenges the inactive and passive role of the learner and rather draws attention to dialogue and the co-construction of knowledge as preconditions for learning and human development.

Vygotsky's work covered a wide range of fields, such as linguistics, psychology, and history. Vygotsky's way of framing teaching and learning, which encourages creative

conversations among different disciplines, represents a major contribution to educational scholarship, particularly his attention to the preconditions for learning and development. According to [Vygotsky \(1962, p. 149\)](#), children's learning is not solely a cognitive achievement or something that happens through a one-way transmission of information from an adult to a child. Rather, learning is closely connected to social interactions that are recapitulated within the learner in the form of inner speech. In a famous quote, Vygotsky explains how he sees the interaction between the learner and the social context: "Every function in the child's cultural development appears twice: first, on the social level, and later, on the individual level, first, between people (interpsychological) and then inside the child (intrapsychological)" ([Vygotsky 1978, p. 57](#)). Hence, the acquisition of knowledge is not about teachers providing information that should be processed by students' preexisting cognitive skills, but rather a social process that shapes their cognition (see also [Kozulin 2004](#)).

Vygotsky's sociocultural approach to learning is also illustrated in his well-known concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). As noted by [Bruner \(1987\)](#), the ZPD concept draws on a Socratic pedagogy in which a learner's cognition is activated through interactions with a more able peer. As scripted by Plato in his work *Meno*, Socrates engaged in several dialogues with people at the agora in Athens. For example, in a dialogue on geometry with Memo, a young slave, Memo's understandings are widened and restructured, as Socrates builds on his experiences and already established concepts. In the same sense, Vygotsky's ZPD concept explains how learners can enhance their knowledge when guided by a person who is more skilled than them. Throughout the process of learning, the more knowledgeable other activates and builds on the cultural, linguistic, and experiential capital already possessed by the learner. Hence, according to Vygotsky, knowledge is not transferred, delivered, or "placed" into the learner from the outside, but is constructed in an affirmative and dialogical interaction between the learner and his/her social context.

Context also plays a crucial role in Dewey's alternative to a teacher-oriented pedagogy and Freire's to banking education. However, while Vygotsky explored the psychological side of learning and its sociocultural conditions, Dewey advocated the ethical ideal of participatory democracy based on a belief in human experience. Taking a critical stance against attempts to reduce students to passive interpreters and teachers to mere providers of a prescribed curriculum, Dewey argued that learning should be closely related to students' everyday experiences and that alternative learning arenas, such as family life and leisure time, are important for students' development. Consequently, in line with Vygotsky's ZPD concept, Dewey found that education should take its starting point in students' various experiences, interests, and needs—a principle that stimulates the freedom of choice for students. Thus, teachers "should know how to utilize the surroundings, physical and social, that exist so as to extract from them all that they have to contribute to building up experiences that are worthwhile" ([Dewey 1963, p. 40](#)). Furthermore, for Dewey, building education from "below" not only enhances students' cognitive development, but also leads to their democratic development, thus revealing a profound belief in the progress of humanity. Hence, according to Dewey, an educational approach based on experiential learning is not merely beneficial for cognitive development, but counteracts the unfortunate fragmentation of modern industrial society and increased democratic participation.

As noted by [Kitchens \(2009\)](#), a close link exists between Dewey's attention to students' cultural and personal backgrounds and Freire's pedagogical thinking (see also [Kolb 2015](#)). Both Dewey and Freire are concerned with what they considered conventional pedagogy, where the teachers talk and the students listen. In parallel to Dewey, Freire pointed out that teachers' awareness and involvement of students' previous knowledge, experiences, and skills into learning may counteract conventional teacher-centered strategies that often rely on a banking model where content is transferred to passive students. However, Freire's work puts a stronger emphasis on critical ideals, such as social transformation and individual emancipation, than on the scholarship of Dewey and Vygotsky. According to

Freire, a pedagogical “turn toward subjective experience must also include a global, critical dimension” (Shor and Freire 1987, p. 104). This means that an experiential learning approach should not simply “confirm the status quo or motivate students” (Shor and Freire 1987, p. 104). Rather, from Freire’s perspective, a critical experiential pedagogy should seek to transcend perceptions of reality as something universal and natural. While the oppressive banking model mirrors the attitudes and practices of an oppressive society, a critical and experiential approach to learning is liberative in the sense that it challenges a pedagogy wherein the teacher “fills the students with the contents of his narration—contents which are detached from reality, disconnected from the totality that engendered them, and could give them significance” (Freire 2005, p. 71). An experiential model like this one activates and builds on students’ interests and personal engagement and allows for a reflexive process in which students are encouraged to engage critically with that which is studied. Thus, Freire’s contribution to experiential learning is to introduce the potential of liberating students’ minds through education. Moreover, the situation that oppresses them may also be altered by changing the consciousness of the oppressed, thereby illustrating the transformative potential of Freire’s (2005, p. 74) pedagogical contribution.

It is worth noting, however, that Freire, Dewey, and Vygotsky’s theories are more complex and distinct than my presentation in this paper indicates. To present the three theorists as representatives of an experiential theory of learning, thus runs the risk of overlooking important differences and presents them as more similar than their original writings allow. For example, Vygotsky’s emphasis on cultural artifacts as tools to mediate learning announces an object-centered theory of learning that may come into conflict with Freire and Dewey’s more student-centered approaches (Johnsen and Afdal 2020; Kozulin 2004). Furthermore, one can ask how well Vygotsky’s idea that education should enhance students’ higher mental functions and transcend everyday concepts into scientific concepts aligns with a view on learning as a context-sensitive process (Dafermos 2016; Faldet and Skrefsrud 2020). Although Vygotsky rejected ideas about universal cognitive development through pre-defined stages, he indisputably argued for learning as the process of acquiring individual context-free knowledge. Another important distinction is that Freire’s philosophy focuses also on dialogue as a means for emancipation, but with little attention to artefacts. Freire’s work seeks to develop a critical consciousness in students of how their social realities are shaped by power structures. A key difference too is that Freire argues that teachers should use the language students use, which might conflict with Vygotsky, who tended to prefer the ‘more advanced other’ in relation to the level of the learner. Moreover, while Vygotsky focused on psychological development through social interaction, and Dewey on motivational factors for learning, Freire focused on political liberation from oppression through critical awareness and dialogue (Tavares Forthcoming).

Being aware of the risk of oversimplifications, however, I still see it valuable and important to explore the intersecting ideas the three theorists represent, despite their differences and the richness of their authorships. While these educational theories differ in some significant ways, this proposal is grounded in their common essence that problematizes and reconceptualizes the roles of teachers and students within traditional education toward their empowerment and agency. As I show in the next section, I believe that the fundamental role of social interaction in the development of cognition that Freire, Dewey, and Vygotsky all stress can inspire RE research to benefit from an experiential model of learning.

5. Discussion

How can an experiential approach to education in the tradition of Freire, Dewey, and Vygotsky help us reflect upon an objective, critical, and pluralistic teaching of the RE subject in the Norwegian context? In the remainder of the article, I attempt to synthesize the contributions of an experiential approach to learning by identifying three partly overlapping inputs.

First, I believe that an experiential model of learning can help clarify the consequences of a situation in which a one-dimensional outsider approach is applied by teachers without

sufficient pedagogical knowledge in RE classrooms. A non-confessional teaching of religion that, for some reason, is unwilling to connect the curriculum to the lives of students risks passing on the discipline as something irrelevant and abstract. By not creating and cultivating a meaningful space through which students can explore their interests and investigate meaning in relation to the content, schools create a distinction between students' everyday activities and classroom learning in ways that reduce the latter's motivational beliefs and attitudes (Dewey 1963). Moreover, as Freire (2005, p. 74) emphasized, "liberating education consists of acts of cognition, not transferals of information." When students in RE classrooms dutifully absorb the knowledge laid before them by the teacher, dominating perspectives are not critically questioned; rather, the curriculum is prescribed by the teacher in ways that promote conformity more than critical thinking and self-reflection. Hence, the concept of experiential learning warns us that teaching RE in an objective, critical, and pluralistic manner is not about reproducing a static body of content, as such an approach demotivates students and creates barriers for critical thinking.

Second, an experiential model of learning challenges traditional perceptions of the roles of students and teachers. The traditional classroom has often been associated with a teacher-centered pedagogy of instruction, of telling and listening, and of right and wrong answers. While teachers within this setting often adopt the Initiate–Response–Evaluate (IRE) pattern of teaching, students only memorize the information and repeat the content of the lesson with little interpretation in connection to their social realities. Hence, within such a model, teachers are the active knowers and experts who decide what can be considered legitimate and relevant knowledge. This means that students who succeed in such a setting are those who listen quietly, attentively, and passively accept what is being taught.

As emphasized by Johnsen (2017) and others, such roles are easily played out, or at least not sufficiently addressed, within a one-dimensional learning from approach. An experiential model of learning, however, rejects the idea that students' engagement with religion simply implies the reproduction of curricular content. For RE teachers, as for all other subject teachers, an experiential model requires a shift in how the role of teaching is conceived of. Rather than seeing teachers and students as the providers of information and passive receptacles, respectively, experiential pedagogy invites teachers and scholars to reimagine how methods and classroom interactions are introduced and implemented. To establish learners' ZPD, teachers' interest in students' previous skills, experiences, and knowledge must not only be understood as a positive openness toward the latter's backgrounds, but also as the former's willingness to make connections between students' lives and the curriculum they are mandated to teach. Thus, it is worth noting that the experiential model does not disregard the significance of teachers' position in the classroom; rather, it challenges procedure-bound teaching and learning patterns that define and place teachers and students in hierarchical categories and dichotomous positions.

Third, an experiential model of learning does not only reject a transfer model that isolates knowledge from practice; it also offers a constructive alternative for instruction that puts students' knowledge and experiences at the heart of their learning. As such, the model underlines the core principle of Grimmer's (1983) pedagogy, in the sense that it sets students "on the way to being receptive to the lessons to be learned from life; of being imaginative and creative in their responses to changing personal circumstances" (p. 14). When the curriculum is connected to and built around the students' daily lives, and instruction gives them tools to critically understand and act on those everyday experiences, they can become what Cummins (2015, p. 460) called "insiders," whose background knowledge and experiences are considered useful and valuable for academic learning.

For example, teaching non-confessional and intercultural RE within the zone of proximal development would mean giving students engaging and culturally meaningful tasks that they need to work together with a more competent peer to accomplish. As part of an experiential model, Vygotsky's ZPD concept thus encourages RE teachers to emphasize dialogue and collaboration between students and between students and the teacher, not as fixed relationships, but as continuous collaboration. Such an approach to education

would mean recognizing the presence and importance of diversity and not leveling out differences, but integrating them as providers for rich learning opportunities. Thus, applying the ZPD concept in RE education implies an opportunity for teachers to affirm the linguistic, cultural, and religious repertoire that students bring with them to school, which in the context of RE could entail experiences with religious practices and understandings of religious phenomena. However, as noted by Leganger-Krogstad (2014, p. 122), “at school it is allowed to voice other viewpoints than those given through upbringing and those which can be stated at home or in the religious community”. Hence, teachers cannot take for granted that students should be able to make active use of their experiences at school, either because they do not want to, or because acquaintance with a religious practice or belief can be something completely different than being able to explain its background and details. Nevertheless, teaching RE within the ZPD, differences are seen as a resource for learning, meaning that educating comes into touch with the students’ diverse knowledge about religions and worldviews, at the same time as they are moved beyond their initial preconceptions in collaboration with others. As such, applying the ZPD concept in the classroom as part of an experiential learning approach can enhance the intercultural potential of a non-confessional RE.

Moreover, a modern experiential theory of learning incorporates a critical dimension, which is also prominent in Grimmitt’s (1973, 1983, 1987) thinking. In Grimmitt’s pedagogy of RE, “the item of religious content is always brought into a dynamic relationship with critical and reflective thought” (Engebretson 2004, p. 10). Thus, from this perspective, infusing RE classrooms with dialogical and student-centered approaches is not only about creating motivational interests to make the students invest in their own learning. According to Shor and Freire (1987, p. 104), “themes familiar to the students are not thrown in as a manipulative technique, simply to confirm the status quo or motivate students.” Rather, an attentiveness toward students’ subjective experiences should also include a critical dimension: “We don’t only look at the familiar, but we try to understand it socially and historically” (Shor and Freire 1987, p. 104). Hence, experiential learning demands an openness: listening, reflecting, critically reviewing, and perspective-taking about the relations between the learning content and the learners’ experiences. Throughout this process, abstract thinking can be enhanced to conceptualize the meaning of the experience and its relevance for everyday life; this can even lead the learner toward a decision to act: “We gain a distance from the given by abstracting it from its familiar surroundings and studying it in unfamiliar critical ways, until our perceptions of it and society are challenged” (Shor and Freire 1987, p. 104). As such, in making connections between the curriculum and the students’ personal experiences, a distant perspective is also nurtured, not as an oversimplified, linear transport of prescribed knowledge from teacher to student, but as a critical approach that stimulates the latter’s self-reflection and conceptual thinking.

6. Conclusions

There is a self-evident rationale for emphasizing lived experiences as a means of enhancing learning. However, beyond this self-evident proposition, a modern theory of experiential learning remains necessary to challenge conventional understandings of how to create meaningful classroom interactions between educators and learners. Such a theory also identifies some important pedagogical principles that strengthen the significant role played by education in promoting students’ academic achievements and understanding across cultural differences.

The framework presented in this paper builds on the works of Freire, Dewey, and Vygotsky and assigns noticeable agency to teachers (but also students), both individually and collectively, to acknowledge the resources brought into the classroom by their students. Within an experiential learning model, teachers function as interpreters and facilitators who can activate students to gain an in-depth understanding and to engage in critical reflection. Thus, teaching and learning in the classroom are no longer about teachers providing information for passive students to reproduce or memorize. Moreover, by

connecting the curriculum to students' daily lives, the process of learning can empower them to understand and act upon the realities they face. Thus, looking at non-confessional religious education in light of an experiential model of learning, we can see that students are "active interpreters of religious meaning-making, [and] not just passive observers or recipients of information" (Grimmitt 2000, p. 39). This view suggests a perspective of learning from in learning about.

The framework, however, illustrates that learning from and learning about religion is a distinction that can be more confusing than useful in interpreting a non-confessional, objective, critical, and pluralistic RE subject. As Hella and Wright (2008, p. 60) have noted, students' engagement with religion is never abstract, "one always learns about something, and such learning necessarily changes you as a person." Hence, in the classroom, learning about and from religion is intertwined, as illustrated by an experiential model of learning. In line with Vygotsky, Dewey, and Freire's views on learning, Biesta (2015, p. 235) argued that education always involves "transmission and acquisition of some content [. . .], but always also 'connects' students to particular traditions and ways of doing and being and, in addition, has an impact on their formation as a person." Although learning from and learning about approaches to education can be distinguished, an experiential model of learning helps us see that they cannot be singled out or kept separated. In other words, even teaching approaches that claim only to focus on learning about (e.g., the privileged didactic of the Norwegian RE subject) are still making an impact on the domain of learning from. Moreover, teachers face the challenge of finding a meaningful balance between the two, keeping in mind that what can be achieved in a learning about approach often limits or disturbs what can be achieved within a learning from approach, and vice versa.

An experiential model of learning does not give specific recommendations or guidelines about what it means to conduct objective, critical, and pluralistic teaching within the context of the Norwegian RE subject. Nevertheless, this model can serve as a valuable addition to ongoing discussions, as it sheds light on the problematic consequences of teaching that overlook the significance of students' experiences in their learning. Giving attention to students' personal reflections and daily experiences in the teaching of religion can counteract an education that underestimates the substantial roles played by reflection, critical review, and perspective-taking in the learning process.

As Dodman et al. (2022, p. 136) have pointed out, a curriculum that considers students' experiences in the process of learning "makes room for unforeseen, yet meaningful, circumstances designed by and negotiated with the students." Thus, applying the ideas from an experiential model of learning in Norwegian RE classrooms can help us reflect further on the intercultural potential of the subject. Diversity becomes more than an abstract concept when teachers and those who design and conduct RE education affirm the complex and diverse experiences brought about by students and their communities to the classroom and activate their "life-worlds" in processes of teaching and learning. Allowing students to engage with a plurality of views in ways that cultivate personal experiences and critical reflections can challenge presumptions and stereotypical understandings about the self and the other in light of interreligious contact, thereby creating a richer learning environment. Hence, interpreting the Norwegian non-confessional RE subject through the pedagogical lens of experiential learning can help us see more of how the subject can contribute to the development of a positive understanding of cultural and religious differences, as well as a readiness to engage in dialogue.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: Not applicable.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

References

- Alsaigh, Rasha, and Imelda Coyne. 2021. Doing a hermeneutic phenomenology research underpinned by Gadamer's philosophy: A framework to facilitate data analysis. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 20: 1–20. [CrossRef]
- Andreassen, Bengt-Ove. 2008. Et Ordinært fag i Særklasse. En Analyse av Fagdidaktiske Perspektiver i Innføringsbøker i Religionsdidaktikk. Ph.D. dissertation, University of Tromsø, Tromsø, Norway.
- Andreassen, Bengt-Ove. 2016. *Religionsdidaktikk: En Innføring*. Oslo: Universitetsforlaget.
- Anker, Trine. 2011. Respect and Disrespect: Social Practices in a Norwegian Multicultural School. Ph.D. dissertation, MF Norwegian School of Theology, Religion, and Society, Oslo, Norway.
- Asheim, Ivar. 1977. *Religionspedagogikk: En Innføring*. Oslo: Universitetsforlaget.
- Asheim, Ivar, and Sverre Dag Mogstad. 1987. *Religionspedagogikk: Tolkning, Undervisning, Oppdragelse*. Oslo: Universitetsforlaget.
- Biesta, Gert. 2015. Freeing teaching from learning: Opening up existential possibilities in educational relationships. *Studies in Philosophy and Education* 34: 229–43. [CrossRef]
- Bourdieu, Pierre, and Jean-Claude Passeron. 1990. *Reproduction in Education, Society and Culture*. London: Sage.
- Bråten, Oddrun Marie Hovde. 2009. A Comparative Study of Religious Education in State Schools in England and Norway. Ph.D. dissertation, Warwick University, Coventry, UK.
- Bråten, Oddrun Marie Hovde. 2015. Should there be wonder and awe? A three-dimensional and four-level comparative methodology used to discuss the "learning from" aspect of English and Norwegian RE. *Nordidactica: Journal of Humanities and Social Science Education* 5: 1–23.
- Bruner, Jerome. 1987. Prologue to the English Version. In *The Collected Works of L. S. Vygotsky. Volume 1: Problems of General Psychology, Including the Volume "Thinking and Speech"*. Edited by Robert Rieber and Aaron S. Carton. New York: Plenum, pp. 1–16.
- Carter, Ellen. 2013. John Is Back, or Is He? The Dewey Revival and Community Service-Learning in Higher Education. In *Critical Issues in Higher Education*. Edited by Michael Kompf and Pamela M. Denicolo. Rotterdam: Sense Publishers, pp. 225–35.
- Cramer, Colin, and Felix Schreiber. 2018. Subject Didactics and Educational Sciences: Relationships and Their Implications for Teacher Education from the Viewpoint of Educational Sciences. *RISTAL. Research in Subject-Matter Teaching and Learning* 1: 150–64.
- Cummins, Jim. 2015. Intercultural education and academic achievement: A framework for school-based policies in multilingual schools. *Intercultural Education* 26: 455–68. [CrossRef]
- Dafermos, Manolis. 2016. Critical reflection on the reception of Vygotsky's theory in the international academic communities. *Cultural-Historical Psychology* 12: 27–46. [CrossRef]
- Dewey, John. 1961. *Democracy and Education: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Education*. New York: The Macmillan Company.
- Dewey, John. 1963. *Experience and Education*. London: Collier MacMillian Publisher.
- Dodman, Maria J., Inês Cardoso, and Vander Tavares. 2022. Communicating and Understanding the other Through Experiential Education: Portuguese Language and Culture in Toronto. In *Curriculum Design and Praxis in Language Teaching: A Globally Informed Approach*. Edited by Fernanda Carra-Salsberg, Maria Fugeredo and Mihyon Jeon. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, pp. 131–43.
- ECHR. 2007. Case of Folgerø and Others v. Norway. Available online: <https://hudoc.echr.coe.int/fre?i=001-81356> (accessed on 4 June 2022).
- Engbretson, Kathleen. 2004. Learning about and learning from religion: The pedagogical theory of Michael Grimmitt. *Journal of Religious Education* 52: 1–7.
- Engen, Thor Ola, and Sidsel Lied. 2010. RLE-faget og dobbelt kvalitativ differensiering. In *Livstolkning i Skole, Kultur og Kirke. Festskrift til Peder Gravem*. Edited by Jan-Olav Henriksen and Atle O. Søvik. Trondheim: Tapir Akademisk Forlag, pp. 33–44.
- Faldet, Ann-Cathrin, and Thor-André Skrefsrud. 2020. The reception of Vygotsky in pedagogical literature for Norwegian teacher education. *Forum Oświatowe* 32: 11–27.
- Fleming, Douglas, and Pierre Walter. 2004. Linking teacher professionalism and learner autonomy through experiential learning and task design. *TESL Canada Journal* 4: 58–72. [CrossRef]
- Freire, Paulo. 2005. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. New York: Continuum.
- Gadamer, Hans-Georg. 2003. Om forståelsens sirkel. In *Utvalgte Hermeneutiske Skrifter*. Edited by Helge Jordheim. Oslo: Cappelen, pp. 33–44.
- Gravem, Peder. 2004. *KRL-et Fag for Alle? KRL-Faget Som Svar på Utfordringer i en Flerkulturell Enhetsskole*. Vallset: Oplandske Bokforlag.
- Grimmitt, Michael. 1973. *What Can I Do in RE?* Great Waking: Mayhew-McCrimmon.
- Grimmitt, Michael. 1983. *Religious Education and Humanisation*. Sydney: Australian Association for Religious Education.
- Grimmitt, Michael. 1987. *Religious Education and Human Development: The Relationship between Studying Religions and Personal, Social and Moral Education*. Great Waking: McCrimmons.
- Grimmitt, Michael. 2000. *Pedagogies of Religious Education: Case Studies in the Research and Development of Good Pedagogic Practice in RE*. Great Waking: McGrimmon.
- Hella, Elina, and Andrew Wright. 2008. Learning "about" and "from" religion: Phenomenography, the Variation Theory of Learning and religious education in Finland and the UK. *British Journal of Religious Education* 31: 53–64. [CrossRef]
- Husebø, Dag. 2013. Fagdidaktisk Utpøving av en Fortolkende Kulturbevisst Tilnærming til Religion, Livssyn og Etikk-Undervisning: Om Forholdet Mellom Teori og Praksis i Lærerutdanningsfaget og Grunnskolefaget RLE. Ph.D. dissertation, University of Stavanger, Stavanger, Norway.

- Johnsen, Elisabeth T. 2017. Religionsvitenskapelig fornyelse med pedagogisk slagside. *Teologisk Tidsskrift* 6: 322–37. [[CrossRef](#)]
- Johnsen, Elisabeth T., and Geir Afdal. 2020. Practice theory in empirical practical theological research: The scientific contribution of LETRA. *Tidsskrift for Praktisk Teologi* 37: 58–76. [[CrossRef](#)]
- Jørgensen, Camilla Stabel. 2014. Som du Spør får du svar? En empirisk Studie av Skrivning i Religions- og Livssynsfaget. Ph.D. dissertation, NTNU, Trondheim, Norway.
- Kitchens, John. 2009. Situated pedagogy and the situationist international: Countering a pedagogy of placelessness. *Educational Studies* 45: 240–61. [[CrossRef](#)]
- Kolb, David A. 2015. *Experiential Learning: Experience as the Source of Learning and Development*, 2nd ed. Upper Saddle River: Pearson Education.
- Kozulin, Alex. 2004. Vygotsky's theory in the classroom: Introduction. *European Journal of Psychology of Education* XIX: 3–7. [[CrossRef](#)]
- Leganger-Krogstad, Heid. 2014. From dialogue to trialogue: A sociocultural learning perspective on classroom interaction. *Journal for the Study of Religion* 27: 104–28.
- Lied, Sidsel. 2008. KRL-faget i Strasbourg: Presentasjon av dom og dissens i EMD og skisse av en mulig vei videre. *Norsk Teologisk Tidsskrift* 109: 55–71. [[CrossRef](#)]
- Lied, Sidsel. 2009. The Norwegian Christianity, Religion and Philosophy subject KRL in Strasbourg. *British Journal of Religious Education* 31: 263–75. [[CrossRef](#)]
- Ministry of Education. 2020. *Læreplanverket for Kunnskapsløftet 2020*. Oslo: Ministry of Education.
- Paterson, Margo, and Joy Higgs. 2005. Using hermeneutics as a qualitative research approach in professional practice. *The Qualitative Report* 10: 339–57. [[CrossRef](#)]
- Shor, Ira, and Paulo Freire. 1987. *A Pedagogy for Liberation: Dialogues on Transforming Education*. New York: Bergin and Garvey.
- Skeie, Geir. 2022. Er KRLE-faget et ordinært skolefag? Hva betyr det i så fall for undervisningens mål? In *Møter og Mangfold: Religion og Kultur i Historie, Samtid og Skole*. Edited by Hildegunn Valen Kleive, Jonas G. Lillebø and Knut-Willy Sæther. Oslo: Cappelen Damm Akademisk, pp. 199–227.
- Tavares, Vander. Forthcoming. A century of Paulo Freire: Problem-solving education, conscientização, dialogue and TESL from a Freirean perspective. In *Social Justice, Decoloniality, and Southern Epistemologies within Language Education: Theories, Knowledges, and Practices on TESOL from Brazil*. Edited by Vander Tavares. New York: Routledge.
- Vestøl, Jon Magne. 2017. Skal religionsundervisningen ta hensyn til elevens livssynsbakgrunn? In *Religion i Skolen. Didaktiske Perspektiver på Religions- og Livssynsfaget*. Edited by Marie von der Lippe and Sissel Undheim. Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, pp. 130–43.
- von der Lippe, Marie, and Sissel Undheim. 2017. *Religion i Skolen: Didaktiske Perspektiver på Religions- og Livssynsfaget*. Oslo: Universitetsforlaget.
- Vygotsky, Lev. 1962. *Thought and Language*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Vygotsky, Lev. 1978. *Mind in Society: The Development of Higher Psychological Processes*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Vygotsky, Lev. 1987. Thinking and Speech. In *The Collected Works of L.S. Vygotsky (Vol. 1: Problems of General Psychology)*. Edited by Robert W. Rieber and Aaron S. Carton. New York: Plenum Press.