

Abstract

The PhD-thesis *Religious learning in social practices. An ethnographic study of mediation, identification, and negotiation processes in religious education in the Church of Norway* analyzes how children learn religion through participation in religious education activities in the Church of Norway. This thesis fills a gap in religious education research by exploring how religious learning takes place in social practices beyond the classroom's walls. By using empirical material from religious education in the Church of Norway, Johnsen argues that religious education research should include every social practice where religious learning takes place.

Johnsen's theoretical contribution consists of an exploration of how different pedagogical theories give insights into what religious learning is about, and how it takes place in social practices. The research project is grounded in the sociocultural tradition that originates from the writings of Lev Vygotsky, but it is argued that research on religious learning might operate with several theoretical conceptions of learning. One of the theoretically significant elements of the thesis is that it cuts across established lines of thought in pedagogical theory. This becomes apparent in the way in which sociocultural theory is combined with perspectives from phenomenological subjectification theory. By combining these theoretical positions, Johnsen shows how religious learning involves both mediation and subjectification processes.

Methodologically, the thesis demonstrates how a limited ethnographic field study results in knowledge that has broader relevance and validity. The analysis of educational situations and services in two congregations has resulted in findings useful to both other researchers and employees and volunteers seeking to reflect systematically about how different activities facilitate learning. Johnsen takes a methodological stance that argues for understanding empirical findings as preliminary, open, and incomplete knowledge. The thesis shows how the introduction of new theories during the research process makes it possible to perform an analysis that enlarges, deepens, and nuances fieldwork material.

The empirical contribution of the dissertation is that Johnsen, throughout the analysis, shows that religious learning is an integrated part of all the learning situations studied, and that learning is not something that takes place outside or in the prolongation of religious knowledge production. The researcher discusses in particular how the use of artifacts, such as biblical stories, play, and use of church rooms mediates religious conceptions of reality. The analysis shows that artifacts create different possibilities for people who are acquainted with the symbolic knowledge distributed in the artifacts, and those who do not possess this kind of knowledge in advance. The overall argument is that religious learning in the Church of Norway ought to be understood as a hybrid activity where Christian faith and tradition are intermingled with the social and cultural backgrounds children bring with them to religious education.