Dealing with worldviews in religious education

Thematic analysis on the topical structure of German RE

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ABSTRACT

The primary goal of religious education (RE) in Germany is to enable students to develop a personal worldview. According to the literature, this goal can best be achieved when RE a) presents material from various worldviews and b) relates this material to the student’s daily life. Denominational RE, which is the organisational format of this subject in Germany, may fail to meet these requirements because it may tend to focus on the organised worldview of the relevant religious tradition as the preferred worldview for adoption by students. Motivated by the lack of relevant empirical studies, this paper offers initial insight into the issue by answering the question of how German denominational RE organises its themes. On the basis of a German case study, it maps the topical structure of teaching units (N = 15, comprising 116 lessons) by thematic analysis. The results indicate that RE in the German denominational context predominantly addresses its own denominational issues. Alternative perspectives of the unit’s topic, the students’ personal perceptions, and references to the students’ lifeworld are primarily used to better facilitate the students’ comprehension of these denominational issues. Only two units present a variety of worldviews as real alternatives to denominational perspectives.

KEYWORDS

Worldview; religious education; Germany; denominational; topical structure

Worldviews in (German) RE

In modern Western societies, religious education (RE) is challenged by both secularisation and religious pluralisation (Taylor 2007). On the one hand, more and more people tend to explain the world and their lives through secular concepts rather than religious ones. On the other hand, religion is still a legitimate option in contemporary society, where institutionalised religion in a basically Christian sense gives way to a predominantly individualised religiosity inspired by a variety of worldviews. RE addresses groups of learners that represent a broad spectrum in terms of both religiosity and its secular equivalents.

In this societal environment, worldview becomes a key concept in shaping RE. Much of the recent research on this educational field (e.g. Journal of Religious Education 2016) or on the religiosity of students attending this subject at school (Helve 1991; Savage, Collins-Mayo, and Mayo 2006; Ziebertz and Riegel 2008) uses worldview as analytical concept. Then, it allows for a critical rereading of recent paradigms of RE (Riitaoja,
Poulter, and Kuusisto 2011; van der Kooij, de Ruyter, and Miedema 2017). Finally, in countries like England and the USA worldview is the point of departure to formulate the goals of this type of education.

In Germany, this discussion takes place within a particular context. In this country, RE is denominational and the religious communities decide on both the curriculum to be taught and the individuals who are allowed to teach this subject (Rothgangel and Ziebertz 2013). The primary goal of German RE, however, is to enable students to develop a personal worldview within a religiously plural social environment (DBK 2005, 18). Within the denominational frame of reference, the students should understand religion as one valid source of orientation in their lives, learn to respectfully deal with the societal plurality of religions, and create a personal worldview (Englert 2018). The important question is whether German RE is able to realise such goals given its denominational frame of reference.

Worldviews are ‘fundamental cognitive, affective and evaluative presuppositions people make about the nature of things, and which they use to order their lives’ (Hiebert 2008, 15). They are based on existential experience (van der Kooij, de Ruyter, and Miedema 2013, 213) and address the ultimate concerns of both groups of people and individuals. RE can cover both the collective and individual dimensions in the form of organised and personal worldviews, respectively. Many forms of RE deal with organised worldviews. According to van der Kooij, de Ruyter, and Miedema such frameworks represent, “a view on life that has developed over time as a more or less coherent and established system with certain (written and unwritten) sources, traditions, values, rituals, ideals, or dogmas. An organised worldview has a group of believers who adhere to this view on life.” (2013, 212)

The various religious traditions represent such organised worldviews. In Germany, for example, most textbooks display religion as it is understood by distinct religious traditions. Meanwhile, RE often aims to help students develop their own personal worldviews. Such worldviews are drawn from individual beliefs and views on life and reality. They represent the perspective and the meaning system of a particular person (ibid.). Such personal worldviews are not as homogeneous and consistent as organised ones. Personal worldviews may change based on the given situation and sometimes are eclectic and idiosyncratic.

In the case of Germany, RE attempts to facilitate development of personal worldviews by presenting the students with organised (religious) worldviews and the opportunity to discuss them in relationship to their own lives (Englert 2018). Personal worldviews may thus be fostered by discussion of organised religious worldviews in a personal context. In the denominational setting, students ‘own’ organised worldview often serves as the background for such discussion. The educational challenge of this approach is to instruct organised religious worldviews in a manner that best facilitates the development of personal worldviews. When the content of RE is considered, recent statements highlight the importance of presenting the students with a wide variety of worldviews (Grümme 2018). To better prepare the students for life, RE has to deal with the religious plurality the students experience in their social environment. By discussing the pros and cons of various-organised worldviews the students should be able to recognise for those beliefs and practices that will help them to cope with the challenges of daily life.

Thus far, however, there is hardly any empirical evidence on how denominational RE deals with that claim. Do teachers of RE in denominational context offer their students a variety of different worldviews? Or do they prefer to teach according the
organised worldview of the denomination that the subject is dedicated to? We analyse these questions according to the topical structure of denominational RE’s teaching units. The relevant research questions are: Which are the perspectives denominational RE in Germany focuses on and how do these perspectives contribute to the possible variety of worldviews in RE?

A German case study on addressing worldviews in denominational RE

As has been shown, denominational RE seems to face a special challenge in fostering the personal worldviews of its students. On the one hand, such reflection is – at least in Germany – explicitly the goal of recent denominational RE (DBK 2005, 18). Such education should incorporate a variety of organised worldviews in its teaching units, enabling students to engage with different frameworks for perceiving the world in order to more comprehensively reflect on and develop their personal worldviews. On the other hand, denominational RE tends to focus on its ‘own’ organised religious worldviews and doctrines. Our case study from Germany is meant to provide initial insight into how denominational RE deals with this apparent contradiction. In the following, we will describe the theoretical background of this case study, its design, method and sample, and its empirical results.

Theoretical background

As is the case with every school subject, RE normally communicates its topics via teaching units. Such units comprise a selection of lessons which organise the content to be taught according to didactic principles. The theme of such a sequence is split into its key components, and these components are arranged within the teaching unit in such a manner that the theme is accessible for the students. The order assigned to the thematic aspects throughout a teaching unit defines this unit’s topical structure.

In terms of organised worldview, two primary distinctions are feasible. First, one may distinguish between religious and secular worldviews. The question here is whether RE exclusively addresses religious worldviews in its teaching units. One the one hand it is logical that RE should focus on religion. However, recent RE takes place in a secular environment, and this subject may thus be expected to incorporate secular worldviews as well. The first distinction between religious and secular worldviews, therefore, takes these options into account. Second, in the field of religion, one may distinguish between specific-organised worldviews like Christianity, Islam, Judaism, etc. Particularly in denominational RE, an important question is whether this subject predominantly presents the ‘own’ religious tradition or whether it provides opportunities for discussion of alternative religions as well.

A further conceptual distinction can be drawn from educational theory (Klafki 2007; Mendl 2011; Nipkow 1986; Schweitzer 2007). According to this strand of the literature, the arrangement of a teaching unit must take into respect of the students’ accountability. Two such aspects are of particular significance. First, RE must address the student’s (pre-)perceptions of the theme and its key concepts (Bahr 2010, 503). As every teaching moment entails mediation of the learner’s perception and the scientific concepts under discussion, effective RE must clarify how students understand the content being communicated. In terms of worldview education, such education must connect organised worldviews with the personal worldviews of students to enhance
mindful, effective reflection. For this reason, the topical structure of a teaching unit may feature lessons that predominantly address the student’s (pre-)perceptions. Second, RE has to clarify the relevance of its content for daily life (Bahr 2010, 504; Tulodziecki, Herzig, and Blömke 2017, 76). Religious claims and concepts are under discussion in the context of a secular society. It is not intuitively apparent why it is advantageous to adhere to religious convictions or to act according to religious morals. RE must explicitly address its daily relevance because the credibility of an organised or personal worldview is evaluated according to its viability in daily life. For these reasons, in RE the topical structure may incorporate lessons which predominantly address popular or contemporary cultural themes of daily life.

In sum, the topical structure determines the order of thematic aspects throughout the teaching unit in RE. This structure may be defined by the nature of the presented worldviews, be they religious or secular, as well as by didactic aspects of how to clarify the student’s (pre-) perceptions and mediate religion and daily life.

**Design, sample and method**

Given the lack of empirical insight into the topical organisation of teaching units in German denominational RE, our study employed a qualitative design. We collected our data by videotaping all the lessons of a teaching unit (Riegel 2018). The technical setup consisted of one camera located at the front of the classroom, used to observe the interactions of the students, and another camera located in the back of the classroom, intended to provide us with deeper insight into the teacher’s interactions and the use of teaching media. In analysing classroom interaction we reconstructed the topic dealt with in the relevant lesson. We favoured video analysis over the analysis of lesson plans because video reveals what actually happens, while lesson plans indicate what should happen.

The sample of our study comprises 15 teaching units (comprising 116 single lessons) that were videotaped between 2010 and 2018 in the German regions of North-Rhine Westphalia and Bavaria. All units took place in Catholic RE at state schools. They are drawn from primary (N = 5) as well as secondary education classes (N = 10). The ages of the students range from nine to nineteen years old. Some of the units have been taught by experienced teachers with more than 10 years’ experience in education, others by teams of students in the internship period following their graduation from university. Since students must teach one lesson during their internship, the sample contains 62 teachers. This constellation, however, does not restrict the contribution of this study; the students prepared the teaching units in teams and individual styles of teaching thus did not interfere with the mediation of the topics dealt with. The themes of the videotaped units covered a broad spectrum of religious issues: systematic theology (anthropology (two units), Christology (three units), eschatology and ethics), biblical issues (the story of Mose, the structure of the Bible (two units), Paul’s mission, the creation, the parables), religious customs (saints), and non-Christian religions (Islam; two units).

To analyse classroom interaction we applied thematic analysis following the five steps proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006). First, we familiarised ourselves with the data by watching each videotaped lesson in its entirety. While viewing the videos, we took notes on the main topic(s) addressed in classroom interaction. Second, we generated topical codes by assigning a title to each lesson. We thus summarised the
learning objectives and classified them according to the theoretical background described previously. We were able to identify four specific categories: religious perspective, secular perspective, perspective of daily life, and perspective of the students’ own concepts. These categories represent the topical codes of a lesson. Third, we developed the units’ topical structures in further detail. We analysed the order of topical codes for each unit, which represents the flow of learning that takes place in classroom interaction. In comparing these progressions in multiple units we were able to identify typical topical structures. Fourth, we ascertained the functions of the topical codes in the teaching units. We identified characteristic positions of the topical codes in the topical structure, and we reconstructed how a given topical code at a particular position in the flow of learning facilitates the student’s learning. Through this step, we were able to identify particular functions of each topical code. Fifth, we compiled a synopsis of all identified topical structures and all functions of the topical codes, from which we elaborated characteristic patterns according to which the teaching units were organised. These patterns are based upon typical organisational principles according to which denominational RE addresses organised worldviews with the goal of facilitating the development of personal worldviews.

Empirical results

The presentation of the empirical results proceeds according to the order of thematic analysis. We first discuss the topical codes, then reconstruct typical topical structures of the units. This is followed by a description of the educational functions of the topical codes within these structures, and finally a reconstruction of the principles according to which the topical structures are organised.

Topical codes

By analysing the key topics of the individual lessons we were able to reconstruct four topical codes, namely religious perspective, secular perspective, perspective of daily life, and perspective of the students’ own concepts.

Religious perspective. Lessons associated with this code address the religious dimension of the instructional content. They are predominantly concerned with religious content and religious meaning drawn from an organised religious worldview. Secular perspectives may be discussed as well. Such perspectives, however, do not represent the main focus of classroom interaction. For example, in a unit on the saints, one lesson introduced Martin of Tours. The students learned about some elements of Martin’s life, a focal point which clearly entails secular information. The main focus of the lesson, however, was the legend of Martin’s cloak, and the students learned about the Christian virtue of sharing with the poor. The overall theme of the lesson clearly dealt with a religious dimension of St. Martin’s life.

Secular perspective. Lessons featuring a primarily secular perspective emphasise the perspective of organised secular worldviews on topics such as art, biology or philosophy. Religious aspects may also be discussed, but they are not of primary interest. For example, in a unit on anthropology, several lessons addressed the meaning of human
being in a biological or philosophical sense. Even if some students compared these concepts intuitively with the religious concept of man as God’s creation, the focus of the lessons was on the biological or philosophical definitions.

**Perspectives of daily life.** This topical code refers to concepts taken from the social and cultural environment of the students. Lessons that focus on this perspective are characterised by their concentration on popular or recent cultural themes that are common to the students. For example, in a unit on Jesus Christ, the teacher showed clips from Mel Gibson’s movie ‘The Passion’ to provide the students with a popular approach to the topic. Such movies are a regular feature of contemporary popular culture.

**Perspectives of the student’s concepts.** The main focus of the lessons associated with this topical code is to invite students to think and speak about their own ideas in relation to the issue taught. As opposed to pure instruction on scientific concepts, these lessons aim to facilitate individual reflection. From the perspective of this study, such lessons clearly incorporate the students’ own concepts and ideas. At the beginning of a unit on Jesus Christ, for example, the students were asked to sketch the curriculum vitae of Jesus. The focus of this lesson, however, was not on imparting specific information but on clarifying the students’ pre-conceptions regarding Jesus.

**Topical structures**
After identification of the topical codes, we reconstructed the topical structure of the teaching units by asking how the topical codes of a given unit are linked to each other. This analysis produced three characteristic structures (Figure 1): units referring exclusively to the religious dimension of the topic, units in which the religious perspective is supplemented by secular perspectives, and units in which the religious perspective is framed by other perspectives.

**Exclusively religious.** The majority of the units concentrate exclusively on the religious perspective of the topic. Each lesson in such a unit addresses the religious dimension of the issue under scrutiny and its reference point is an organised religious worldview (see Figure 1). For example, in the unit on saints, the students learned about the term ‘saint’ itself in the first lesson and subsequently learned about various individual saints in the following lessons. In every lesson, the focus was on the Christian virtue expressed by the relevant saint. In consequence, the entire unit focused exclusively on the religious (more specifically: Roman-Catholic) meaning of this theme. We found this topical structure in seven units in our sample.

**Religion supplemented by secularity.** Some units contain lessons which proceed from a religious point of perspective as well as lessons whose focus is secular (see Figure 1). Normally, these units explore their theme by considering various perspectives from theology and supplementary secular scientific disciplines. In this case, organised religious and secular worldviews are dealt with. For example, a unit on creation in primary school began by providing general biological and geographic insight into the functioning and the characteristics of earth. After this lesson, the unit continued with discussion of biblical stories about God’s creation and then clarified the theological concept of creation. In this
unit, secular and religious approaches to the theme support to one other. We found this topical structure in three units in our sample.

**Framed religious.** In the third type of topical structure, lessons with religious perspective are framed by lessons that represent one of the other three topical code types of perspective (see Figure 1). With the term frames we mean that such units start and end with one or more lessons that do not refer back to a religious worldview on the theme, while the lessons in between are dedicated to its religious dimension. A unit on Jesus Christ, for example, began by focusing on the student’s understanding of Jesus. It continued with Jesus’ biography and Christian concepts like messiah and God’s Kingdom. The penultimate lesson was on the Christian meaning of the resurrection of Jesus. The final lesson dealt with the movie ‘The Passion’ as an example of a recent interpretation of Jesus, and as such it did not focus on the Christian notion of Jesus, but rather on Mel Gibson’s understanding of this individual. We found this topical structure in five units in our sample.

**Functions of topical codes**
The positions of the topical codes within the teaching units may vary. This indicates that these codes have a number of functions in organising such units (see Table 1).

**Religious perspective.** All lessons categorised as religious perspective address some aspect of the unit’s theme explicitly. Their function in the unit is to present the key religious content of the unit and to get the students engaged with organised religious worldviews. Such lessons at the beginning or at the end of a unit are also seen as having this primary function. Furthermore, this function can take the form of both an intra-denominational and an inter-denominational approach (see Table 1). The intra-denominational version focuses exclusively on content from one religious worldview, as with the unit on saints or a unit on the so-called ‘Five Pillars of Islam’. The inter-denominational version presents content from several religious worldviews. For example, a unit on anthropology offered the students both a Christian and a Buddhist perspective of humanity. In the inter-denominational version, the various religious worldviews are treated equally.

**Secular perspective.** Lessons of this topical code have three different functions in the teaching units (see Table 1). First, they serve as scientific contextualisation. Most
often found at the beginning of the unit, the secular input establishes the setting or the background for perspectives to religion. For example, a unit about Jesus’ life started with a lesson introducing the students to the geographic and cultural environment of Palestine in his time. Religion was the point of departure for the following lessons, in which Jesus’ life and message were presented. Second, the input of organised secular worldviews functions as scientific support of the perspective of religion. In contrast to contextualisation, here the secular perspective is used to confirm or to expand the topic’s religious perspective. For example, in a unit about eschatology modern art was examined for the presence of the theological concept of heaven and hell. Secular referencing as support normally takes place following the lessons that addressed the religious content. Third, secular perspective offers alternative perspectives on the theme of the unit. In this case, the organised secular worldview is presented as being equal to the religious one, and encourages the students to reflect on the unit’s theme from different perspectives. For example, in a unit on anthropology naturalist and existentialist theories of humanity are presented alongside Christian and Buddhist ones.

**Perspectives to daily life.** In our sample, this topical code serves two specific functions (see Table 1). First, lessons refer to daily life in order to generate the students’ interest in the topic. Such lessons seek to offer the students fluid access to the unit’s theme, often by making perspective of popular culture. In a unit on Christian morals, for example, in the first lesson, the students reconstructed the moral attitudes in clips from the TV series ‘The Simpsons’. The goal of this lesson was to motivate the students to reflect on morality. Normally, such stimulating lessons that perspective daily life are located at the beginning of the unit. Second, perspectives to daily life also function as lifeworld support of the religious content taught. Often placed in the end of the unit, they serve to link the religious content to the student’s daily life. Normally, such lifeworld support is meant to confirm the credibility of an organised religious worldview by illustrating its viability in daily life. In this sense, the clips from ‘The Simpsons’ might be used at the close of a unit to identify perspectives to Christian morals, as well as how the series’ writers play with these perspectives.

**Perspective of the student’s concept.** This topical code also fulfils two functions in our sample (see Table 1). First, as in the former category, perspectives of the students’ own

| Topical Code                  | Function            | Example                                                                 |
|------------------------------|---------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Religious perspective        | Intra-denominational| Exploring the five pillars of Islam                                      |
|                             | Inter-denominational| Comparing Christian and Buddhist perspectives on mankind               |
| Secular perspective          | Scientific contextualisation | Exploring the geographical environment of Jesus’ mission          |
|                             | Scientific support  | Learning about the display of heaven and hell in modern art             |
|                             | Alternative perspective | Comparing Christian and humanist perspectives on mankind            |
| Perspective of daily life    | Stimulation         | Looking for moral attitudes in a clip from ‘The Simpsons’             |
|                             | Support             | Reconstruction Christian morals in a clip from ‘The Simpsons’         |
| Per. of students’ concepts  | Stimulation         | Individual definition of the term human being                         |
|                             | Individual positioning | Making one’s own mind up in regard of both religious and secular perspectives on mankind |
concepts and ideas are used to stimulate the students’ interest in the unit’s theme. In a unit on anthropology, for example, in the first lesson students were asked to define their personal understanding of ‘human being’. Second, lessons which address the students’ concepts allow these students to take an individual position with regard to the theme being dealt with. The students are asked to make up their minds and develop personal opinions. This position taking may occur in one of two ways: students may either personally evaluate a particular religious topic or may assume one perspective from among a spectrum of different existing perspectives on the theme. Lessons with a focus on position taking normally conclude a unit. A unit on anthropology, for example, presented various theories on mankind, ranging from organised secular to organised religious approaches, and then in the last lesson of the unit invited the students in to assess how relevant these perspectives are to their personal worldview.

**Organisational principles**

The final step of thematic analysis delineated the principles according to which the units in our sample were organised. We were able to identify three such principles.

First, in all but two units the religious dimension of the theme formed the baseline for the flow of learning. The thematic core of these units comprised one aspect of the organised religious worldview, normally taken from the ‘own’ denominational tradition and doctrine. When alternative perspectives on the theme were addressed, they served to clarify the particular profile of the relevant religious perspective.

Second, alternative perspectives on the theme of a unit may be addressed to help students better grasp the theme. For the most part, the non-religious perspectives in our sample are used to functionally support perspectives to religion. The teachers refer to daily life, to the student’s concepts, or to secular perspectives on the unit’s theme either to stimulate or consolidate the flow of learning. In both cases, however, the perspective is intended to help the students better understand the religious issue under scrutiny and to reconstruct the relevant religious worldview.

Third, alternative perspectives on the theme may also be offered as real, viable alternatives. In our sample, two units followed this organisational principle. The topical structure of these units is unique in the sense that the topical code of secular perspective is located neither at the beginning nor at the end of the unit (which would indicate a functional use with regard to the core religious perspective), rather they are located in the middle of this unit where the key aspects of the theme are discussed.

**Denominational RE and the plurality of worldviews: do they really match?**

In the Western discourse on RE, many scholars use the concept of worldview to reconcile RE with a secular and religiously pluralistic societal environment: If RE aims to enable students to act respectfully in these contexts it should address this plurality in its teaching (Clarke and Woodhead 2017; Grümme 2018). This paper reviews a German case study to address the question of how denominational RE addresses the plurality of religious and secular worldviews in the topical structure of its teaching units.

Our findings show that it is possible to discuss a diversity of worldviews in denominational RE. At its best, such education presents students with both religious
and secular worldviews relevant to a teaching unit’s theme and provides them with the opportunity to adopt positions according to their individual perspectives. Two of the 15 units in our sample represent this ideal.

The dominant type in our sample, however, can be regarded as mono-religious in the sense that it addresses one particular religious worldview exclusively. The topical structure of 13 of the 15 units in our sample exhibits a clear religious foundation. Secular worldviews can also be addressed in this context, but their inclusion is meant to validate the dominant religious worldview. The same is true for perspectives to the students’ own concepts and with regard to perspectives to daily life. The qualitative character of our study does not allow us to draw conclusions on the current state of denominational RE in this regard. These initial findings, however, support the hypothesis that this mono-religious approach may be the default mode of denominational RE – at least in Germany. This hypothesis must be tested in further studies.

Moreover, our findings indicate that the mono-religious type of denominational education tends to predominantly address religion at the level of organised worldview. Most of the lessons in our sample directly address the doctrines of the relevant worldviews. In cases where religious practice was the focus, the lessons dealt with the institutionalised norms of such practice rather than proceeding from the perspectives of individual relevant believers. In the unit on Islam, for instance, the topic was the ‘Five Pillars of Islam’ and not the various forms by which Muslims realise these ‘pillars’. Our findings indicate that this focus on organised religious worldviews contributes heavily to the mono-religious character of denominational RE.

In consequence, the answer to the research question of this paper is that although addressing the plurality of worldviews is possible even in denominational RE, our case study indicates that in practice, this educational framework does not commonly realise this potential. It is worthwhile to discuss whether such an approach is appropriate in the context of denominational RE. Arguments can be made that the real strength of such education is the presentation of the unique rationality of religion on the basis of one distinct religious worldview (Schambeck 2013). In the denominational mode of such education, students are able to grasp why religious people act as they do. The mediation of such insight can be seen as a valuable contribution towards the goal of living together respectfully in an environment that features highly diverse worldviews. In a secular and religious plural society, however, denominational RE must also deal with the task of presenting students with various worldviews. Our findings indicate that in this regard denominational RE has the potential to be developed further.

Some readers may ask themselves how these findings can contribute to the discourse on RE beyond the German context. For one, when one considers Europe as a whole, denominational RE is not the exception (Schreiner 2013). In the Eastern, the Southern and the South-Western regions of this continent the denominational type – regardless of national peculiarities – is the default mode of RE in state schools. There is good reason to assume that with the migration waves of the last years the question of how to deal with diverse worldviews will arise. In these contexts, the German example shows that the denominational model is able to address the plurality of worldviews explicitly, but the teachers have to be trained in how to realise this potential.

In a broader perspective, our findings raise the question of the extent to which RE should focus on organised (religious) worldviews. In our sample, this type of
worldview made up the core of all units, while personal worldviews first came into the play when the organised worldviews had previously been discussed. To develop the worldviews of the students it is essential to refer to their personal ideas of the world, mankind, and life (van der Kooij, de Ruyter, and Miedema 2013, 222–226). Moreover, organised worldviews represent ideal representations that can rarely be found in the actual practice of their adherents. In this regard, organised worldviews form the frame of reference within which individuals create their personal one, a process which often leads to idiosyncratic bricolages of various aspects from different worldviews, mediated more strongly by cultural participation than by conscious reflection (Lewin 2017, 456–458). In his interpretative approach, Robert Jackson (1997) advocated for RE that seriously considers students’ personal worldviews and related practices. The topical structures of the units in our sample do not represent such an approach to RE.

This last point, however, leads us to reflect on the limitations of our case study. It is clear that a case study is restricted in terms of both sample size and region. Fifteen teaching units are not representative denominational RE across all of Germany (not to mention Europe), nor even the two regions from which our recordings were taken. Moreover, our analysis dealt specifically with Roman-Catholic education. Teaching units from Protestant or Muslim RE may exhibit different topical structures. Finally, in this study, we focused on the topical order of teaching units, an aspect which represents a surface structure of teaching. Although we reconstructed the topical codes by analysing classroom interaction, our emphasis was not on the micro-processes of this interaction. From a theoretical point of view, it is feasible that a lesson ascribed to the topical code religious perspective allows the students to adopt positions in regard to this perspective in a particular phase of the lesson. Thus, a lesson may address personal worldviews at the level of classroom interaction although its thematic emphasis is on organised worldviews. The nature of our analysis means that it is not able to grasp this constellation. Therefore, two avenues of further research are necessary: it should cover a broader spectrum of lessons from various types of RE, and it should also focus on the micro-processes of classroom interaction.

**Disclosure statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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