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Powerful Knowledge in Religious Education? Perspectives in Conversation with Michael Young and Paulo Freire

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Introduction

The starting point of this chapter is the question of knowledge and its meaning for religious education (RE). It seems fair to say that this question has not received much attention in religious education discussions of the last few decades, neither in Germany where I live and work nor, as far as I can tell, in international debates. Should the conclusion from this observation be that the question of knowledge is not important in this field? Does knowledge not matter in RE? Or should issues related to knowledge in RE be considered a neglected topic which is in need of further clarification?

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In a recent statement, Richard Kueh (2018) has taken the second position. He is even of the opinion that the crisis of RE (at least in the United Kingdom) is a crisis of knowledge. By this he means that RE is lacking a clear knowledge base and that the only possible way out of this crisis must therefore be a new debate about knowledge in religious education and about a clear knowledge base for the school subject of RE as well as, by implication, for the academic discipline of religious education and its understanding of knowledge. One of the sources from which Kueh expects RE to draw for a better knowledge base is Michael Young's understanding of powerful knowledge.

In the following, Young's concept of powerful knowledge will also be used, in this case as a background against which such questions about the role of knowledge in RE can be discussed in new ways. I will therefore start out by briefly presenting my understanding of Young's concept in the context of RE. After that, I will turn to the German religious education discussion in terms of two other concepts which have been of core importance for German religious education and beyond, the concept of *Bildung* on the one hand and the concept of competences on the other. What could the idea of powerful knowledge add to an understanding of religious education based on *Bildung* and competences? At the same time, these two concepts will also be used for showing certain shortcomings implied by the notion of powerful knowledge in the context of religious education.

The two concepts of *Bildung* and competences have both been chosen because of their importance for the religious education discussion. It should be clear from the beginning, however, that these two concepts are in fact quite different, both in terms of their origins and in terms of their theoretical backgrounds. The concept of *Bildung* has a long history which goes back to the Middle Ages and ultimately to Antiquity. The word itself is hard to translate into English but there are equivalents, for example, in Scandinavian languages (*dannelse*) or in Greek (*paideia/παιδεία*). *Bildung* is connected to a particular view of education which is of interest in the present context because it can be contrasted, at least in part, to the idea of powerful knowledge. The second concept used in the following, that is competences, only has a short history. Most of all it has come into use in

the wake of the PISA studies, at least in its current meaning. This concept is of interest here because it intentionally does not emphasize content or knowledge but the importance of abilities acquired by the learning person.

So far, the concept of powerful knowledge has not found its way into the German religious education discussion which implies that the intention in the following will not be to report on an existing discussion (for references to the concept of powerful knowledge in the Swedish and in the UK discussions on RE, see Kueh, 2018; Biesta et al., 2019; Osbeck, 2020; Franck, 2021). Instead, the question will be what the concept of powerful knowledge could possibly mean for religious education and what benefits are to be expected from making use of the concept of powerful knowledge in this field, but also vice versa, what the tradition especially of *Bildung* as well as a focus on pupils' competences might have to add to the understanding of powerful knowledge.

Yet answering the question of what role Young's concept of powerful knowledge could mean for religious education presupposes still another step of analysis which will focus on Young's second core concept, knowledge of the powerful. Young's distinction between powerful knowledge and knowledge of the powerful has interesting parallels in the religious education discussion. In this case, it is the work of Paulo Freire which has informed the understanding in Germany as well as in many other countries. Consequently, it will be of interest to see how Young's epistemological understanding of powerful knowledge compares to Freire's liberationist interpretation of the role of knowledge and power in education. Therefore, in a final step, a comparison between the approaches of Michael Young and Paulo Freire will be attempted. In conclusion, some perspectives for the future will be offered.

Finally, a note on terminology is in place. The acronym RE will be used in this chapter in reference to the respective school subject while 'religious education' (in the lower case) refers to the academic discipline related to this subject as well as to the field of religious education in general. In the German language, there are two words for this (*Religionsunterricht* and *Religionspädagogik*). The English language does not allow for this distinction.

The Concept of Powerful Knowledge in the Context of Religious Education

In this section, readers will be offered a brief summary of my understanding of Young's work on powerful knowledge and knowledge of the powerful. Moreover, first possible connections between the idea of powerful knowledge and RE as well as religious education will be identified, most of all in terms of a number of questions concerning the role of knowledge in this field.

One of Young's starting points concerning his concept of powerful knowledge is the widespread demand to take knowledge in general education more seriously. In one of his first publications concerning powerful knowledge he developed a critique of educational programmes and policies demanding a stronger focus on knowledge in education without specifying the nature of this knowledge. Young calls this the 'emptying of content' which he describes in the following way: 'My argument is that an empty and rhetorical notion of knowledge and the increasing tendency to blur distinctions between the production of knowledge and its acquisition and between knowledge and skills—the latter unlike the former being measurable and targetable—becomes a way of denying a distinct "voice" for knowledge in education' (Young, 2009, p. 195).

Next to this plea for becoming clearer about the knowledge to be taught, it is the distinction between powerful knowledge and knowledge of the powerful which is central for Young's point of view (see e.g. Young, 2013a). For him, the knowledge of the powerful is the opposite of powerful knowledge. It means knowledge prescribed and required by those in power, not only in politics but also in other fields. In this case, knowledge is created by the powerful, not by true insights into the nature of reality but through their political influence and domination. Against all attempts of determining the place of knowledge in education without making the epistemological quality of respective knowledge the decisive criterion, he insists on the need for powerful knowledge as knowledge whose power is an inherent epistemological characteristic or quality of this knowledge itself.

Young developed his idea of powerful knowledge in a series of publications beginning about 15 years ago (cf. especially Young, 2008). In line with Rob Moore whom he actually quotes in this context, Young demands an epistemological examination of the knowledge to be taught for which he suggests four criteria. The knowledge must be ‘critical’ in the sense of being ‘open to revision’, ‘emergentist’ in that it is recognized that it is not limited in its validity to the situation of its production, ‘realist’, that is, based on the conviction that ‘the objects of knowledge of both the natural and social worlds are realities that (a) are independent of our perception of the world and (b) provide limits to how we can know about the world’, ‘materialist’ because it is recognized that ‘knowledge is produced (and acquired) in specific historically created modes of production, or in Bourdieu’s terms, intellectual fields’ (Young, 2009, p. 197).

In a later paper, Young argues that ‘we have the responsibility to hand on to the next generation the knowledge discovered by earlier generations’ (Young, 2013a, p.101). The power inherent to this knowledge demands its being handed on—an argument which connects the idea of powerful knowledge to questions of schooling in general and especially to questions of the curriculum. Moreover, in a joint publication, Young and Muller (2013) point out that powerful knowledge also is a special kind of knowledge because it is produced in specialized institutions like universities or research institutes. Powerful knowledge then is not only special but it is also specialized (p. 231). Another important clarification refers to the relationship between powerful knowledge and empowerment: ‘we explicitly do not understand “powerful knowledge” as “empowerment”, but as referring to “knowledge with powers” or the “powers of powerful knowledge”’ (Young, 2013b, p. 196). Nevertheless, Young claims that powerful knowledge can strengthen pupils’ understanding of the world: “Powerful knowledge” is powerful because it provides the best understanding of the natural and social worlds that we have and helps us go beyond our individual experiences; even the creative and performing arts, and literature and drama, have these emergent properties and universalising properties, albeit not based on generalisations’ (p. 196). This is why it is an ‘entitlement for all pupils and students’ (p. 196).

While Young and also Muller are most interested in not confusing power and knowledge, that is that no external power is allowed to define

the status of knowledge as knowledge (as with the knowledge of the powerful), they seem to have changed their views concerning the relationship between powerful knowledge and empowerment in their summary paper published a few years later (Muller & Young, 2019). Now they seem to assume a clearer connection between powerful knowledge and empowerment, depending on successful teachers: 'When they are successful, and the pupils learn successfully, the pupils become empowered in a range of ways: in the quality of their discernment and judgement; in their appreciation of the range and reach of the substantive and conceptual fields of the subject; and in their appreciation that the substantive detail they have learnt is only part of what the hinterland of the subject has to offer. They are able to make new connections, gain new insights, generate new ideas. That is why PK is at the heart of true schooling' (p. 210).

The following summary from Young may be helpful:

Powerful knowledge is systematic. Its concepts are systematically related to one another and shared in groups, such as subject or disciplinary associations. It is not, like common sense, rooted in the specific contexts of our experience. This means that powerful knowledge can be the basis for generalisations and thinking beyond particular contexts or cases. The clearest examples both of the systematic structure of powerful knowledge and of its role as a resource for generalising are found in the natural sciences. However, other forms of subject knowledge, such as the social sciences, humanities and the arts, also have concepts that take us beyond particular cases and contexts in different ways, and offer us different capacities for generalisation, due to the nature of the phenomena they are concerned with. (Young, 2015)

There has been an extended critical debate on the concept of powerful knowledge in general education (see Muller & Young, 2019 for respective references and responses to the critics). Instead of reviewing this debate, my focus will be on the field of religious education. Can the concept of powerful knowledge be applied to RE? And if so, in what respects?

Young himself does not address religious education although, in the quote above (Young, 2015), he explicitly foresees implications of his concept of powerful knowledge for 'other forms of subject knowledge' beyond the natural sciences which, in his case, appear to be the first

context for developing the notion of powerful knowledge. If religious education or academic disciplines like theology or religious studies related to religious education can count as part of these ‘other forms of subject knowledge’, one needs to clarify the meaning of powerful knowledge in this specific context. Three questions to be addressed in the following can be of special importance in this respect:

- What is the role of knowledge in religious education? Should it receive more emphasis? And if so, in which ways?
- Is there anything in religious education which could be considered powerful knowledge? How can powerful knowledge be identified in religious education?
- How should the relationship between powerful knowledge and knowledge of the powerful be interpreted in religious education?

As indicated above, these three questions will be taken up in the following in different ways by discussing them in connection to *Bildung*, competences and Freire’s approach to education.

Knowledge and *Bildung*

The concept of *Bildung* is rather complex and, at least in some ways, hard to define. While its meaning overlaps with the connotations of ‘education’ it carries with it a particular history and heritage through which it goes beyond the concept of ‘education’ (for an overview cf. Bollenbeck, 1994; Tenorth, 2020; concerning religious education, see Schweitzer, 2014; on *Bildung* and theology, see Schröder, 2021). The German word itself has roots in medieval religious thought and theology. At the same time, it is sometimes interpreted as translation of Neo-Platonic terms like the Greek *eidon* (image) and the Latin *imago* as well as of the Hebrew terms *zelem* and *demût* (likeness) in Gen 1,26f. concerning the human likeness to God. In the field of education, it was the so-called German classics who, in the early nineteenth century, set forth the most influential understandings of *Bildung*, in the first place Wilhelm von Humboldt and also Friedrich Schleiermacher. In this view, the guiding idea of all

education must be to support the development of an autonomous person or individual self-characterized by independent reflexivity and self-determination coupled with critical thinking and responsibility for others.

Given this aspiring understanding of the aim of education it is easy to see why the acquisition of knowledge could only play a secondary role for education understood as *Bildung*. *Bildung* necessarily cannot be equated with the acquisition of knowledge (for teaching and learning cf. the influential position of Klafki, 1963, who makes this very clear from the beginning). However, in the reality of German schools and the syllabi guiding their work, knowledge has always played a crucial role. These syllabi often contain, allegedly in the name of *Bildung*, long lists of topics related to the different school subjects and to the academic disciplines behind them. What is not clear in these syllabi (and beyond), however, is how the two layers or strata are meant to be related to each other—the rather abstract ideal of *Bildung* referring to the formation of the autonomous self on the one hand and the contents prescribed in the syllabi on the other. Similarly, the discussions in academic religious education often refer to *Bildung* as well as to different approaches to teaching religious education, but they rarely touch upon the question of what knowledge should be taught or treated in RE. In this respect, the discussion on powerful knowledge could be quite helpful by inspiring a new discussion on the content of religious education. On what basis should content be selected for teaching in RE? What are the criteria applied in this selection? Is there powerful knowledge to be found in RE? The reference to the development of an autonomous self in the sense of *Bildung* obviously does not provide sufficiently concrete answers to the question of what knowledge should be included in RE.

At the same time, there also are critical impulses from the idea of *Bildung* concerning the understanding of powerful knowledge. In the tradition of German philosophy of education, the guiding principle of *Bildung* regulates the role of knowledge in education by demanding that knowledge must always and consistently be chosen and taught in such a way that it serves the development of an autonomous self. In this respect, any understanding of powerful knowledge would be incomplete which does not refer to the meaning of this knowledge for particular persons and their development. Contrary to this, as shown above, Young seems to

assume that the power of powerful knowledge is inherent to this knowledge itself, quite independently of the person who might acquire it. From an educational perspective based on *Bildung*, however, the power of any given knowledge can only exert its wished-for powerful effects within a certain relationship to a particular person or group of persons. For example, true knowledge concerning quantum physics will most likely not be powerful for a first grader, while it may be quite powerful for older adolescents or a university student in that it can truly broaden their minds.

Yet what could powerful knowledge mean in the field of religious education? Since Young refers to the disciplinary nature of powerful knowledge, the first reference would be to theology and/or religious studies (depending on the context of a particular country and model of RE and its implied relationship to certain academic disciplines). An example of powerful knowledge would then be that the insights gained in specialized scientific research concerning, for example, the Bible or the Quran must be included, instead of personal and individual perspectives on such sources. Moreover, the history of Christianity and Islam has been the object of rigorous academic research so that new insights have become available. Still another example could refer to research concerning the different religions and their contemporary expressions. For example, what is true about these religions and what not? Do all Muslim women wear the headscarf? Do all Muslims pray five times a day? Concerning such questions there is specialized knowledge in the sense of Young's description—knowledge based on sound research which is produced in research institutes and which can always be revised. As described above, following Young, the older generation has an obligation to pass on such knowledge to younger generations so that it does not get lost. Another example could be the different forms of religious expression which have often been of special interest to people. The verbal images of the Psalms or the visionary structure of a peaceful world order entailed in the first book of the Bible, the life of a prophet or of a person living her or his life based on divine love. These could be examples of powerful knowledge which fascinates people although the powerful may not find it useful at all.

Are there also theoretical concepts or particular kinds of knowledge related to them which could be identified as powerful knowledge in this

case? Possible candidates could be basic religious/theological concepts like ‘God’, the divine, revelation and experience, faith, truth and certainty, conversion and so on—concepts which play a key role for theology and religious studies. Powerful knowledge in RE would then mean that such basic concepts are taken up and that the scientific use and understanding of these concepts are presented. This reference to basic concepts has a parallel in the recent discussion on ‘threshold concepts’ in religious education. ‘Threshold concepts’ are identified here as something like an eye-opener which allows for a new and deeper understanding of religious phenomena or even religion altogether (cf. Niemi, 2018). In the present context, they can therefore be considered as powerful knowledge as well, at least as far as they are related to the scientific study of religion and religions. In the field of religious education, however, the idea of focusing on ‘threshold concepts’ is relatively new and consequently not well-developed yet. So far, the respective discussion has led to the identification of four such concepts (Niemi, 2018, p. 2): lived religion, world religion paradigm, emic/etic, orthodoxy/orthopraxis—concepts which have in common that they can be applied to the whole field of religious phenomena and that their application does lead to a more differentiated understanding and interpretation of these phenomena. For this reason, such concepts can also become important at an individual level, for example, by making pupils think about religion in new ways.

At the same time, these few examples of what powerful knowledge could mean in RE clearly indicate that no more than tentative attempts at identifying powerful knowledge in the field of religious education are possible at this point. Much more work would need to be done before the concept of powerful knowledge can be fully applied to this field in a meaningful and systematically controlled manner. For example, the idea of identifying threshold concepts for RE is a promising beginning but, at least until now, it is still waiting for broader exploration. From the perspective of *Bildung*, it remains important that none of these concepts or key terms should be, as it were, imported, for example from theology or religious studies, into education without considering its relationship to the needs, interests and abilities of the learning and developing person as well as the overarching aim of supporting their development as

autonomous selves. In this view, it is actually impossible to identify powerful knowledge or threshold concepts without considering their potential usefulness for particular persons.

Competences—Without Knowledge Base?

Just like in many other countries, educational debates including the field of religious education in Germany have had a strong focus on competences in the last two decades. These debates followed the lead of the PISA studies which, as is well known, do not refer to religious education itself but are nevertheless considered important for this school subject as well. Especially in the first years of the respective debates there were competing and contradictory opinions (from the religious education discussion in Germany cf. the collections edited by Rothgangel & Fischer, 2004; Sajak, 2012). Some considered the understanding of competences in studies like PISA helpful because they referred to the learner and to the abilities acquired by the learning person, instead of only looking at contents and what has to be learned without taking the learning person into consideration. Others however, were critical of the idea of constantly measuring pupils' achievements, warned of the now infamous effects of 'teaching to the test' and deplored the time used for testing instead of teaching and learning.

Yet in spite of such debates which have accompanied so-called competence-oriented approaches from the beginning, it took much longer before another problem came into view, the issue of content or of the knowledge to be taught at school and to be addressed in teacher education (cf., for example, Heer & Heinen, 2020). The understanding of competences in PISA-like studies intentionally does not focus on content as presented in the different syllabi around the world. These syllabi are treated as more or less contingent since they often strongly reflect local or regional traditions and circumstances, and mastering the content prescribed by them does not necessarily say much about pupils' abilities when compared at an international level. Especially concerning international comparisons this decision makes sense. Comparing competences is more promising than, for example, comparing grades gained within the

context and framework of different syllabi and in relationship to standards which are not comparable. However, while the advantages of a competence-oriented approach in international comparative research are quite obvious, things look different concerning syllabi. So-called competence-oriented syllabi typically prescribe a number of competences or abilities to be acquired by the pupils as well as the degree to which the different competences should be mastered after a certain number of years of schooling. In the meantime, however, it has become obvious that prescribing competence levels is not enough for subjects like RE which are heavily dependent on the familiarity with particular contents. There may be mathematical literacy which is independent of contents. Yet, for example, there is no general biblical competence in the sense of an ability that would be independent of the familiarity with certain texts. For this reason, the syllabi for RE had to also specify the knowledge to be taught in RE next to the competences, but the competence models could only be of help in this respect in terms of the ways in which contents should be taught but not concerning the question of what contents should be selected. In other words, just like in the case of *Bildung*, there were or are again two different levels in the syllabi now, descriptions of competences based on defined theories (even if the empirical basis of competence models for RE is still weak in most countries) on the one hand and lists of contents which have no theoretical or empirical basis or for which no such basis is mentioned, at least not in terms of competences, on the other.

It is at this point where Young's understanding of powerful knowledge might be of interest for religious education. From his understanding of powerful knowledge it becomes obvious that knowledge matters in education and that any understanding of education which does not address the quality of the knowledge to be included or excluded and to be offered to pupils or to be withheld from them will remain incomplete. For him, this is a result of epistemological considerations. As he points out, there is a clear difference between what can be called everyday knowledge based on everyday experiences and specialized knowledge gained in a disciplinary-controlled manner in line with standards of scientific falsification (cf. Young & Muller, 2013). Education which does not make the second type of knowledge accessible to young people leaves them in the dark about the insights achieved most of all in academic research,

concerning both the natural and the social world. Competences alone may indeed fall prey to the ‘emptying of content’ criticized by Young (2009, p. 195).

While knowledge concerning such insights can be considered of value for good reasons, calling it powerful in itself raises a number of questions and objections from the perspective of competences. Even if a competence-oriented approach falls short of the task of providing criteria for the choice of contents to be treated in a certain subject area, it rightfully reminds educators of the need to never focus on content alone. What really counts in terms of competences always is the acquisition of abilities by the learners. At least in this respect, the competence-oriented approach leads to a general critical criterion concerning the selection of content to be taught. No content should be chosen for purposes of education which does not effectively support the development of pupils’ abilities. In this respect the idea of powerful knowledge can even be misleading. To a high degree, the educational power of any knowledge depends on the learner. It never is a property of knowledge in itself, even if it also remains important, contrary to only competence-oriented persuasions in education, that only true knowledge will prove to be helpful in the long run.

Powerful Knowledge and *Conscientização*: Religious Education Based on Michael Young or on Paulo Freire?

Whoever from the field of education encounters the distinction between powerful knowledge and knowledge of the powerful will probably not think of Michael Young in the first place but more likely of Paulo Freire. Freire actually does not use exactly these terms but they strongly resonate with the core of Freire’s educational thinking. When Freire ostracizes what he calls the ‘banking concept of education’, he seems to have in mind a transfer of the knowledge of the powerful to the learners who, through this knowledge, continue to be powerless and oppressed. Given the at least *prima facie* parallels between Young and Freire (and Young is certainly familiar with Freire’s seminal work), it seems promising to

compare their approaches and to consider their meaning for religious education. Moreover, while the German religious education discussion has not come to include Young's work, there have been many references to Freire's work in this discussion (cf. Ahme, 2022). Before comparing Young's and Freire's approaches, at least a brief description of my reading of Freire's approach is needed, in correspondence to the description of Young's approach in Sect. 1. For this purpose, Freire's foundational book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* is the most suitable source. (Freire's approach has been described and discussed in many publications; Cruz, 2013, offers a brief overview as well as background information on the concept of conscientização.)

The 'banking concept of education' which Freire criticizes as oppressive refers to a distorted teaching situation. 'In the banking concept of education, knowledge is a gift bestowed by those who consider themselves knowledgeable upon those whom they consider to know nothing' (Freire, 2005, p. 72). Freire offers a long list of characteristics of this concept which turns out to be a caricature of true education. Already his first two points are telling: '(a) the teacher teaches and the students are taught; (b) the teacher knows everything and the students know nothing' (p. 73). Moreover, the knowledge taught has no relationship to the lives of the pupils. Education carried out in this manner ends up to be rote learning of isolated and meaningless bits and pieces of knowledge.

Opposed to this, liberation-oriented education works as 'problem-posing' education characterized by 'cognition, not transferrals of information' (p. 79). This form of education is truly dialogical because the teacher does not act as authority: 'In this process, arguments based on "authority" are no longer valid; in order to function, authority must be on the side of freedom, not against it' (p. 80). For Freire, in other words, liberation becomes the decisive perspective in determining the content of education. For him, 'true knowledge' acquired in the problem-posing mode is liberating: 'Whereas banking education anesthetizes and inhibits creative power, problem-posing education involves a constant unveiling of reality. The former attempts to maintain the submersion of consciousness; the latter strives for the emergence of consciousness and critical intervention in reality' (p. 81). This obviously is the core of what Freire calls *conscientização*—becoming conscious of the truth behind

ideological, distorted and oppressive renderings of reality as cemented by the 'banking concept of education'.

Most importantly in this view, the knowledge in question can never be isolated from the lifeworld of the learners. Education must begin with asking about the thematic world in which the learners are living. In this respect Freire speaks of 'generative themes' which are rooted in this lifeworld understood as the 'thematic universe' of the learners (p. 97). It is important to note, however, that Freire is clearly aware of the limiting character and functioning of this lifeworld. He does not argue that education should be adapted to it in the sense of not transcending it. Instead he explicitly refers to the limiting function of generative themes which he therefore connects to 'limit-situations' and, even more importantly, to 'limit-acts' in the sense of overcoming such limitations (p. 102). In other words, education aims at the learners to develop a 'critical form of thinking about their world' in order to become able to transcend it and to ultimately change it (p. 104).

It is obvious that this understanding of education entails important consequences concerning the role of knowledge in education. 'In contrast with the antidialogical and non-communicative "deposits" of the banking method of education, the program content of the problem-posing method—dialogical *par excellence*—is constituted and organized by the students' view of the world, where their own generative themes are found' (p. 109).

From this brief summary of Freire's understanding, a number of commonalities and differences between Freire and Young become obvious. The main common point of these authors is their interest in true knowledge. Both are convinced that true knowledge must be the basis as well as the aim of education. Moreover, both agree that education must go beyond everyday knowledge. Yet at the same time, they come to very different conclusions concerning the question of how this knowledge should be embedded in education. While both envision education to be a transition from knowledge of the powerful to powerful knowledge, Young does not seem to be very interested in the process of transition itself. What counts for him is that powerful knowledge can indeed be acquired. Freire, however, assumes that this will not be possible without an appropriate process of knowledge acquisition which he describes as problem posing

and as based on the interplay between generative themes and limit-situations or limit-acts. The reason behind Freire's views is that the power of the knowledge of the powerful cannot be overcome unless this power is challenged and finally rejected by the learning person who must become, step by step, free from the authority of the teacher.

What does this mean for religious education? What about the role of knowledge in RE when viewed from the perspective of Young and Freire? As described above, Young's emphasis on the importance of powerful knowledge for education can be helpful in that it reminds us of the need to become clearer concerning the knowledge to be acquired in RE. Taking Freire's views in account as well on the one hand also confirms the need for true knowledge. Yet on the other hand, with Freire, there is a warning against focusing on content alone. In education, all content, including powerful knowledge, must be related to the lives of the pupils in such a way that it is not only powerful in itself but can also empower them, not only in general as Muller and Young expect in one of their later statements quoted above, but most concretely concerning their lives in general and specifically their social and material living conditions.

Freire's approach grew out of his work with the poor in Latin America in the 1960s. It can rightly be pointed out that the situation of today's pupils at least in Europe is quite different from that of the poor in Latin America. In any case the oppression from which they may have to be liberated, for example, in terms of consumerism, is not very obvious to them. Maybe one could suggest that it is the idea of generative themes and limit-situations which might be of help in this situation. Concerning the educational use of powerful knowledge this would mean that this knowledge must be connected to generative themes which, in turn, presupposes that educators first have to become able to identify such themes in the lifeworlds of the learners.

Conclusion and Perspectives for the Future

The discussion of the concept of powerful knowledge in this chapter made use of three different lenses—education as *Bildung*, competences and Freire's liberationist approach to education. The concept of powerful

knowledge clearly resonates with all of these perspectives while in turn, these perspectives can substantially add to the understanding of powerful knowledge and its potential role in RE. While the idea of powerful knowledge which really deserves to be handed on to future generations certainly is quite plausible from the perspective of religious education as well, it nevertheless must be closely connected to pupil-oriented forms of teaching. In the field of RE, the idea of powerful knowledge could otherwise lead back RE to the times of catechetics when a catechism with its set content was considered absolutely authoritative because it contained the core of the Christian faith. If one were to attempt to pass on even the most powerful knowledge in this manner, its power would definitely be lost on its way to the children and adolescents.

Conversely, the concept of powerful knowledge serves as a reminder of the neglected role of the topic of knowledge in the religious education discussion. This neglect has led to questionable ways of dealing with knowledge in RE. Obviously knowledge inevitably continues to play an important role in the practice of RE, yet academic religious education is in no position today to offer considered guidelines for the selection of this knowledge. At least in this respect, the diagnosis set forth by Richard Kueh quoted at the beginning of this chapter seems accurate: Contemporary RE is suffering from the lack of a clear knowledge base. As the discussion of powerful knowledge shows there is a need to identify contents and concepts which could be considered as powerful knowledge to be acquired in RE.

True knowledge has always been a promise of Christian education, for example following the Gospel of John 8:32: 'The truth will set you free'. True knowledge, even if understood in different ways, is also of core importance for Young's understanding of powerful knowledge as well as for Freire's view of liberation. Yet it has also become clear in this article that the identification of powerful knowledge in religious education remains an open question, at least at this point. Clearly not enough work has been done in this respect so this identification must remain a task for the future. At the same time, using powerful knowledge in RE will only make sense if it is (re-)interpreted in terms of *Bildung*, competences and problem-formulating methods in the sense of *conscientização*. There can be no liberation without truth but truth without liberation would be a contradiction in itself, not least in education.

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