

Bridging the research–practice gap on Facebook: a study of online communication between RE teachers and researchers

Knut Aukland

To cite this article: Knut Aukland (2021): Bridging the research–practice gap on Facebook: a study of online communication between RE teachers and researchers, British Journal of Religious Education, DOI: [10.1080/01416200.2021.1920366](https://doi.org/10.1080/01416200.2021.1920366)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/01416200.2021.1920366>



© 2021 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.



Published online: 05 May 2021.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 576



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

Bridging the research–practice gap on Facebook: a study of online communication between RE teachers and researchers

Knut Aukland

Department of Primary and Secondary Teacher Education, OsloMet – Oslo Metropolitan University, Pb. 4 St. Olavs plass, 0130 Oslo, NORWAY

ABSTRACT

In this article I explore the research–practice gap in RE with a unique dataset: The communication by teachers, and between teachers and researchers in a Norwegian Facebook group for RE teachers. Posts and comments in the group reflect that teachers largely communicate a practical form of knowledge with little engagement with research. At the same time, there are instances where members bridge the research–practice gap through interactions between teachers, and between teachers and researchers, especially through dissemination efforts. I discuss various institutional constraints contributing to the research–practice gap revealed in the data. Analysing three interactions between RE teachers and researchers, I argue that there are RE specificities tied to the challenges and possibilities in bridging this gap, including the question of how to relate insights from the study of religion to classroom teaching. Finally, I reflect on a striking absence, not only in the data but also academic descriptions of the theory–practice gap in RE: In stark contrast to teachers, researchers do not refer to their own practical knowledge from teaching on campus. Why is that?



KEYWORDS

Research–practice gap;
theory–practice gap;
Facebook; RE teachers and
researchers

Introduction

In this article I investigate the research–practice gap through a unique set of empirical data in the RE context, namely online communication by and between teachers and researchers on Facebook. Social media, and Facebook in particular, have been fertile grounds for the creation of informal arenas where teachers meet and exchange information (Bissessar 2014; Rutherford 2010; Ab Rashid et al. 2016; Krutka, Carpenter, and Trust 2017; Özdemir and Pan 2016). Moreover, Facebook group participation has quickly become an increasingly standard ingredient in the everyday work life of teachers many places (Rensfeldt, Hillman, and Selwyn 2018, 213; Ranieri, Manca, and Fini 2012).

The data for this article consists of communication that took place across a calendar year from June 2018 to June 2019 in the Norwegian Facebook group *RLE-læreregrupper*, which translates to the *RE teacher group*, hereby referred to as the *REt group*. A whole range of similar RE groups and pages can be found on Facebook in other countries. With more than 5 000 members as of March 2021, the *REt group* is easily the most important digital arena for RE teachers in Norway. In the first two publications from this study a key finding was that the group members are not just teachers, but in fact a composite group of different occupations and actors involved in RE, including researchers (Tandberg and Aukland 2020; Aukland and Tandberg 2020).

CONTACT Knut Aukland  knutau@oslomet.no  Department of Primary and Secondary Teacher Education, OsloMet – Oslo Metropolitan University, Oslo, Norway

© 2021 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.
This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way.

The data collected from the *REt group* will be used to explore the nature of the research–practice gap in the context of Norwegian RE. The main research question is: To what extent and how do teachers engage with research in their communication in the group? Related to this main question, is a second one: To what extent and how do researchers engage teachers in the group’s communication? The answers to these questions will be developed in dialogue with earlier research on the research–practice gap in education.

Researching Facebook communication, I believe, is a unique entry-point into teachers’ engagement with research because the dataset is, in a sense, organically produced. That is, it has not been prompted by researchers or a research setting (e.g. surveys, interviews, observation). It therefore provides a rare insight into RE teachers’ everyday concerns and communication as it plays out online, unprompted by research.

For the purpose of this article I will define ‘research’ broadly as denoting not just peer-reviewed literature, but also RE researchers, academic literature, and analytical RE concepts that are associated with RE teacher training and didactics (i.e. learning about/learning from and representation). Here, it’s important to note that in the Norwegian context, RE researchers most typically also work as RE teacher educators. Or to turn it around, contemporary teacher educators in Norway generally all have designated research time, which is not necessarily the case elsewhere.¹

In the next section I will provide an overview of the research–theory gap in education and RE specifically, before turning to methodology and the data. I then combine a presentation of the data with a discussion in four thematic sections. In the conclusion, I summarise the findings.

The infamous gap

It is widely accepted that there is a gap between educational research and practice in the global north (Broekkamp and Van Hout-wolters 2007, 206–7), including Norway (Ulvik and Smith 2016, 63).² Overall, it has been pointed out that the challenge is related to a gap between professional cultures that lean on different forms of knowledge – practical vs. formal (Korthagen 2007, 304, 6–7). Teachers, in this perspective, develop practical knowledge by participating in and reflecting on their own practice, thereby becoming effective problem solvers of everyday work challenges. This form of knowledge need not be conscious or easily formulated in words. Formal knowledge is produced by research, is more conceptual and explicitly formulated, often in an academic language. Where practical knowledge is more perceptual and deals with how to act in a specific situation, formal knowledge is more conceptual and help us know more about many situations (Korthagen 2007, 306). From this perspective the research–practice gap could be understood as a clash of knowledge forms, and the limited impact of research could come as a result of researchers one-sided emphasis on a form of knowledge, overlooking the importance of another.

Possible solutions include emphasising a ‘translation’ of research results and application of strong evidence in practice, on the one hand, and emphasising the importance of collaboration between researchers and practitioners, creating synergies between research and practice on the other (Broekkamp and Van Hout-wolters 2007, 208–11). While the gap as such has been the topic of discussion in some peer-reviewed articles within RE (Afdal 2008; Baumfield 2016; Everington 2013; O’Grady 2011), looking at research across the UK and Norway, it appears that the latter strategy of collaboration between researchers and teachers has been, if not the preferred approach (see e.g. Skeie 2010; Ipgrave, Jackson, and O’Grady 2009; Baumfield 2016), then at least an approach of growing importance in our field, which of course this very special issue also contributes to.³

As part of the REDCo project (2006–9), action research was carried out in England (Ipgrave, Jackson, and O’Grady 2009; O’Grady 2010) and Norway (Skeie 2010). At the time, it was possible for Geir Skeie to state that the REDCo action research was, to his knowledge, ‘unique in the world of religious education’ (Skeie 2009, 232), hinting at how rare this form of research has been in the field.⁴ While the REDCo project coordinator Wolfram Weiße placed the English monograph in the context

of the theory-practice gap (Weiß, Wolfram 2009, 12–3), the volume itself does not refer to the gap, employing instead the notion of community of practice.

Both Geir Afdal and Kevin O’Grady have in each their way tried to clear the theoretical ground for understanding the gap in the RE context. Conceptualising RE research and practice as two distinct activity systems, Afdal argues that the two ought to have a dialectic and equal relationship (Afdal 2008). This implies an upgrade of the status of practice in RE research, the realisation that practice contains theoretical insights, and that bridging the gap is therefore not to be seen as a top-down or bottom up process, but rather one of negotiation between two systems operating with different languages—the everyday language and that of academia and scholarly analysis (Afdal 2008, 208). With references to the Warwick action research part of the REDCo project, Kevin O’Grady discusses the tensions between teaching and inquiry/research (O’Grady 2011). From the point of view of a teacher-researcher this tension plays out in something so fundamental as the question of what to spend more time on (O’Grady 2011, 194). The article is an important reminder that institutional conditions, such as how much time a teacher has to engage inquiry, is a fundamental in the making of a research-practice gap.

Looking back at the more than a century long plea for teachers to engage with theory and/or research, Vivienne Baumfield has argued for the importance of including ‘experiments in practice’ and paving the way for participation in communities of learning to strengthen RE teachers professional learning (Baumfield 2016). She suggests that a key to bridge the gap would be to create and nourish the sharing of narratives of practice in RE across institutional boundaries, and between teachers and researchers (Baumfield 2016, 146).

In a REDCo study of an action research intervention into a one year RE teacher education programme for post graduates in the UK, Judith Everington wanted to strengthen the students engagement with theory, specifically the interpretative approach (Everington 2013). Echoing surveys revealing that pre-service students find university training as ‘too theoretical’ (ibid, 91), she found resistance to theory among the participants (ibid, 96), but concluded that as long as they have empowering experiences in connecting theory and practice, pre-service teachers view themselves as active and critical partners in educational research and development (ibid, 104).

In sum, it seems fair to say that RE is not different from other fields in that, while there is no shortage of academic writing *about the gap* between educational research and practice, there is actually not a lot of empirical research *on the gap* (cf. Vanderlinde and Van Braak 2010). In that regard it is hoped that the current study is a welcomed contribution.

Methodology

The data for this study was collected through archival digital ethnography (Kozinets, Dolbec, and Earley 2014). We followed the national guidelines for research ethics, and internet research specifically,⁵ and secured approval from the Norwegian Centre for Research Data (Tandberg and Aukland 2020). We received the group’s administrators consent to collect the data, informed the group of the project and left behind contact information informing them of our decision to anonymise data so that no post could be tied to an individual with the exception of statements from public figures. Hence, my presentation of quotes from posts and comments will be constructed on the basis of the data material by combining elements from different posts and comments, and making some alterations. For instance, a post about teaching Islam for key stage 3, might be altered to be about Judaism for key stage 5. While this is necessary to protect the anonymity of the group’s members, it also entails a certain danger in adding elements in these constructions. I have therefore been very careful not to add new semiotic elements in my reconstructions of posts and comments that are not found in the group’s communication.

A total of 160 posts were collected manually between 12.06.2018–12.06.2019 and coded in relation to occupation of author; age group/level; whether the post amounts a *question*, *sharing* of resource or an *opinion*; whether the post was about *direct classroom relevance*; finding *informants* to

studies or student papers; *content knowledge updates*⁶ or other; and finally we coded a variety of keywords in relation to the content of the posts such as *Hinduism*, *student engagement*, *films and video*, *official guidelines* etc. A combination of the content of the posts and the researchers' familiarity with the limited number of RE researchers in Norway, made it possible to determine the occupation of the authors in 93% of the posts.

The group's administrator also gave us access to a function called Group Insights in Facebook that allowed us to generate basic data and the number of posts, comments, reactions (emoticons such as *likes/thumbs up*) and 'active members'. Active members refer to a member that has, as a minimum, looked at or scrolled past a post or the groups page, or otherwise posted, commented or reacted to something.

Teacher-teacher interaction: do teachers' posts engage research?

What do teachers post about in the group? Before answering this question, it is helpful to get an overall picture of all the 160 posts in our material. Teachers were the author of 100 of them (62%). Researchers wrote 26 of the posts (16%). The teachers mostly posted questions (70%) and posts where they shared information (27%), whereas researchers mostly contributed with sharing posts (81%), and only secondarily asked questions (15%). In short, while teachers predominantly *ask*, researchers predominantly *share*.

The vast majority of posts from teachers, it turns out, deal with information that has direct classroom relevance (67%). Two sub-categories dominated here. First is teaching material (59 out of 108 posts), which includes plans, tips and resources for teaching a topic, or specific ways of working with a particular theme or topic (for instance, suggestions for suitable films are recurring). Typically, teachers are asking for input on a particular topic they are about to teach:

We are about to analyse key texts in Buddhism. Any suggestions for suitable texts? Would prefer some that can be tied to the life Buddha Gautama. And that is fun. Key stage 4. Any suggestions are welcome! ☺

The second biggest sub-category within direct classroom relevance are posts that typically share teaching and content knowledge resources to inspire or help plan teaching:

- Here is a sheet comparing Theravada and Mahayana Buddhism. Good weekend. ☺

It's not surprising therefore that the four most frequent words after KRLE (the acronym of the RE school subject) are key stage (*trinn*), religion/s, tips and pupil. While the world religions loom large in these posts, ethics and humanism are recurrent topics, but also more general issues such as assessment and textbooks. The word 'pupil' indicates the attention teachers give to the learners' experience. These posts typically receive comments from other teachers that come with suggestions and share from their own teaching, while a minority of them receive comments from researchers.

Looking at all the teacher posts, there are a few that do engage research, and they are all related to dissemination projects. Beyond that, some posts deal with relevant content knowledge resources for teachers themselves, some posts invite discussions around national curriculum or guidelines, and finally, a few posts deal with the question of how schools are managing religious diversity in general.

Turning to the interaction teachers have between one another, I decided to limit the total dataset (941 comments) to a manageable amount because of time constraints. I isolated the ten teacher posts dealing with teaching RE that had the most comments. This was a pragmatic choice that was made to reflect the most recurrent topic (teaching) and the posts that gathered most attention in the group, since the posts with most comments also had the biggest audience. The selected ten posts gathered 223 comments, that I consequently coded into categories. The most typical comments in this sample of the total dataset *refer to practice*:

- Looking for input and materials to teach ethics for key stage 4. Have about 4–5 sessions and would like to plan for a larger package across this period. Does anyone have something that works well?

I usually begin with a classical dilemma such as the trolley problem, before introducing ethical theories, and then in the final stage let pupils apply them to cases they care about and come up with.

We started by watching an episode of [name of TV series] dealing with sexuality and bullying on social media, and let pupils discover the ethical questions raised in the show.

Here, teachers refer to what they do in their practice without further evaluations. Notice that some teachers also ask, not just for input, but suggestions *based on experiences* in the classroom. A similar form of comment is one that *refers to practice and experiences* in the classroom, oftentimes employing positive adjectives. While these cases sometimes refer to general pedagogical tips (i.e. how to organise classroom activities), they are more typically RE specific:

- I'm a teacher specialising in Key Stage 2, and we are beginning with Judaism. I want to use these animated short films [link] combined with passages from the Tanakh. Beyond that I'm not sure, but really want to have engaging classes, and avoid the standard use of textbooks. Suggestions?

Combining texts with debates and discussions have worked well with my pupils!

We create groups and let them compete in how to look up relevant verses and quizzes. Always a lot of fun.

In one case a teacher referred to negative experiences.

- Hi. Has anyone tried to let pupils stage or act out key moments in the life of Moses or Jesus or Buddha, or tried hotseat with the same? I am considering trying one of these things out for stage 4.

We tried something similar with the life of Jesus, with mixed results I would say. Difficult to say what learning actually took place, though the pupils enjoyed it. Can share in a personal message if you're interested.

Another type of comment that is very prevalent is the sharing of resources, either via links to external material or, more rarely, self-made teaching plans or materials. Here is one example in relation to a teacher asking for input on teaching ethics:

I could send you some writing assignments in a personal message that we are using now in relation to ancient Greek philosophers. Not exactly what you need but should be helpful.

- Please do!
- Could you forward to me too?

While exchanges that refer to practice and sharing of resources are most typical, there are instances where exchanges include looking at context. For instance, some responders ask about the pupils' prior knowledge on the subject at hand or invite colleagues to reflect on the national curriculum and what they are passionate about themselves, as teachers.

Finally, there are occasions when a request for teaching resources develops into more substantial discussions. In this case a teacher comments on a post requesting input on a class on Islamic history:

It's important to reflect on the relation between detailing facts such as chronology of events, names of key characters, names of sections in holy texts etc, and the bigger connections. Understanding Islam and its relationship to Judaism and Christianity is one such big connection. After all this is what we want to see in assessment, the ability to reflect on knowledge and facts.

Here, questions around the larger aims of RE and assessment are activated. These instances of substantial debates are less typical in the material, but nevertheless do occur. What to make this overall snapshot?

First, research or academic RE literature plays a marginal role in the teacher-teacher interaction. It is tempting to see this as a reflection of a research–practice gap in RE. I think it is fair to say the educational research and RE research in general do not yield conclusive results or practical results that is easily or readily available to teachers, and so it might make sense that practitioners do not seek out research or make use of it when they plan their teaching (Broekkamp and Van Hout-wolters 2007, 206–8). It also seems fair to claim that there is a relative shortage of research that aims to directly contribute to teaching materials and plans in Norway.⁷

Another factor is certainly that many RE teachers in Norway lack exposure to RE research. It is common knowledge in the Norwegian context that it is not unusual or unheard of that teachers with no RE training teach RE. When Geir Skeie compared the Norwegian and English communities of practice that consisted of teachers and researchers in the REDCo project, he found a key difference: The Norwegian teachers had less experience of and training in academia than their English counterparts (Skeie 2009, 230–1). This is certainly an institutional constraint that contributes to the research–practice gap in Norway.

The teachers lack of engagement with research must also be understood in relation to the everyday work situation and what teachers need to prioritise (O’Grady 2011). Everyday work life is busy with little time to discuss teaching and content knowledge with colleagues, which limits the teachers’ engagement to a hunt for good teaching plans and materials (Larsen 2010, 100–1). It is also known that Norwegian school leaders do not prioritise the subject in ways that would support a wider engagement with research (Larsen 2010, 163; Leganger-Krogstad and Berge 2009; Bråten 2014, 176; Ziebertz and Riegel 2009, 400). No wonder then that the majority of posts and comments deal with the sharing of teaching materials and plans. This, however, is not to say that RE teachers do not engage research at all in their work, but this engagement is generally not reflected in the data.

The overall impression I get from the teacher-teacher communication is that the particular kind of knowledge that dominates these interactions is a practical rather than a theoretical knowledge (Korthagen 2007, 6–7). This practical knowledge is concerned with ‘what works’ on the basis of teacher experience. That being said, there are examples in the data where teachers do engage academic RE concepts beyond the 223 comments I analysed. These examples I found in posts where teachers and researchers interact.

Teacher-researcher interaction

In total we found that researchers commented in 22 of the 100 teacher posts. This in itself could be seen as potential signs of bridging the theory-practice gap. 15 of these posts deal with direct classroom relevance and teaching materials. In some of these exchanges researchers simply share links to dissemination projects and relevant non-academic resources such as media outlets. In the following I will discuss the three cases in which RE research and teachers’ practical knowledge were put into dialogue, with teachers and researchers both contributing. In the first two cases, both teachers and researchers engage research. The last two cases were so similar that I will present them as one case. In both instances, researchers wrote critical comments based on RE theory that teachers then reacted to in a more defensive mode.

Case 1: religious art

- Author (teacher): Hi! Im looking for a presentation of religious art to be used for stage 3 classroom. Any suggestions, given that the curriculum plan emphasise aesthetics? All suggestions welcomed!

Teacher 1: I have used this with my pupils, though they are stage 4 and 5. [link to English medium media outlet].

Teacher 2: This might be relevant. it's a bit outdated but the images haven't changed;) [link to personal webpage of researcher A with RE specific and other resources].

- Teacher 4: I love this group!
- Researcher 1: [name of researcher A] never gets outdated: Her/his insights on religious art is incredibly useful.

In this case, teacher 2 is the first to refer to a researcher, and thus academic forms of knowledge. Researcher 1 then follows up to confirm the usefulness of the scholarship and, later in the exchange, adds another academic publication from another scholar. This is an example where RE teachers find research useful for the practical planning of teaching, and in this case, it points to a specific part of our subject, namely images. A reason for this is no doubt that research on images also reproduce images that in turn can be used in the classroom. Thus, research on images often contain visual representations or artefacts, if you will, that have practical usage in the classroom. The case therefor invites us to reflect on what other topics in the study of religion (and other disciplines related to worldviews and ethics) have a similar potential to bridge the research-practice gap.

Case 2: thematic vs. systematic

- Author (teacher): This year I would like to try something new and organise the class according to themes and questions instead of one religion after the other. Not sure whether to use the old textbooks or simply manage without them. Anyone with relevant experiences?

Teacher 1: I would combine with social science and other subjects.

Teacher 2: We recently purchased (name of textbook series) that came out recently, but combine this with video clips and other things with quality. Not always easy to locate good stuff online, and still remember my teacher educator's emphasis on representation. Important to keep this in mind when only using online material.

Researcher: Going for a thematic rather than a systematic approach to teaching religion has many advantages though it requires a lot of content knowledge combined with teaching skills. Plus, the teacher has to make decisions him or herself on what to teach in the different religions in contrast to using textbooks where decisions have already been made. There are pros and cons to using textbooks ...

[thread continues where teachers refer to their own practice]

What strikes me in this interaction is that teacher 2 engages theory via their own educational training and the issue of representation. This reflects a teacher that finds it fruitful to employ RE theory and training when planning their teaching. After this, a researcher further introduces RE terminology, but these are not picked up by teachers who continue the conversation while referring to practice.

Here it is relevant to remember Judith Everington's conclusion that pre-service teachers could positively and fruitfully engage research as long as they had empowering experiences in connecting theory and practice (Everington 2013, 104). Could it be that teacher 2 has had exactly that, whereas teachers that are being 'lectured' by or commented upon by someone referring to RE theory with no reference to their own practice will not? It is interesting that the researcher's comment refers to teachers, but not to the authors own teaching experiences from campus. Thus, while teacher 2 is bridging the gap by sharing a narrative of practice (cf. Baumfield 2016, 146), the researcher appears to be talking from a purely theoretical point of view.

Case 3: taxonomies

- Author (teacher): Hi! Looking for ways to classify different religions according to belief system, one god, many gods etc. Anyone suggestions for material?

Teacher 1: It has worked well for me to compare religions on the basis of theistic belief, rituals and ethics, and letting groups create different posters.

[thread continues with teachers posting links to resources and references to practice]

Researcher 1: Taxonomies of religions have been criticised by scholars of religion. Not saying it is impossible, but this is something to keep in mind when creating a teaching plan. For one the theistic beliefs and practices in a tradition can be multiple and exist side by side (Hinduism is a good example here where many conceptions of the divine exist side by side). Another issue is that of official and lived religion. I think it's important to remind pupils that 'one religion' contains a variety of interpretations and practices.

- Teacher 2: But comparisons are helpful in the classroom.
- Researcher 2: Taxonomies can be challenging but also helpful in sorting out reality. RE should find a balance between these two. One strategy is to let pupils themselves develop classifications and then probe these. Best to avoid comparisons between religion A and religion B, and instead narrow the focus on say rituals, particular stories etc. One can focus on teachings such as theism or practical matters such as food and dress and let pupils create their own questions to explore.
- [thread continues with teachers posting links to resources and references to practice]

In this case, researcher 1 interrupts the flow of practical knowledge with a critical, academic intervention. A teacher then resists the intervention, before researcher 2 attempts to bridge the two perspectives. Researcher 1 is clearly tying theoretical insights from the study of religion to the practice of teaching RE. In response to this teacher 2, echoing teacher 1, simply refers to practice, and the pragmatics of experiences in the classroom, which is also the dominating form of knowledge in the group. To this, researcher 2 attempts to articulate a compromise between the two perspectives, including both an academic caution in comparing religions, and a practical perspective emphasising pupil participation.

The exchange reveals a fundamental challenge in bridging theory and practice in RE: How to relate theoretical insights from the study of religion regarding the complexities of religion, with the practical challenges of teaching learners at different stages. Teacher 2 can be read as an example of a practitioner resisting theory (Everington 2013, 91), but also as an attempt to remind RE research of the value and necessity of practical knowledge. While researcher 2 appeals to a balancing act, there are of course also real disciplinary disagreement on the question of how to conceptualise religion.

While this exchange does enrich the communication in the group, it is noteworthy that the rest of this last thread is made up of teachers referring to their own practice. Researcher 1 and 2 might have raised a theoretical problem for RE, but the everyday language of applied RE continues undisturbed, leaning on practical knowledge. Here we should note that while researcher 1 refers to formal knowledge and theory, they also refer directly to practice (planning teaching) and therefore bridges theory and practice. However, neither researcher 1 nor 2 refers to their own teaching practices on campus.

Dissemination efforts and posts by researchers

In the coding process, we found that no less than 24% of all the posts in our material were related to teachers or researchers sharing podcast episodes, blogposts, videos or other forms of dissemination projects (Aukland and Tandberg 2020). These dissemination efforts cover RE specific projects, general school and education projects (typically, particular episodes with RE relevance are shared),

and study of religion projects. In most of these projects, researchers and research are engaged through audio, video and text. In some, teachers interact with researchers, but we also have researchers engaging teachers, teacher engaging teachers, and researchers engaging researchers. There are also examples of researchers discussing the practicalities of teaching or even suggesting or sharing teaching materials or specific ways of working in the classroom. The dissemination efforts from researchers that contain concrete materials for teaching RE receive the most reactions and enthusiasm in the group.

This interaction is significant for several reasons. Firstly, it in itself is an indicator that the *REt group* does help bridge the research-practice gap in Norway. It not only brings together a variety of RE actors in one arena, it also helps create an RE audience and thus pave the way for RE dissemination efforts (cf. Aukland and Tandberg 2020). Secondly, it indicates that while there are not many cases where teachers engage research in their own communication, participation in the group does secure a steady stream of offers to read, watch or listen to RE specific research and researchers.

Turning to the literature on the research–practice gap, these efforts are significant given that scholars have pointed to the importance of mediators and mediating structures that help translate and bring research findings to practitioners (Levin 2004; Broekkamp and Van Hout-wolters 2007, 208–11). This is precisely what we see happening in the *REt group*, establishing it as an arena where the research-practice gap is bridged by ‘research popularisers’ (Levin 2004, 5).

Finally, I turn to the posts by researchers, and specifically those that receive comments and reactions from teachers. There are instances when researchers actively seek teacher interaction by prompting questions or inviting them to engage in dissemination projects. There are also links to seminars and conferences. While they are signs that researchers are trying to, or engaging in projects that bridge research and practice, these posts tend not to elicit very little response. Only four out of the 26 posts by researchers received comments by teachers, and only one of them received substantial input from teachers. Two of these inspired more substantial exchanges, where teachers give input to researchers based on their own practical knowledge from teaching RE. In those cases we see a knowledge flow from practice to research happening as a result of researchers actively expressing an interest in RE teachers’ practical knowledge.

The practical knowledge of researchers: a striking absence

The main bulk of communication between teachers reflects practical knowledge. Researchers, however, are noticeably *not* doing the same. Barring one exception in all the posts and the comments analysed, researchers do not share narratives of their own practice from teaching on campus where they work as RE teacher educators.

Vivienne Baumfield has suggested that a key to bridging research and practice in RE would be to nourish a sharing of narratives of practice across institutional boundaries, and between teachers and researchers (Baumfield 2016, 146). In the *REt group*, teachers do share such narratives across schools and key stages, while researchers do not. Here might lie the potential for the kind of synergistic exchanges envisioned by Baumfield (2016) and Everington (2013).

Perhaps the researchers do not share from their own practical knowledge as teacher educators because they do not see this form of knowledge valuable or appropriate in a group for RE teachers? The practical knowledge of researchers as teachers on campus also appears to be overlooked in earlier accounts of the research–practice gap in RE (Afdal 2008; O’Grady 2011), and I suspect in the general literature on the gap as well. One way to understand this absence is surely to see (RE) research as a social practice with both institutional and cultural norms and rules (Afdal 2008, 206). Academia is geared towards research and publications, and RE academics may not identify as RE teachers. Still, Norwegian RE researchers teach. They too have to grapple with questions of representation and taxonomy when they teach their students. They too need to bridge theory from the study of religion or other disciplines to the campus classroom. They too develop practical knowledge

couched in everyday language. And yet, the communication in the *REt group* suggests that researchers/teacher educators refrain from sharing that form of knowledge.

Conclusion

To what extent and how do teachers engage with research in their communication in the group? Looking at teachers' posts, they generally do not engage research, except in the context of dissemination projects where interviews with researchers are shared. Turning to the comments, I again found a limited engagement with research. Instead they lean heavily on *practice and experiences*, i.e. practical knowledge, and the sharing of resources. These interactions also include brief excursions into larger questions such as assessment in RE. This apparent lack of engagement is not surprising considering the institutional constraints on teachers and RE in Norway. That being said, we should not forget that teachers in the group can and probably do engage research in other contexts that are not reflected in the teacher-teacher communication in the *REt group*.

There are, nevertheless, instances when teachers do engage research, whether by referring to academic publications, teacher education or connecting theoretical issues such as representation to practice. Moreover, teacher members are exposed to research dissemination on a regular basis in the group. Researchers do contribute when teachers ask for input on teaching, sometimes suggesting materials and resources, other times making academic interventions. Researchers also contribute with a variety of dissemination efforts that find an audience in the group and bridge the gap. Finally, I have found that researchers by and large do not share from their own practical knowledge as teachers on campus.

Considering these findings together, I have begun to draw the contour of the challenges and opportunities in the research–practice gap within RE. There are institutional constraints on teachers, but also RE specific challenges in bridging practice with insights from the study of religion. Findings indicate that there are aspects of research on religions, such as studies of visual representations, that appear to travel particularly well between academia and school. Finally, the data invites researchers to reconsider the role of campus teaching in bridging the research–practice gap, both in the context of research and their own interaction with teachers.

Notes

1. RE teacher educators in Denmark generally do not have research time outside specific grants. Email correspondence with Rose Maria Bering-Jensen, 20.10.2020.
2. Note that this gap is also relevant when looking at research into teacher development and the actual practice of teacher educators (Korthagen 2007, 308).
3. The recently established, UK based RE:Online webpage, however, does include efforts to make research more relevant to teachers. There is no equivalent in Norway.
4. Kevin O'Grady, however, incorporated action research elements in a study published six years earlier (O'Grady 2003).
5. <https://www.forskningsetikk.no/en/guidelines/social-sciences-humanities-law-and-theology/a-guide-to-internet-research-ethics/>, accessed 19.10.2020.
6. With content knowledge updates we refer to posts that typically include a link to some resource that can help support readers understanding of religions, worldviews and ethics, including news items on topical cases, often without any explicit reference to RE.
7. To my knowledge the few available actions research or pedagogical design research publications that aim to develop teaching material includes Geir Skeie's mentioned anthology (Skeie 2010), and two articles (Toft 2018; Husebø Husebø 2019).

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank the Religion & Education Collaborative for allowing me to present and discuss an early draft of this paper, and the two anonymous reviewers for valuable input.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes on contributor

Knut Aukland is associate professor and head of the RE section at OsloMet, Department of Primary and Secondary Teacher Education. His research interests includes RE didactics, virtual reality in RE, RE and digital tools and Indian religions. His PhD investigated domestic tourism and Hindu pilgrimage in Northern India. His research profile is available here: <https://www.oslomet.no/en/about/employee/knutau/>

References

- Ab Rashid, R., M. F. Yahaya, M. F. A. Rahman, and K. Yunus. 2016. "Teachers' Informal Learning via Social Networking Technology." *International Journal of Emerging Technologies in Learning (IJET)* 11 (10): 76–79. doi:10.3991/ijet.v11i10.5908..
- Afdal, G. 2008. "Religious Education as a Research Discipline: An Activity Theoretical Perspective." *British Journal of Religious Education* 30 (3): 199–210. doi:10.1080/01416200802170086..
- Aukland, K., and H. N. Tandberg. 2020. "Lærergupper På Facebook II: RLE-lærerguppe Og Andre Møteplasser." *Prismet* 71 (1): 23–43. doi:10.5617/pri.7877.
- Baumfield, V. 2016. "Making a Difference in the Religious Education Classroom: Integrating Theory and Practice in Teachers' Professional Learning." *British Journal of Religious Education* 38 (2): 141–151. doi:10.1080/01416200.2016.1139889..
- Bissessar, C. S. 2014. "Facebook as an Informal Teacher Professional Development Tool." *Australian Journal of Teacher Education* 39 (2): 121–135. doi:10.14221/ajte.2014v39n2.9..
- Bråten, O. M. H. 2014. "Bruk Av Lærebøker I RLE." In *RLE i Klemme: Ein Studie Av Det Erfarte RLE-faget*, edited by K. Fuglseth, 173–197. Bergen: Fagbokforlaget.
- Broekkamp, H., and B. Van Hout-wolters. 2007. "The Gap between Educational Research and Practice: A Literature Review, Symposium, and Questionnaire." *Educational Research and Evaluation* 13 (3): 203–220. doi:10.1080/13803610701626127.
- Everington, J. 2013. "The Interpretive Approach and Bridging the "Theory-practice Gap": Action Research with Student Teachers of Religious Education in England." *Religion & Education* 40 (1): 90–106. doi:10.1080/15507394.2013.745359..
- Husebø, D. 2019. "Digitale Tankekart Og Fagspesifikk Literacy I KRLE." In *Ny Hverdag? Literacy-praksiser I Digitaliserte Klasserom På Ungdomstrinnet*, edited by Atle Skafun og Dag Husebø IMari-Ann Igland, 195–212. Oslo: Universitetsforlaget.
- Ippgrave, J., R. Jackson, and K. O'Grady. 2009. *Religious Education Research through a Community of Practice. Action Research and the Interpretive Approach*. Münster: Waxmann.
- Korthagen, F. A. J. 2007. "The Gap between Research and Practice Revisited." *Educational Research and Evaluation* 13 (3): 303–310. doi:10.1080/13803610701640235..
- Kozinets, R. V., P.-Y. Dolbec, and A. Earley. 2014. "Netnographic Analysis: Understanding Culture through Social Media Data." In *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Data Analysis*, edited by U. Flick, 262–276. London: Sage.
- Krutka, D., J. Carpenter, and T. Trust. 2017. "Enriching Professional Learning Networks: A Framework for Identification, Reflection, and Intention." *TechTrends: Linking Research & Practice to Improve Learning* 61 (3): 246–252. doi:10.1007/s11528-016-0141-5..
- Larsen, A. H. 2010. "Utfordringer i kollegafellesskapet." In *Religionsundervisning Og Mangfold*, edited by G. Skeie, 90–103. Oslo: Universitetsforlaget.
- Leganger-Krogstad, H., and M. B. E. Berge. 2009. "Norway. Common Compulsory Religious Education: A Survey on Professionalism among Norwegian School Teachers." In *How Teachers in Europe Teach Religion. An International Empirical Study in 16 Countries*, edited by Hans-Georg Ziebertz and Ulrich Riegel, 153–167. Münster: Lit. Verlag.
- Levin, B. 2004. "Making Research Matter More." *Education Policy Analysis Archives* 12: 1–20. doi:10.14507/epaa.v12n56.2004.
- O'Grady, K. 2003. "Motivation in Religious Education: A Collaborative Investigation with Year Eight Students." *British Journal of Religious Education* 25 (3): 214–225. doi:10.1080/0141620030250305.
- O'Grady, K. 2010. "Researching Religious Education Pedagogy through an Action Research Community of Practice." *British Journal of Religious Education* 32 (2): 119–131. doi:10.1080/01416200903537381.
- O'Grady, K. 2011. "Is Action Research a Contradiction in Terms? Do Communities of Practice Mean the End of Educational Research as We Know It? Some Remarks Based on One Recent Example of Religious Education Research." *Educational Action Research* 19 (2): 189–199. doi:10.1080/09650792.2011.569205.

- Özdemir, S. M., and V. L. Pan. 2016. "Web-Based Tools and Environments for Teachers' Professional Development." *Participatory Educational Research* 4 (1): 251–261.
- Ranieri, M., S. Manca, and A. Fini. 2012. "Why (And How) Do Teachers Engage in Social Networks? an Exploratory Study of Professional Use of Facebook and Its Implications for Lifelong Learning." *British Journal of Educational Technology* 43 (5): 754–769. doi:10.1111/j.1467-8535.2012.01356.x.
- Rensfeldt, A. B., T. Hillman, and N. Selwyn. 2018. "Teachers 'Liking' their Work? Exploring the Realities of Teacher Facebook Groups." *British Educational Research Journal* 44 (2): 230–250. doi:10.1002/berj.3325.
- Rutherford, C. 2010. "Facebook as a Source of Informal Teacher Professional Development." *In Education* 16: 1.
- Skeie, G. 2009. "A Community of Dialogue and Conflict? Discussion of Community of Practice Findings in A Wider European Context." In *Religious Education Research through a Community of Practice: Action Research and the Interpretive Approach*, edited by J. Ipgrave, R. Jackson, and K. O'Grady, 216–234. Münster: Waxmann.
- Skeie, Geir, ed. 2010. "Religionsundervisning Og Mangfold: Rom for Læring i Religion, Livssyn Og Etikk." In Oslo: Universitetsforlaget.
- Tandberg, H. N., and K. Aukland. 2020. "Lærergrupper På Facebook I: RLE-lærergruppa Og Religionslærerens Profesjonsfaglige Utvikling." *Prismet* 71 (1): 5–22. doi:10.5617/pri.7876.
- Toft, A. 2018. "Nettbrett, Fortelling Og Kategorial Danning." In *Kategorial Danning Og Bruk Av IKT I Undervisning*, edited by K. Fuglseth, 131–153. Oslo: Universitetsforlaget.
- Ulvik, M., and K. Smith. 2016. "Å Undervise Om Å Undervise: Lærerutdanneres Kompetanse Sett Fra Deres Eget Og Fra Lærerstudenters Perspektiv." *Uniped* 39 (1): 61–77. doi:10.18261/1893-8981-2016-01-06.
- Vanderlinde, R., and J. Van Braak. 2010. "The Gap between Educational Research and Practice: Views of Teachers, School Leaders, Intermediaries and Researchers." *British Educational Research Journal* 36 (2): 299–316. doi:10.1080/01411920902919257.
- Weiß, Wolfram. 2009. "Foreword." In *Religious Education Research through a Community of Practice: Action Research and the Interpretive Approach*, edited by J. Ipgrave, R. Jackson, and K. O'Grady, 11–13. Münster: Waxmann.
- Ziebertz, Hans-Georg and Ulrich Riegel, eds. 2009. "How Teachers in Europe Teach Religion: An International Empirical Study in 16 Countries." In Münster: LIT Verlag.