Boys in Religious Education – a difficult relationship?! Considering perspectives of boys in a gender-balanced pedagogy of diversity

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Abstract: Religious Education never was neutral to gender; when it pretended to be so it actually supported male dominance. This outcome of research in Feminist Theology and feminist approaches to Religious Education (RE) has led to a necessary emphasis on structural discrimination of girls in school education and contributed to increasing awareness of gender bias in RE-approaches. However, academic reflection on RE has needed some time to discover boys not only in a deficit-oriented perspective as trouble makers for girls but also as subjects of religion-related learning who need critical companionship in their physical, mental and also spiritual development. One basic tenet of religious education which is directed towards gender equality should be to reflect upon and to foster manifold ways of understanding oneself in its own individual gender. This is in the same way important for boys as for girls because there seems to be a current backlash in role models with the trend of homogenizing gender roles according to mainstream frames of manlyhood and womanlyhood.

Current approaches in RE reflect gender as one category of difference within a set of differences formed by social background, religion, culture and dis/ability. The challenge and task is to conceptualize RE at the intersections of these categories. The article explains how boyhood can be understood as gender-related category of difference and outlines conceptual features of a religion-related pedagogy of diversity without any discrimination based on sex, gender, sexual orientation, or gender identity.

Key words: pedagogy of religion, gender justice, situated construct, intersectionality, androcentrism

Chicos y Educación Religiosa - una relacion dificil?! Sobre las perspectivas de los chicos en una pedagogía de diversidad y de género equilibrado

Resumen: La educación religiosa nunca ha estado neutral respecto al género; cuando pretendía serlo, en realidad apoyaba un predominio masculino. Este resultado de la teología feminista y de los enfoques feministas en el ámbito de la educación religiosa (ER) ha llevado a la necesidad de analizar la discriminación estructural de las niñas en la educación escolar, contribuyendo a aumentar la conciencia sobre lo prejuicios relacionados con el género en los enfoques RE. Sin embargo, la reflexión académica sobre ER ha tardado algún tiempo para descubrir a los chicos, no solo en cuanto a una perspectiva enfocada sobre los déficits, como causantes de los problemas para las niñas, sino también como sujetos de un aprendizaje relacionado con la religión que necesitan un modo de acompañamiento crítico en su desarrollo físico, mental y también espiritual. Un principio básico de la educación religiosa dirigida hacia la igualdad de
género debería consistir en reflexionar y fomentar formas múltiples de entenderse a sí mismo en su propio género individual. Esto es igualmente importante para los chicos como para las niñas teniendo en cuenta los recientes retrocesos en los modelos que tienden a homogeneizar los roles de género de acuerdo con estereotipos generalizados sobre ser femenino (womenlyhood) y ser masculino (manlyhood). Los enfoques actuales en ER reflejan el género desde una categoría de diferencia dentro de un conjunto de diferencias formado por antecedentes sociales, religiosos, culturales y de dis/capacidad. El reto y la tarea consiste en conceptualizar ER en las intersecciones de estas categorías. El artículo explica cómo entender el "ser chico" (boyhood) en el sentido de una categoría de diferencia relacionada con el género al esbozar las características conceptuales de una pedagogía de la diversidad relacionada con la religión sin discriminación basada en el sexo, el género, la orientación sexual o la identidad de género.

**Palabras clave:** Pedagogía de la religión, justicia de género, construcción situada, interseccionalidad, androcentrismo

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**Garçons et Éducation Religieuse - une relation difficile?! Sur les perspectives des garçons dans une pédagogie de diversité et de genre équilibrée**

**Résumé:** L'enseignement religieux n'était jamais neutre au genre; lorsqu'il a essayé de devenir neutre dans cette position, en réalité il a soutenu la dominance masculine. Cette conclusion de recherche dans la théologie de féministe et des approches féministes à l'éducation religieuse a mené aux chercheurs au besoin d'analyser la discrimination structurelle de filles dans l'enseignement scolaire, en contribuant à développer la conscience au tour des préjugés liés au genre dans les perspectives de l'éducation religieuse. Cependant, la réflexion universitaire sur l'éducation religieuse a eu besoin du temps pour découvrir les garçons dans ce contexte, non seulement dans une perspective relative aux déficits comme responsables des problèmes des filles, mais aussi comme des sujets d'apprentissage, concernant la religion, qui ont besoin d'un soutien critique dans leur développement physique, mental et aussi spirituel. Un principe de base de l'éducation religieuse dirigé vers l'égalité des sexes qui devrait permettre la réflexion et favoriser la compréhension-même dans son propre genre individuel. C'est de la même façon importante pour les garçons quant aux filles, parce qu'il semble y avoir une répercussion actuelle dans des modèles à émuler, notamment avec la tendance existant d'homogénéiser des rôles de genres selon les cadres courants: féminin (womanlyhood) ou masculin (manlyhood). Les approches actuelles dans l'éducation religieuse reflètent le genre dès une catégorie de distance dans un ensemble de différences conçues par l'environnement social, la religion, la culture et la dis/capacité. Le défi à accomplir est de conceptualiser l'éducation religieuse aux intersections de ces catégories. L'article explique comment comprendre "l'être garçon" (boyhood) dans le sens d'une catégorie de différence liée au sexe en décrivant les caractéristiques conceptuelles d'une pédagogie de la diversité concernant la religion sans aucune discrimination basée sur le sexe, le genre, l'orientation sexuelle, ou l'identité de genre.

**Mots-clés:** Pédagogie de la religion, justice de genre, construction placée, intersectionnalité, androcentrisme
Introduction
Pedagogy of Religion has been, for a long time, pedagogy of skipped gender difference. In a wrong generalization, students were talked about sweepingly. However, Religious Education (RE) never was neutral to gender; when it pretended to be so it actually supported male dominance. Crucial for the pioneer work of feminist theology was to reveal the gender veil (cf. Pissarek-Hudelist, 1981, p. 47-71): The silence about the significance of gender supported an unreflected acceptance of maleness as the standard. Feminist religious pedagogy tried to overcome androcentrism, the dominance of male perspectives in religious education in contents, aims, and interactions (Cf. for example Jakobs 1994, 97-106; Kohler-Spiegel 1995, 204 -211; Pithan 1993, 421-435). Outcomes of research in Feminist Theology and feminist approaches to Religious Education have led to a necessary emphasis on structural discrimination of girls in school education and contributed to increasing awareness of gender bias in RE-approaches. The feminist perspective was bitterly needed and still is. But while the way of looking at girls, their life situations, needs, and gender-related educational approaches could become more differentiating, the perspective on boys has remained strangely bleak, being stuck in the criticism of male dominance. Academic reflection on the pedagogy of religion has needed some time to discover boys not only in a deficit-oriented perspective as trouble makers for girls but also as subjects of religion-related learning who need critical and partial companionship in their physical, mental and also spiritual development. Boys also need pedagogical relations which enable them to become responsible and caring human beings who can contribute to equality and solidarity between the different sexes. It was at the beginning of the 21st century when approaches have been worked out which are explicitly directed to boys in their diversity and thus – by reflecting their gender roles – contribute to a pedagogy which could meet the variety and fluidity of defining and understanding sex and gender (Möller 1997; Knauth et. al 2002).

I consider this preliminary remark necessary in case someone concludes from the focussing on boys made here that I now intend to introduce the patriarchal rollback, reactivating androcentric perspectives in the wake of an incorrect approach of the discrimination debate.

Rather, the following reflections are developed from the interest in a pedagogy of religion which has knowledge of how hierarchies of coexistence and effects of exclusions are generated through the category of gender. Here lies the remaining right and merit of the feminist oriented gender-related work with girls. And here it is where a reflection with regard to boys must start. The question is how boys can be supported in their gender-related identification process beyond androcentrism and the discrimination against girls and women but also beyond deficit depiction and stereotyping – taking account of the variety and fluidity of the gender category in the field of religion (Hunt 2016). Much work has to be done in RE on the task to boys through suitable approaches and contents. In this article, I would like to propose a conceptual localisation of the boy perspective by clarifying central background assumptions about the situation of boys, their relationship with girls, and the tasks of a gender-related pedagogy of religion in the context of diversity.

What a boy is and does, what influences and guides him and differs him from the other sex is not easy to grasp conceptually. As soon as we start thinking about boys in pedagogical contexts,
we find ourselves in a field of tension. This relationship of tension results from the necessity to determine more closely what is the matter with the boys and the impossibility to do that, with closer examination, without simplifying or becoming normative.

I do not actually take this indeterminacy as a disadvantage but rather as an important starting point for the reflection about boys in religious pedagogy. The difficulty of grasping conceptually what is the matter with the boys challenges us towards a more precise perception. It also demands reflecting on one’s own perspectives with regard to gender relationships.

My attempt at conceptually localising the boys’ perspective in religious pedagogy is divided into three sections in which I want to give an understanding of conceptually, empirically, and practically directed elements of a perspective of boy-oriented religious pedagogy.

In the first section I would like to confront different attempts at reconstructing the perspectives of boys which I consider insufficient or problematic because they take being a boy as a generalizable category. In this process, important differentiations get lost and the difference between the sexes becomes a main difference. Starting from the critique of this position, I will demonstrate in the second section, by means of practical examples from empirical research in schools, what it means to interpret being a boy as a situated construct, that is, as related to contexts and situations. And finally, in the last section, I will present some elements of a boy-oriented religious pedagogy.

Being a Boy as an Emergency Situation?! The Discourse about the "Poor Boys"
The German teacher Frank Beuster (2006) wrote down his longstanding experiences in pedagogical work with boys in a book. Consistent with the present "Poor Boys Discourse" which is fuelled in the media with corresponding articles about the allegedly disadvantaged sex, Beuster’s book is titled, *Die Jungenkatastrophe. Das überforderte Geschlecht (The Boy Disaster. The Overtaxed Sex).* Beuster describes the present situation of boys as an emergency situation. The catalogue of deficits he composed is long: When starting school, boys are not as far as the girls; abilities and skills are missing. Boys lack structure and the capability to structure themselves; they are haphazard, overtaxed with time management; they are unable to engage themselves independently, have difficulties in subjects with a high proportion of language; they are unable to show weaknesses and to express feelings, they make everything into a competition and are peasants with regard to the constructive dealing with a conflict. They lack inner orientation.

Beusters’ observations lead, in the field of schooling, to a provocative thesis: School does justice to the girls but not to the boys because, induced by socialisation, girls master the school virtues sooner than the boys. Moreover, has the adapted girl become the standard for boys, a desired child in modern urban society. This results in the case of boys, in an education towards unmanliness, a tendency to suppress the "male side" in the boy. This amounts to a demasculinisation against which boys then defend themselves by overemphasising their masculinity.

So boys are different from girls – and this is the case – according to Beuster – not only due to their socialisation but also due to genetically and evolutionary conditioned dispositions. They are “makers” and can’t do anything with the text-intensive school; they are oriented to the outside, want to explore and experiment, but they can increasingly less follow their natural impulses today.
This is not the place to deal with the fundamental theses of this book that was written for a broad audience and was extraordinarily successful. I mentioned it because it stands for a current discourse in which being a boy is described as an emergency situation. We owe it to this "Poor Boys Discourse" that boys-pedagogy could be taken out of its niche role, now being discussed more widely in its school-educational and didactic relevance.

Three objections against these oversimplified theses of the disadvantage of boys can be formulated:

a) Critique of the Essentialism of Distinction between Boys and Girls

Talking about the poor boys who are now at a disadvantage to the girls produces a drastically simplified image of boys. It sets the categories boy and girl as essential, constructing the differences along this category. Concentrating on differences between boys and girls disambiguates a complex reality in which diverse differences and commonalities between humans are operative. If the mode of perception boy and girl is now applied to this complex reality and, moreover, this mode is thought as a contrast or as an opposition, then problematic stereotyping results from it.

b) Homogenisation of Diversity

At the same time, it homogenises the differences that exist among boys. The Australian researcher on men, Raewyn, formerly Robert William, Connell (2005), described this simplifying talk about the boys as victims as "boys in a box approach": all boys in one box. Through the reduction to the gender difference, as through simple boys-girls comparisons, the differentiations among boys are easily lost from sight.

c) Shortening the Connection of Sex and Life Situation

Thirdly, talking about the disadvantage of boys discusses the connection between life situation and social discrimination in a shortened way. It considers the disadvantage as a result of the gender situation, not including social and cultural factors.

The current debate about the disadvantage of boys is suffering – in other words – of pseudo-relations between gender and educational disadvantage. Boys are not at a blanket disadvantaged group, this applies to a particular social group. The paradigmatic talk of the Muslim worker's boy from the city illustrates that disadvantage is a combination of different factors. This simple fact, however, is being neglected in the public debate about the poor boys. The general discussion about the score of the boys seems to cause more hype than the diagnosis that children with a background of migration are at a disadvantage (cf. Budde, 2006, p. 488-500).

How boys are, what boys do, and what is to be done or omitted for them does not only depend on gender. The dilemma of the research on boys consist — speaking with Reinhard Winter (2004, p. 355) — in the simultaneous existence of permanent gender (re)constructions and a continuous opening of options of being a boy. Determinations of what it means to be a boy, what constitutes boys in relationship to girls, are constantly being worked out in theory and practice. At the same time, however, the determination of what it means to be a boy is progressively pluralised. The certainty about boys shrinks. The more, however, the certainty about the boys shrinks, the greater is the danger of reproducing gender stereotypes even with
regard to the work with boys: all boys into one box. What helps here is only precise observation and a close description of the situations and contexts in which being a boy is significant.

"Being a Boy" as a Situated Construct. Results of Empirical Research in (Religious) Education

The pluralisation of being a boy is also reflected in critical research on men and substantiated empirically in school-related empirical research. This research follows the claim that gender must be related to the context. The social and cultural gender of being a boy depends strongly on social situations and the rules of gender-related attributions operative in them. Being a boy is not only a social and cultural construct but also a "situated construct" (Fuhr, 2006, p.133). In their interactions in school, boys and girls are constantly working on their gender roles. How they construct their own sex and the sex of the other depends on contexts. In an ethnographic study on boys in the secondary stage of a Gymnasium, Jürgen Budde, for example, worked out that boys define masculinity simultaneously through social hierarchies in the sex-homogenous group. By excluding some boys who do not correspond to the favoured image of masculinity, a we-group emerges which gets its sharp external border through a devaluation of femininity. Thus emerges a sexual unambiguousness in situated interactions.

The significance of a context-related interpretation of gender construction can be elucidated with two examples from empirical research on Religious Education:

"The Feminisation of Religious Education"

Not only boys and girls are actively working on their gender roles; even the school-subjects themselves are being gendered, that is, furnished with attributions of feminine and masculine. How much this also applies for RE could be established in a study in which 14-16 year-old students from Hamburg and Northrhine-Westphalia with Christian, Muslim, and unaffiliated backgrounds were interviewed on religion and RE (Jozsa, 2009; Knauth, 2009). It is interesting to see that, besides gender, the religious background quite obviously also has a role for the answers. Religion is quite clearly considered determining for life and very important by Muslim girls. The personal relevance of religion is primarily rejected by unaffiliated boys. Even "talking about religion" in a circle of friends is also rather restricted to girls, primarily to Muslim girls. This has consequences for the image of RE. Widespread among students is the understanding that RE is a matter for girls. This feminisation of the subject emerges as the result of a certain youth culture habitus of coolness. Young people who represent this understanding formulate a tension between youth culture and religion. One's interest in popular music, the other sex, the need of conquering new open spaces does not agree, in the young people's view, with the codes and the habitus of religion with which self-limitation, conformity to rules, and an attitude of moral observance is associated: Religion is well-behaved, conventional, and boring, a little bit too serious and demanding with regard to ethical good conduct – nothing for young people who want to try themselves out. Rather something for young people who – like pious Muslim or Christian girls – are under strict discipline at home and do not want to give offence in school either.

Thus, a demarcation line emerges through the described tension between religion and youth culture which is utilised for processes of mutual attribution and labelling by the groups that are thus constructed. For example, girls with a youth culture orientation comment derogatively on scarf-wearing Muslim girls from the same form. Conversely, these girls must live with being described as "bitches" or "broads." Boys again who manifest themselves as interested
in religion are likewise affected. They are labelled as "effeminate" or as "half boys" because they violate a definition of being a boy that is based on the delimitation of "uncool" things like religion. In some of these cases, we could observe how boys who had been "feminised" this way tried to free themselves from the clutches of these attributions by means of demonstrative masculine enactment. The example illustrates how much religion can be employed as a category in processes of defining masculinity and femininity; in these negotiation processes among young people, it is obviously always a question of what it means to be a real boy and a real girl. In these cases, the dramatisation of gender becomes a powerful resource for constructing group boundaries.

An additional remark: Even more revealing is this result of our ethnographic research if the youth cultural dramatisation processes of gender and religion described here are localised socially. The Sinus milieu study (Calmbach et al., 2011) identified, starting from qualitative data of a representative random sample, seven different life world milieus of young people who differ in characteristic ways with regard to central themes of this stage of life (future, school, profession, social interest, communitarisation, faith, religion, church, etc.). Most of the personalising delimitations of religion expressed in my example, the sexualisations and gender stereotypes are – considered through the lens of the milieu study – an expression of symbolic-cultural confrontations between different life world milieus in which the groups move, mutually defining their boundaries. In our example, it is a matter of a value conflict between young people from the socially lower-class milieu of so-called materialist Hedonists and the middle-class oriented milieu of the so-called adaptive pragmatists. I cannot go into more detail here but just point out the following: In these different milieus, partly very different ideas and concepts of gender roles are operative. Even what it means to be a boy is determined in very different ways. Thus, the lower class precarious milieu, for example, tend towards classical gender stereotypical ideas of masculinity and femininity while these concepts are criticised in the milieu of socio-ecological young people, being dissolved in favour of egalitarian ideas oriented on equality and diversity. And from the milieu oriented consideration emerges also that the differences between different life worlds of young people are bigger than the differences between the sexes within one life-world milieu.

"Enactment of Masculinity in Religious Education"

There are, however, also other forms of enacting hegemonic masculinity which can become a problem in RE class. In the 9th form of a Comprehensive School, in a course with a large performance gap and a religiously heterogeneous composition, we could observe how a rhetorically eloquent, science-oriented boys' group that was extremely critical of religion dominated the course of discussions to a great extent. I quote sections from an observation protocol:

"The topic today: Justice in the religions. Alex, Noah, Sven, Yannick, sometimes Jan, Nora, and Aline are reasoning at a high level. They talk in exclamatory voices – the

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1 The observation protocol originates in an ethnographically oriented investigation of RE which was also carried out in the framework of the REDCo Project at two Hamburg schools (cf., on the conception of the research, Knauth, 2009, p. 319–330).
Others zone out. Martin and Stefan in the last row listen to their walkman, Celina and Chantal write obscene comments to each other on a slip of paper, and Irfan comments on the situation with constant interjections. Thus, for example, he shouts into the class in an undertone: ("Are they not allowed to speak at home? Do they always get a smack in the face when they say something?"). In the beginning of the second lesson, the teacher distributes a text sheet with key quotes from the sacred scriptures of the religions. Noah is the first to react with a long foray. In an ironical tone, the teacher thanks the "Professor" for the little lecture. Quiet comment by Celina into the direction of Chantal: "Little lecture? Rather long lecture." Alex is the next to react: What is just? That must be defined". And he immediately starts off a definition. Chantal groans: "OOh, do shut up." I observe how Celina and Chantal write insulting remarks about the boys on a DinaA4 sheet, i.a.: "A. and Y. have nothing in their pants at all.

Alina, Sebastian, and Friedrich, in the last row, study for their General School exam while Alex, Noah, Yannick, Sven, and Tobias discuss the question how a just God can allow natural disasters to happen.

The teacher takes up the question: Yes, why does God allow this to happen?
Irfan shouts into the class: ... because he is bored.

Mumenah asks: Couldn't we watch a movie about Islam... ?
Alex, once more, replies to the question in detail.
Irfan shouts again: "For six hours I have been listening to you already. Are you not allowed to talk at home or what?"

From the observation protocol it appears: The rhetorical dominance of a boys' group leads to the exclusions of the rest of the study group. This causes different reactions among the fellow students. Predominantly, they show a silent rebellion by retiring into sideline communication or sideline activities which, in some cases, deal with the discussion behaviour of the dominant boys' group. Only one girl and one boy go into open opposition, criticising the discussion behaviour of the boys loudly and audibly.

In interviews with the participating students, it becomes clear that the conflict in this RE class lies in different verbal capabilities and educational perspectives within the study group. But it also becomes obvious here that the rhetorical enactment of the boys' group is part of their very high school self-understanding of masculinity which is strongly defined through an intellectual component. Noah, Alex and the others reveal themselves as students who find joy and pleasure in discussing topics and clarifying problems in a communicative way even outside school. Clarifying irrational phenomena like religion by means of analytical reason is part of the declared intellectual and religion-critical habitus of the boys. Revealing for their self-understanding is a remark by Alex who describes himself, in a longer conversation, as a boy who cannot impress through special physical abilities but through his "verbal extroversion." That the appearance of the boys in its character as an enactment of masculinity is also perceived as that by their fellow students becomes obvious in the sexualising insults through which Celina and Chantal construct a negative connection between rhetoric and sexual potency ("He has nothing in his pants"). Irfan follows a different concept of masculinity. He distances himself from the boys' flood of words while, in his behaviour in class, fluctuating between demonstrative disinterest and episodically participating in the class discussion. He reports in the interview that, through his membership in
the study group, he slacked in his performance, now seeing his General School leaving qualification threatened. Reaching this goal, however, is important to him - "because of the future," as he says. In the interview, he reveals himself as a boy who derives his self-esteem from his passion, boxing, and who – without wanting to make many words – is interested in having a "relaxed life." Revealing for Irfan is his relationship with religion in which he is actually very interested: "Religion is something that shows you the way, but I don't know why/one needn't talk about it – one should believe in it."

The examples presented here can illustrate that gender-related difference becomes a meaningful category if it is considered in connection with further categories and related to concrete contexts of action. In the second example, different forms of masculinity wrestle for acceptance. That enactment of masculinity which is the most compatible with one's role of a student has the most chances of being accepted as "legitimate" in a class setting.

Even the boys' relationship with religion and Religious Education is thus a "situated construct," that is: the way they present themselves in RE class, what they can do with religion, depends on contextual constellations like the composition of study groups, gender-related attribution processes, and didactic arrangements. Especially in heterogeneous contexts of religious learning, religion, ethnicity, and gender become resources for diversely combinable attributions. A (religious) pedagogy which wants to be sensitive to gender-related educational processes cannot avoid asking about the modus of producing gender-related difference. The question is then in which contextual setting, under what pedagogical conditions, in which situational connection it becomes relevant to be a boy? And when is this criterion perhaps completely immaterial for questions of religious learning?

Are Boys less interested in Religion or less religious than Girls?

Quantitative data and qualitative data from larger studies on youth and religion seem, at first, to support this diagnosis. An example: In the framework of a larger European research project in Hamburg and Northrhine-Westphalia among 14–16 year-old young people, data on the role of religion and religious education were collected\(^2\): If gender difference is taken as a variable for analysing questions of the meaning of religion, of religious activities, and of the regularity of religious communication, differences between boys and girls can, in fact, be determined. For example, girls take more part in religious activities like praying. They agree more with the statement that religion helps them to deal with difficulties in a better way. On the whole, girls talk more often about religion with their friends and are also more optimistic than the boys with regard to the assessment that religion contributes to the resolution of conflicts and that religious dialogue helps to understand other people and to coexist with them in a peaceful way. Boys tend more to consider religion nonsense, they are, on the whole, more distanced with regard to religion, be it in talking about religious experiences or with regard to the readiness of having an exchange with friends about religious topics. Even in qualitative analyses, it becomes obvious that the religion-critical element is quite dominantly contributed by them. In brief: The

\(^2\) The quantitative survey was carried out in the framework of the European research project REDCo in Hamburg and NRW under altogether 1933 students, cf. on the total evaluation of the study which was carried out in altogether 8 countries (Pille, Valk, et.al., 2009), cf. on sample, design, and result of the surveys in Germany (Jozsa, Knauth, Weiße, 2009, p. 199–240).
impression emerges as if boys were more critical against religion and, on the whole, more sceptical against the positive effects of communication about religion.

If, however, further criteria like, for example, religious affiliation and background of migration are considered, then it emerges that it has a greater role for the attitude towards religion if someone has a Christian, a Muslim, or an unaffiliated background. Or if someone has a background of migration. The significance of the gender background recedes. The perspectives that had been connoted as allegedly "feminine" by the data material are more strongly represented by young people with a Muslim background and by students with a background of migration than by young people with a Christian background. The Muslim students attribute by far the greatest significance to religion. Students with a background of migration pray more frequently and take part in religious activities more often than students of other groups. And Muslim students have more trust in the positive effects of religious communication for respect and understanding for others than Christian students. Thus, ultimately the data also implies that, with regard to the attitude towards religion, the differences between unaffiliated, Christian, or Muslim boys may be greater than the differences between boys and girls.

The double thesis of feminisation of RE and neglecting the boys' perspectives therefore has to be differentiated. Neither are boys and girls gender homogeneous groups in themselves, nor is the talk about a discrimination of boys in education and to be reduced monocusally to gender. Social, cultural, ethnic, but also religion-related criteria must always be taken into consideration.

A Boys' perspective in a Pedagogy of Diversity
In contrast to ontologising and biologising determination efforts the starting point of the following reflections is the thesis of the social and cultural construction of gender. Thus, gender is – briefly speaking – acquired through social attribution and subjective appropriation in a lifelong process and is also exposed to changes, conversions, sometimes even transformations. Thus, gender is a flexible and, so to speak, a fluid factor, in fact in bodily/physically, in psychical, social, and in sexual respects. At the same time, it is interwoven with age, ethnic orientation, economic status, and physical shape. These categories influence each other mutually. Thus, gender is also an intersectional category (Knauth, Jochimsen 2017), that is, it interacts with other characteristics, and from this interaction, social processes and positions can be understood. Three perspectives can be distinguished.

a) Being a boy is a subjective context of perception and experience

Gender is also a way of existence which you cannot simply escape. Gender-related identity is experienced, which means that individuals confront it and develop a self-image in which gender has a role. Role models (in the form of human beings, toys, and media characters) have an impact on this process of identity development. Frequently, something is chosen that confirms and strengthens one's belonging to one's own group – and rather not what unsettles it. Such development processes may have the tendency to intensify if only those forms of society and interaction are chosen for building up one's gender-related self-concept which correspond to one's own self-image. From this consideration also results the significance of alternative possibilities to experience masculinity. Especially with regard to RE, it is important that boys come to know, by means of the concretely lived example, different possibilities of letting religion have a role in developing their own masculinity.
b) The category of being a boy is, secondly, a "situated construct," a contextual category

This category can be explained by a small example: Cengiz is seven years old and new in the area. The other children in his class have known each other from kindergarten or the neighbourhood. Now, a mother phoned the teacher indignantly. Her already shy and fragile daughter no longer wants to go to school because she and other girls feel constantly pestered, annoyed by Cengiz in class and in the breaks. The teacher has already noticed that, and she intervened already. As a punishment, Cengiz is now to sit alone in class and, in the coming breaks, to have a seat in the green penalty bench in front of the staff room. "It cannot continue like that with the boy," is the unanimous opinion of the mothers of the affected girls. He has become a problem for fearful girls. But at home and when playing in the afternoon – thus the reports show – Cengiz shows a completely different side: together with a female classmate, he built a cave in the room for hours and happily played in the garden.

What it means to be a boy is often also decided in the concrete situation. It emerges or shows in contexts and is then a result of interaction in an interplay of one's own enactments, one's own experience, expression (even physical), and the interpretations of this expression by others. In the research about boys, it is stated in this context that being a boy is a "situated construct." Boys just can – depending on situations and group constellations – present themselves in quite different ways. A boy can, "depending on the situation in which he finds himself, represent different concepts of being a boy. Being a boy is identity in contexts" (Fuhr, 2006, p. 133). And it is certainly also a task of RE to facilitate wiggle room and group constellations for showing and testing these different facets: not always having to be only the cool type, not always being only the one who causes problems for others, but also not always being considered a wimp, etc.

c) Masculinity is – thirdly – a structural category which refers to symbolic orders, cultural role models, power relations, hierarchies, and standardisations

This means that social orders are always also organised through the category of gender. There are forms of masculinity which guarantee greater prestige, more influence, social capital, and also power than other forms and also than certain forms of femininity. This is also like that in school as we are shown by different ethnographic studies. In gendering processes of boys in school, it is, for example, about the prestige of boys in the group of boys and with the girls. Sometimes a boy gets more recognition the more resolutely he differs from attributes or behaviour labelled as "feminine." It may then be the case that certain boys who do not fit into this image "are excluded." Boys who want to belong must take part in the enactment of masculinity. It is astonishing to see how much the boys, in their everyday gendering processes in school, orient themselves on what can be termed a system of hegemonic masculinity according to Raewyn (formerly Robert William) Connell (cf. Connell, 1999, p. 87ff.). This means the forms or, to use a better term, the behaviour patterns of masculinity which are in themselves arranged hierarchically: there is the hegemonic, the confederate, the subordinated, and the marginalised masculinity. In total, these masculine behaviour patterns arrange themselves into a structure which supports a traditional, dichotomous, hierarchical, and heterosexual understanding of the gender relationship. In simple terms: In that which the boys do in school in order to present
themselves as boys, they follow an understanding which considers femininity in opposition to masculinity and depreciates it.

Being a boy therefore must be understood as a category which depends on contexts and situations and relates to other social categories, being able to become effective, as it were, also in asymmetric conflicts and hierarchic social orders. This means that reflecting about what constitutes being a boy is connected with a lack of unambiguousness, that is, with uncertainty and with diversity. And my recommendation for a boy-oriented religious pedagogy would be to endure this uncertainty and to acknowledge this diversity. A religious pedagogical approach is necessary which takes diversity as a starting point for boy-oriented reflection: the diversity of social life situations, the diversity of religious orientations and cultural backgrounds, the diversity of gender-related self-understandings, the diversity of presenting oneself to others and to design oneself as a boy (Knauth 2009, Obenauer 2014).

At first, four theses on this:

1. A boy-oriented religious pedagogy is not a pedagogic special discipline or even a gender-specific special pedagogy. Rather, the orientation towards boys is part of a reflection of the gender reference in RE and, within the range of different other categories of difference (social status, religion/ethnicity, special needs), didactic structures, and tasks of Religious Education, an important dimension. I call for entering the category of gender into a religious pedagogy of diversity.

2. A boy-oriented religious pedagogy consists of a particular hermeneutical perspective on the category of gender and a religious-pedagogic attitude resulting from it. This means: Being a boy is kept in mind as a category for religious learning, always being considered and discussed wherever it is meaningful and necessary in religious pedagogy.

3. In this process, the religious-pedagogic reflection and didactic enactment of gender may refer to life worlds and life situations, learning topics, methods, and material.

4. It would then be a matter of bringing into play the category of gender in Religious Education under the perspectives of experience and perception, context and interaction as well as structure in such a way that Religion can be a resource and a field of friction in the confrontation with developmental challenges of one’s own gender-related identity. Boys should feel accepted and taken seriously in their diverse ways of understanding themselves as boys. It is an important task to promote the capability to deal in an accepting and appreciating way with other gender-related self-designs of boys and girls. It should, conversely, also be discussed, where the recognition of different gender-related self-designs is threatened or altogether denied. Religion can be explored on its different levels (doctrine, tradition, ritual, ethics, experience) as a "resource" for the necessary work on viable masculine self-designs and role models. This should also imply an idea of the diversity of gender roles in other religious traditions. Thus, gender ought to be understood in its social and cultural conditionality, formability, and changeability.

Finally, I would like to outline, rather sketchily and in the mode of half a reification, the practical dimension of this drafted approach of mine.
In their pedagogy of boyhood the German pedagogues Gunter Neugebauer and Rainer Winter (2002) mentioned various dimensions which present themselves as a developmental task on the boys’ way to "being a man in a balanced way." I consider these dimensions very suitable in order to enter religious pedagogical perspectives relating to being a boy in the perspective of the context of perception and experience. I must limit myself to brief hints:

a) Dimension: Body

Here, it is a matter of the corporeality of religious learning in a tension field of activity – the experience of strength, power, also aggressiveness and passivity – the physical experience of rest or the experience that something is being done with my body. Fascinating examples for both poles of this tension field can be found in the pedagogic work with socially disadvantaged boys. In a so-called male training with boys ready to use violence, an exercise of beating with sticks is practised (two partners face each other in front of a jacked soft soil mat, armed with large truncheons, taking turns hitting the mat with a high intensity; www.mannepotsdam.de). Strength, aggressiveness, perhaps even the intoxication with it, are felt, channelled and, at the same time, made accessible for reflection and conversation.

From his religious pedagogic work at a secondary school, the RE-teacher Martin Autschbach (2002, p. 68 – 83) reports on a project on stories about touching or being touched from the New Testament. From a perspective of physical contact and tender touch, many narratives from the synoptic Gospels can be explored in a new way. It is fascinating how the teacher finally ultimately succeeds, by gently approaching the narrative as well as the contact fears of the boys, to carry out a foot washing with the boys.

b) Dimension: Biography and Identity

In the dimension of biography, it is about reflecting on gender-related aspects of one's own identity: How did my childhood as a boy go? What determined me? What carried me? Through what crises and transitions did I have to go? What role did men have for my self-understanding as a boy, what discontinuations happened? Which new beginnings? Who do I want to be as a man later on? What kind of a father do I want to be? What role do God, faith, religion have?

This biographical reflection can (and perhaps even should) be done in the mirror of examples – this may be Biblical narratives – for example, I consider the story of Joseph as superbly suitable (also because it has, f. ex., a counterpart in the Qur'an); but there may also be examples relevant to present times. Excellently suitable is, in my opinion, the movie Boyhood by the US-American movie-maker Richard Linklater, produced in 2014. It is a fictional longterm study about the childhood of a boy in the South of the USA called Mason, filmed over a period of 12 years. In the course of the shooting time, the actor who represents Mason grows to 19 years old. The movie is suitable for a boy-oriented perspective. In the form of a fictional documentary it deals with several important topics such as father-son relationships, life as a child with a single mother and patchwork family. The film also discusses surrogate fathers, it touches upon masculinity concepts like enactments of traditional masculinity, and shy attempts at developing alternative forms to live as a man. The story also presents chapters about first love in a quite discrete way. It tells about the search for identity, the mastery of radical changes, and about the significance of the quest for the sense of life or – as Mason puts it in a question to his father in a conversation:
So Dad, what is it about? This film, I find, contains a treasure trove of topics for an experience-related educational work with boys.

**c) Work with Transitions**

Being a boy also happens in the confrontation with stages in life. Designing transitions e. g. from childhood to youth can be helpful. With Confirmation and First Communion, the Christian tradition has a great transition ritual at its disposal – but the question is, how can it also be utilised for the turning point of one's farewell to childhood and the insecurities with regard to the upcoming new which is relevant for boys, and how can good forms be found for Confirmation to be understood as a blessing ritual for life's journey? In the mostly unaffiliated context of Brandenburg, the educational association MANNE e.V. offers a pedagogical transition ritual for boys, the so-called "Phoenix Time" (the Phoenix as a mythical bird that dies and reemerges from the ashes) in which, over a period of half a year, boys regularly spend time with their chosen male godfathers, working in topics connected with their own growing up. The Phoenix Time ends in a camp lasting several days in which the boys finally, all by themselves – without their godfathers – spend one night in the forest after having undergone a farewell ritual. After that night, the boys' parents arrange a festival to celebrate their farewell from childhood. I find the concept of Phoenix Time very stimulating and can imagine quite well, as a father, to participate in some similar program with one of my daughters. As a Protestant religious educator, I wonder how far even the interpretation pool of the Biblical tradition can be utilised for such consciously designed transitions. In the narrative of Jacob's wrestling at the Jabbok, for example, there is a great transition story as a man's story in which, by way of example, even alternative forms of being a man can be discovered in Biblical texts. With which shadow do boys have to wrestle, how can God accompany and strengthen us in this?; how can male godfathers and fathers accompany and strengthen? That could be the basic theme of a *Jacob Time on the Jabbok*.

I conclude the range of examples alongside important dimensions of boyhood by mentioning a (research) project in which boys diagnosed with special educational needs in the fields of social and emotional development confront their fears, their experiences with and fantasies of violence, their rage, and their sometimes also desperate hope with the medium of Psalms (Lamentation and the so-called Imprecatory Psalms). As in Ingo Baldermann by whose approach the project is inspired, the boys finally write texts of their own. One of these texts which has been published in an article by Barbara Strumann (2014, p. 247-261) is as follows:

Hey, you old God!
I don't like you any more!
I feel like a broken shard. When they annoy me,
then I am like a broken shard and you don't do
anything at all. I hate you!
You do nothing at all.
Why not? I hat you!
Please make that I am no longer
so fragile. Please
make that you do more.
Please do that, God.
This is my request to you.

Résumé
Gender is without doubt a central axis of difference for a pedagogy of diversity because gender-related categories play an important role in society as well as for the self-understanding of individuals. In this article, I tried to show that it is however necessary to avoid the traps of essentialising and stereotyping and conceptualise the categories in a context-related way. In doing so the decisive discovery can be made that to be a boy is a diverse category in itself – related to the diversity of life-worlds, social classes, cultural and religious backgrounds. The diversity of contexts and experiences calls for a differentiated hermeneutical perspective on boys. To include gender in the pedagogical discourse of diversity means to assume and cultivate this hermeneutical perspective. It starts from the fact that gender-related aspects are crucial in the development of boys and girls and tries to find helpful resources – also in religion and religious traditions – to support this development. A boy-related hermeneutical perspective is aware of the differences between sexes and within sexes. It is sensitive to social processes of inclusion and exclusion (cf. Knauth & Jochimsen, 2017) within groups. It disturbs and discovers disadvantaging structures and effects by supporting the outsiders. And it turns its discernment to the gendering-process of the individual. It is empathically interested in the ways boys conceptualise their identities by dealing with traditional and hegemonic concepts of masculinity – trying to find liveable ways to become a man. A boy-oriented hermeneutical perspective is different to deficit-oriented approaches of looking at boys. It follows a hermeneutic of recognition. It is indispensable to discern and acknowledge gender-related identities, self-understandings and their performances in their diversity. This is part of the commitment of such a boy-oriented perspective. Even though it feels especially obliged to strengthen and support marginalised masculinities, each boy should have the freedom to self-determine the realm of his willingness to critically assess his own role-model. In the face of the diversity of social, cultural and religious settings which influence gender-related self-understandings pedagogical work can contribute to dialogue between young people from different cultural and religious contexts. It should also contribute to rising awareness about the social and cultural diversity of socially constructed sexes.

References


