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Ela Luria*

General Subject Didactics and Comparative Didactics. Implications for Religious Education

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Abstract: This article examines the relationship between General Subject Didactics (GSD) and Comparative Didactics (CD) and explores their implications for Religious Education (RE). Drawing on recent theoretical and empirical developments, the article argues that while GSD functions primarily on the second and third levels of didactic reflection, providing meta-theoretical orientation across disciplines, CD is grounded in first- and second-level analyses of classroom practice and subject-specific theory building. By juxtaposing the two approaches, we highlight their complementary roles: GSD offers frameworks for cross-disciplinary generalization and legitimization of subject didactics, whereas CD provides fine-grained empirical insights into teaching and learning processes across contexts. Together, they enrich the field of RE by combining theoretical reflection with practical classroom analysis, thereby fostering a more comprehensive understanding of how religious knowledge is transmitted, transformed, and learned.

Zusammenfassung: Dieser Artikel untersucht das Verhältnis zwischen Allgemeiner Fachdidaktik sowie *Comparative Didactics* und analysiert deren Implikationen für den Religionsunterricht. Auf der Grundlage aktueller theoretischer und empirischer Entwicklungen wird argumentiert, dass die Allgemeine Fachdidaktik vor allem auf der zweiten und dritten Ebene didaktischer Reflexion operiert und eine metatheoretische Orientierung über verschiedene Fächer hinweg bietet. *Comparative Didactics* hingegen ist stärker in Analysen der ersten und zweiten Ebene verankert, indem sie sich auf die Untersuchung von Unterrichtspraxis sowie auf den Aufbau fachspezifischer Theorien konzentriert. Durch die Gegenüberstellung beider Ansätze wird ihre komplementäre Funktion sichtbar: Während die Allgemeine Fachdidaktik Rahmenkonzepte für fachübergreifende Verallgemeinerungen sowie für die wissenschaftliche Legitimation der Fachdidaktiken bereitstellt, liefert *Comparative Didactics* differenzierte empirische Einsichten in Lehr- und Lernprozesse in unterschiedlichen Kontexten. Zusammen tragen beide Perspektiven dazu bei, das Feld des Religionsunterrichts zu bereichern, indem sie theoretische Refle-

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xion mit der Analyse konkreter Unterrichtspraxis verbinden und so ein umfassenderes Verständnis davon ermöglichen, wie religiöses Wissen vermittelt, transformiert und gelernt wird.

Keywords: comparative didactics, general subject didactics, religious education, didactic reflection, classroom practice, meta-theoretical analysis

Schlagworte: Comparative Didactics, Allgemeine Fachdidaktik, Religionsunterricht, didaktische Reflexion, Unterrichtspraxis, metatheoretische Analyse

1. Introduction

Didactics has long been a contested and plural concept that varies across cultural and linguistic traditions (Gundem and Hopmann 1998; Hudson and Schneuwly 2007). In German-speaking contexts, Fachdidaktik (subject didactics) developed into a family of disciplines investigating subject-specific teaching and learning, whereas French traditions of didactiques disciplinaires emphasize the role of knowledge content in classroom interaction. More recently, efforts have sought to address the fragmentation of didactic research, among them General Subject Didactics (GSD) and Comparative Didactics (CD) as two prominent frameworks.

Both General Subject Didactics (GSD) and Comparative Didactics (CD) aim to move beyond single-subject research, but they do so from different epistemological perspectives and analytical foci. GSD provides a meta-theoretical framework that synthesizes and legitimizes subject didactics, whereas CD focuses on empirical classroom analysis across subjects and contexts. This distinction can be understood through the three-level model of didactic reflection (Luhmann 1992; Rothgangel 2017b, 2021): GSD primarily operates on levels 2 (subject-didactic theory) and 3 (meta-theory), while CD focuses mainly on levels 1 (classroom practice) and 2 (subject-specific theorization). Despite their growing prominence, the relationship between the two approaches remains insufficiently clarified, which risks obscuring their respective contributions, particularly in fields such as Religious Education where questions of legitimacy, content, and classroom practice intersect. This article therefore examines their relationship through a theoretically guided comparative perspective.

The aim of this article is to distinguish and relate General Subject Didactics and Comparative Didactics by examining the levels of didactic reflection on which they primarily operate, their epistemic functions, and the types of knowledge they generate. The analysis is guided by the following questions: On which levels of didactic reflection do the two approaches operate? How do their theoretical orientations

and methodological commitments differ? And how can their complementarity contribute to the advancement of Religious Education theory and practice? By addressing these questions, the article contributes to current debates on overarching subject-didactical approaches while remaining attentive to subject-specific knowledge domains.

The article proceeds in four steps. First, it introduces GSD, outlining its origins, functions, and empirical foundations. Second, it presents the development of CD, highlighting its theoretical frameworks and methodological orientations. Third, it compares the two approaches using the lens of levels of reflection. Finally, it discusses their implications for Religious Education, showing how the complementarities between GSD and CD can advance both theory and practice in diverse educational contexts.

2. Methodological Approach and Analytical Lens

This article adopts a theoretically guided, conceptual perspective. Rather than generating new empirical data or conducting a systematic comparison of literature, it aims to clarify the relationship between General Subject Didactics and Comparative Didactics by explicating their respective epistemic orientations, levels of didactic reflection, and research functions as they are articulated in contemporary didactic discourse (Bayrhuber et al. 2017; Rothgangel 2021; Ligozat, Amade-Escot and Östman 2015). The article is thus argumentative and synthetic in nature, seeking to enhance conceptual clarity rather than to establish empirical findings.

The analytical lens employed throughout the article is derived from Niklas Luhmann's three-level model of observation (Luhmann 1992), as adapted for didactic research in subject-didactic and comparative contexts (Rothgangel 2017b; 2021; Brezinka 1978). The first level refers to classroom practice and the concrete processes of teaching and learning. The second level concerns subject-didactic theorization, that is, the development of discipline-specific theories of teaching and learning. The third level involves meta-theoretical reflection on subject didactics as scientific disciplines. These levels are not understood as rigid categories but as heuristic perspectives that support a structured examination of how different didactic approaches relate theory, practice, and reflection.

The delimitation of General Subject Didactics and Comparative Didactics presents an analytical challenge, as both address cross-subject perspectives and forms of theoretical generalization (Vollmer and Rothgangel 2024; Sensevy and Ligozat 2017). In this article, General Subject Didactics is considered primarily in terms of its meta-theoretical orientation toward subject didactics as academic disciplines and

its effort to articulate overarching conceptual frameworks (Rothgangel 2017a; 2021; Abraham and Rothgangel 2017). Comparative Didactics, by contrast, is discussed in relation to its grounding in classroom practice and its focus on reconstructing teaching and learning processes through comparison across subjects and contexts (Chevallard 1985/1991; Colomb 1999; Sensevy 2011; Ligozat and Buyck 2024). This distinction does not imply rigid boundaries but serves as a conceptual clarification of their respective contributions and complementarities.

3. General Subject Didactics

General Subject Didactics (GSD) is a relatively young yet increasingly influential approach within educational research. Emerging primarily in German-speaking contexts over the past decade and a half, it provides a meta-perspective on the diverse field of subject-specific didactics. While individual subject didactics (e. g., mathematics, biology, or religious didactics) focus on subject-specific processes of teaching and learning, GSD compares these fields to identify commonalities, differences, and overarching principles (Vollmer and Rothgangel 2024; Bayrhuber et al. 2017). In doing so, it positions itself as a theory of subject didactics that situates individual disciplines within a broader educational and philosophical discourse (Rothgangel 2021b).

3.1 Origins and Development

The development of GSD is closely linked to the *Gesellschaft für Fachdidaktik* (GFD), the German Association for Subject Didactics. By the early 2000s, subject didactics had become increasingly established as academic disciplines, partly in response to the “PISA shock” and the growing emphasis on evidence-based educational research. However, their empirical and theoretical development was not fully recognized by General Didactics, which traditionally claimed authority in theorizing teaching and learning more broadly (Rothgangel 2017a). This discrepancy led to the creation of a GFD working group on “General Subject Didactics” in 2009 to examine commonalities, differences, and the collective contribution of subject didactics to educational theory.

Early comparative projects involved five subject didactics, but the scope soon broadened. A major empirical initiative engaged 17 subject-didactic disciplines, each of which produced structured self-reports on their history, goals, research perspectives, and cross-disciplinary connections. These reports, analyzed through

grounded theory methods, revealed both convergences and divergences across fields (Rothgangel et al. 2020; Vollmer and Rothgangel 2024). This empirical basis provided the foundation for theorizing GSD as a framework capable of integrating subject-specific insights while also enabling cross-subject generalization.

3.2 Theoretical Foundations

At its core, GSD differs from General Didactics (Allgemeine Didaktik). While General Didactics traditionally claims to offer universal insights into teaching and learning, it has often been criticized for neglecting the specificities of individual subjects. By contrast, GSD begins from the diversity of subject didactics and develops generalizations inductively through comparative observation and theoretical synthesis. In this sense, its “general” is not a lowest common denominator but the result of systematic reflection on similarities and differences (Klafki 1994; Rothgangel 2017a).

A useful way to conceptualize GSD is through the three-level model of observation developed by Niklas Luhmann (1992) and later adapted by Rothgangel (2017b; 2021; see also Brezinka 1978). The first level concerns everyday practices of teaching and learning within specific subjects. The second level corresponds to subject didactics as academic disciplines that produce theories of subject-specific teaching and learning. The third level involves meta-theoretical reflection, where GSD observes and compares how subject didactics operate, functioning as a theory of theories. Thus, GSD primarily operates on the second and third levels, providing a framework for orienting subject didactics and situating them within a broader philosophy of education.

3.3 Methodological Orientation and Functions

Several functions can be identified for GSD. First, it provides orientation: individual subject didactics can better understand their own epistemological position by situating themselves in relation to other disciplines. Second, it offers legitimation: by emphasizing the common scientific foundations of subject didactics, GSD strengthens their status as academic fields in their own right, distinct from but related to both the educational sciences and the subject-matter sciences. Third, GSD fosters transdisciplinary dialogue, enabling subject didactics to learn from one another's methods, theoretical orientations, and curricular approaches. Finally, GSD contributes to the philosophy of education by highlighting how subject-specific teaching and learning relate to broader societal and cultural questions (Abraham and Rothgangel 2017; Rothgangel et al. 2021; Vollmer and Rothgangel 2024).

3.4 Empirical Insights

Empirical studies within GSD have generated several important insights. For instance, the comparative analysis of 17 subject didactics revealed that their reference sciences are more diverse than previously assumed. Beyond the traditional dual orientation to the academic subject and the educational sciences, subject didactics also draw on empirical educational research and, increasingly, on other subject didactics (Rothgangel et al. 2021b). This finding underscores the dynamic and networked character of the field.

Another significant development stems from international Delphi studies on subject-didactic research (Riegel and Rothgangel 2022; Rothgangel and Riegel 2021). These studies confirmed broad agreement on three constitutive dimensions of subject-didactic research: (i) subject areas (e. g., teaching, learning, content, teachers, learners, places of subject learning, theories of subject didactics), (ii) disciplines of reference (academic disciplines, educational sciences, psychology, sociology, cultural studies, philosophy, other subject didactics), and (iii) methodologies (historic, qualitative, quantitative, hermeneutical/philosophical). Together, these three dimensions define a “generic model” of subject-didactic research, conceptualized as a three-dimensional space. Although scholars remain divided on the existence of distinctive research designs, they broadly affirm this meta-theoretical framework as an accurate representation of the field (Riegel and Rothgangel 2022b; Rothgangel 2021).

Findings from the international Delphi study show that the model is positively evaluated overall, with especially strong support for the dimensions of disciplines and subject areas. These insights not only validate the GSD framework but also underscore its relevance in international contexts.

3.5 Towards an International Perspective

Although GSD originated in Germany, its scope is not nationally confined. Comparative discussions show that while German “Didaktik” emphasizes *Bildung* and the transformation of content into pedagogical form, Anglo-American “Curriculum Studies” tends to focus on the processes of content transmission, and Japanese “Subject Pedagogy” offers yet another variant (Hudson 2024; Kishi and Yamamoto 2024). Against this backdrop, GSD can be seen as an attempt to articulate a framework with both national specificity and international relevance. The growing number of international networks, such as KOSS (The network *Knowledge and Quality across School Subjects and Teacher Education*), further suggests that GSD may serve as a valuable reference point for global debates on subject-specific

teaching and learning (Vollmer and Rothgangel 2024b; Krogh, Qvartrup and Graf 2021; Ligozat, Klette and Almquist 2023).

In sum, General Subject Didactics represents a promising development within educational research. By systematically reflecting on the theory and practice of subject didactics, it provides orientation and legitimation for these disciplines and contributes to broader educational discourse. Its focus on the second and third levels of observation situates it as a meta-theoretical framework, complementing rather than replacing the work of individual subject didactics.

The strong orientation of General Subject Didactics toward abstraction and meta-theoretical synthesis represents both a central strength and a potential tension. By focusing on overarching structures, epistemic commonalities, and disciplinary positioning, it operates at a level of generalization that may distance it from subject-specific content and classroom practice. This abstraction, however, is not a deficit but an epistemic choice that enables cross-disciplinary dialogue, theoretical integration, and the legitimation of subject didactics as scientific disciplines. At the same time, it highlights the need for complementary approaches that remain closely connected to the analysis of concrete teaching and learning processes.

4. Comparative Didactics

Comparative Didactics (CD) has emerged in recent decades as a distinct research field within educational sciences, complementing and expanding the work of subject didactics. While subject didactics traditionally focus on the triadic relationship between teacher, student, and knowledge content within a single discipline, CD extends this scope by juxtaposing and analysing practices across different subjects, institutions, and cultural contexts (Ligozat, Amade-Escot and Östman 2015; Ågerup 2024). Its central aim is to identify both the specific and the generic features of teaching and learning, thereby contributing to a broader understanding of didactic phenomena that transcends disciplinary boundaries.

4.1 Origins and Development

CD developed particularly in French-speaking countries during the early 2000s, rooted in the notion of *didactiques disciplinaires* that foreground the irreducible role of knowledge content in classroom practice (Caillot 2007; Schneuwly 2011). This tradition led to the founding of the Association pour les Recherches Comparatistes en Didactique (ARCD) in 2006 and the launch of the journal *Éducation &*

Didactique in 2007 (Amade-Escot 2013). In parallel, Scandinavian countries pursued related research under the label *allmän didaktik* (general didactics), which aimed to connect empirical studies of classroom practice with broader theories of curriculum and pedagogy (Östman 2002; Wickman 2012). Together, these traditions consolidated CD as a scholarly field in its own right.

The relationship between Comparative Didactics and Scandinavian traditions of *allmän didaktik* requires further differentiation, particularly in light of longstanding tensions between general didactics and subject didactics (Hudson and Schneuwly 2007). While *allmän didaktik* has often aimed to theorize teaching and learning across subjects (Östman 2002; Wickman 2012), Comparative Didactics maintains a strong commitment to subject-specific knowledge and classroom practices. Rather than dissolving subject boundaries, Comparative Didactics uses comparison as a methodological strategy to illuminate how different subjects organize knowledge, interaction, and learning. In this sense, Comparative Didactics does not replace subject didactics with a general theory of teaching but reconstructs didactic phenomena through systematic comparison grounded in subject-specific practices. Early foundational contributions emphasized the need for comparisons across disciplines and contexts in order to avoid the fragmentation of subject didactics. As Mercier, Schubauer-Leoni and Sensevy (2002) argued, the value of comparison lies in highlighting the continuities and discontinuities between different teaching practices, curricular traditions, and epistemologies of school subjects.

4.2 Theoretical Foundations

At the heart of CD lies the didactic system, the triadic relationship between teacher, students, and knowledge (Chevallard 1985/1991; Colomb 1999). This system is shaped by the process of didactic transposition, through which academic or expert knowledge is transformed into school knowledge, and subsequently into classroom knowledge adapted to learners (Chevallard and Bosch 2014). Comparative studies illuminate how this process varies across disciplines: for example, mathematics didactics often builds directly on academic scientific knowledge, while language or physical education draw more heavily on social practices and reference knowledge (Colomb 1999).

Building on these foundations, CD has employed and further developed key conceptual tools such as the didactic contract (implicit rules guiding teacher–student interactions) and the milieu (the symbolic and material environment of classroom learning). More recently, the Joint Action in Didactics (JAD) framework has become particularly influential (Sensevy 2011; Schubauer-Leoni and Leutenegger 2002). JAD conceptualizes teaching as a joint action in which teachers and

students co-construct knowledge, analysed through three interrelated “geneses”: *mesogenesis* (emergence of content as objects of meaning), *topogenesis* (distribution of responsibilities between teacher and students), and *chronogenesis* (temporal development of knowledge) (Ligozat and Buyck 2024). These analytical categories provide a grammar for describing and comparing classroom practices across different subjects and contexts.

When Comparative Didactics is described as contributing to the theorization of teaching and learning, this does not refer to abstract normative models detached from practice. Instead, theorization is understood as an inductive and reconstructive process emerging from fine-grained analyses of classroom interaction (Sensevy 2011; Schubauer-Leoni and Leutenegger 2002). Frameworks such as Joint Action in Didactics conceptualize teaching as a coordinated activity in which teachers and students jointly construct knowledge over time. In this sense, theory emerges from practice and remains closely tied to empirical observation while enabling comparison across subjects and contexts (Ligozat and Buyck 2024).

4.3 Methodological Orientation and Functions

Methodologically, CD is characterized by empirical classroom research. Researchers rely on video recordings, discourse analysis, multimodal analysis, and fine-grained coding of teacher–student interactions to study how content-specific and generic dimensions of teaching unfold in practice (Ligozat and Buyck 2024; Wickman and Ligozat 2011). Such methods allow scholars to trace both cognitive and normative dimensions of classroom meaning-making, capturing how teaching practices simultaneously transmit content and shape identities (Östman and Almqvist 2010).

Central to comparative methodology is the search for a *tertium comparationis*—a common analytical lens that enables the comparison of otherwise disparate practices (Detienne 2008). For instance, comparisons have been drawn between the teaching of physics and contemporary dance (Ligozat and Buyck 2024), or between science and art classrooms (Jakobson and Wickman 2015). In these cases, the *tertium comparationis* is not imposed externally but derived from theoretical categories such as the JAD framework, which balance subject-specific and generic dimensions.

4.4 Empirical Insights

Empirical research in Comparative Didactics (CD) provides a nuanced understanding of how teaching and learning unfold across subjects, school levels, and cultural

contexts. It extends beyond the boundaries of single-subject didactics by integrating epistemological, institutional, and socio-political dimensions of education (Ågerup 2024). In contrast to comparative education, which typically examines educational systems and reforms, CD focuses on the micro- and meso-levels of classroom practice and curriculum implementation. Nevertheless, CD also acknowledges the influence of wider societal factors such as educational policies, language of instruction, and postcolonial legacies (Deutschmann et al. 2024).

Another hallmark of CD is its attention to teacher and student agency. By analysing how classroom interactions shape opportunities for participation and meaning-making, CD addresses not only the transmission of knowledge but also its ethical, cultural, and social implications (Hudson and Meyer 2011; Sensevy and Ligozat 2017). This makes CD particularly relevant for contemporary challenges such as sustainability education, citizenship education, and global justice (Tretheway 2014; Van Poeck et al. 2019).

4.5 Towards an International Perspective

The internationalization of Comparative Didactics has also broadened its epistemological scope. Beyond its European roots, scholars in Latin America, Asia, and Africa are increasingly engaging with the field, adapting its frameworks to local contexts and educational priorities. This expansion demonstrates that Comparative Didactics is not a closed theoretical model but a dynamic, dialogical process that evolves through intercultural exchange. Recent collaborations, such as the special issues edited by Ligozat, Amade-Escot, and Östman (2015), illustrate how Comparative Didactics now serves as a transnational platform connecting diverse didactic traditions—French *didactiques disciplinaires*, German *Fachdidaktik*, and Scandinavian *allmän didaktik*. Such exchanges enrich the theoretical and methodological repertoire of the field, encouraging mutual learning and fostering a shared understanding of teaching and learning as culturally embedded yet globally comparable phenomena.

In recent years, this internationalization has accelerated through global research networks and comparative symposiums, such as those highlighted in Ågerup's (2024) *European Educational Research Journal* special issue. That issue brought together scholars to accelerate the development and internationalization of comparative didactics, that is, to examine how Comparative Didactics can support cross-disciplinary methodological transfer, enhance theory building across cultural boundaries, and inform teacher education worldwide. The featured studies from classroom research in Switzerland and France to language-in-education policy analyses in Sub-Saharan Africa demonstrate that Comparative Didactics now oper-

ates as a genuinely global enterprise, capable of addressing both universal and context-specific dimensions of teaching and learning. By foregrounding transcultural perspectives, such initiatives underscore the relevance of Comparative Didactics for global citizenship, linguistic diversity, and educational justice (Ågerup 2024)

5. Religious Education

Religious Education offers a particularly revealing context for examining how General Subject Didactics (GSD) and Comparative Didactics (CD) complement one another precisely because they are analytically distinct. This distinction becomes especially visible when Religious Education is considered in relation to neighbouring subjects such as ethics or citizenship education. Comparative Didactics enables a fine-grained analysis of how religious knowledge, moral reasoning, and worldview-related questions are enacted in classroom interaction, for instance through differing didactic contracts, patterns of participation, and temporal structures of knowledge development. Such analyses make visible how belief-related content is negotiated, stabilized, or contested in practice. General Subject Didactics, by contrast, provides a framework for situating Religious Didactics within the broader landscape of subject-didactic disciplines, clarifying its reference sciences, epistemic claims, and disciplinary positioning. Taken together, these perspectives illuminate both the concrete dynamics of Religious Education classrooms and the theoretical status of Religious Didactics as a scientific field. Drawing on Luhmann's three-level reflection model, the relationship between empirical observation, theoretical systematization, and meta-theoretical reflection becomes particularly clear in the field of Religious Didactics.

At the first level, CD contributes through its focus on classroom realities, highlighting the complexity of teaching and learning processes in diverse and pluralistic settings. Comparative approaches, such as those discussed by Riegel and Rothgangel (2022a, 2022b), emphasize the need to understand how religious content, values, and worldviews are negotiated within varying cultural and educational frameworks. By situating Religious Education alongside other school subjects—such as ethics, history, or citizenship education CD allows for a better understanding of how meaning, belief, and knowledge are constructed and communicated across different learning contexts.

At the second level, GSD plays a central role in connecting these empirical insights to broader theoretical structures. It provides a framework for positioning Religious Didactics within the wider family of subject-didactic disciplines (Vollmer and Rothgangel 2024). Here, the reference to multiple scientific foundations edu-

cational science, theology, sociology, and psychology reflects the interdisciplinary character of the field. Comparative Didactics adds a valuable dimension by illustrating how the same didactic questions are addressed differently across subjects and cultures, thereby enriching Religious Didactics both conceptually and methodologically.

Finally, at the third level, GSD contributes to meta-theoretical reflection by examining how Religious Didactics functions as part of the scientific system. This level focuses on the relationship between educational research, disciplinary knowledge, and broader societal transformations such as secularization, pluralization, and globalization (Vollmer and Rothgangel 2024).

Taken together, GSD and CD offer complementary lenses for understanding and advancing Religious Education. While CD sharpens the empirical and comparative understanding of teaching and learning processes, GSD provides the theoretical and meta-theoretical coherence that connects these insights to the larger educational and scientific discourse. Through this interaction, Religious Didactics gains a stronger conceptual foundation and an expanded capacity to address the challenges of teaching religion in increasingly diverse educational environments.

6. Critical Reflections on Overarching Subject-Didactical Approaches

The development of overarching subject-didactical approaches such as General Subject Didactics and Comparative Didactics raises normative and epistemological questions that merit explicit reflection. The move toward cross-subject frameworks is often motivated by the desire to foster dialogue, enhance theoretical coherence, and strengthen the academic legitimacy of subject didactics. At the same time, this development entails a shift in focus toward more abstract and process-oriented dimensions of teaching and learning.

From the perspective of General Didactics, the notion of the “general” has traditionally been associated less with epistemic comparison across subjects and more with normative questions of *Bildung* and the aims of education, as exemplified by Klafki’s theory of categorical *Bildung* (Klafki 1994). In this sense, the “general” in General Subject Didactics differs fundamentally from the “general” in classical *Allgemeine Didaktik*, which has historically foregrounded normative orientation, educational goals, and shared societal concerns (Hopmann 1997; Gundem and Hopmann 1998). While General Subject Didactics seeks to identify structural commonalities and epistemic patterns across subject didactics (Rothgangel 2017a; Vollmer and Rothgangel 2024), General Didactics emphasizes questions of educa-

tional responsibility, orientation, and meaning. These perspectives do not contradict one another, but rather foreground different dimensions of educational theory. Recognizing this distinction helps to clarify that overarching subject-didactical approaches do not replace normative educational reflection, but instead operate alongside it, addressing complementary questions at different levels of analysis.

7. Conclusion

When placed side by side, General Subject Didactics (GSD) and Comparative Didactics (CD) reveal themselves as two approaches with different orientations but also strong complementarities. Both emerged in response to the need to move beyond the fragmentation of individual subject didactics, yet they pursue this aim through distinct epistemological positions, research functions, and methodological choices.

GSD is primarily concerned with the architecture of subject didactics as academic disciplines. It takes a meta-theoretical perspective, asking what different subject didactics have in common, how they differ, and how they can be positioned within the broader framework of educational science (Rothgangel 2017a; Rothgangel 2021; Vollmer and Rothgangel 2024). Its functions are conceptual and integrative: to offer orientation, strengthen legitimacy, and foster dialogue across disciplinary boundaries (Abraham and Rothgangel 2017). CD, by contrast, directs its attention toward the concrete processes of teaching and learning. It seeks to understand how knowledge is constructed in practice, focusing on classroom interactions across different subjects, levels, and cultural contexts (Ligozat, Amade-Escot and Östman 2015; Ågerup 2024). Its orientation is thus more empirical and analytical, aimed at generating fine-grained comparative insights into the dynamics of knowledge construction.

These differences are reflected in their methodological repertoires. GSD tends to rely on cross-disciplinary surveys, structured self-reports, and Delphi studies that allow it to map the field of subject didactics and to formulate generic models (Riegel and Rothgangel 2022a; Rothgangel and Riegel 2021). CD, in contrast, grounds its work in classroom-based research, making use of video recordings, discourse analysis, and multimodal studies of teacher–student interaction (Wickman and Ligozat 2011). Frameworks such as the Joint Action in Didactics (JAD) provide tools for capturing how teachers and students co-construct meaning in real time (Sensevy 2011; Ligozat and Buyck 2024). In short, while GSD produces broad conceptual maps of the field, CD generates detailed portraits of classroom activity.

The distinction can also be described in terms of the levels of reflection each approach occupies. Using the three-level model (Luhmann 1992; Rothgangel 2021), GSD clearly operates on the second and third levels. It reflects on subject didactics

as scientific disciplines and engages in meta-theoretical synthesis across them. CD, on the other hand, works primarily at the first and second levels. It studies classroom practices directly and builds subject-didactic theories on that basis (Colomb 1999; Chevallard and Bosch 2014). One might therefore say that GSD offers a “view from above,” analysing the overall structure of subject-didactic research, while CD offers a “view from within,” investigating the lived reality of teaching and learning. Importantly, these perspectives are not mutually exclusive. GSD relies on the empirical insights generated by CD to ground its generalizations, while CD can benefit from the frameworks and orientation provided by GSD to situate its findings in a broader academic and theoretical context.

The scope of the two approaches further illustrates their complementarity. GSD addresses questions of disciplinary identity, international positioning, and philosophical orientation. It engages with debates across German Didaktik, Anglo-American curriculum studies, and Japanese subject pedagogy (Hudson 2024; Kishi and Yamamoto 2024). CD, on the other hand, is more contextual. It investigates classrooms not only in European traditions but also in postcolonial contexts, where issues such as the language of instruction fundamentally shape teaching and learning (Deutschmann et al. 2024). While GSD provides a conceptual map of the field, CD reveals how this map is translated and transformed in practice across diverse educational landscapes.

In conclusion, comparing GSD and CD demonstrates that they are not competing paradigms but rather complementary approaches. GSD brings the bird’s-eye view, offering integration and orientation, while CD provides the close-up lens, offering detailed analysis of practice. Their combination not only advances the field of subject didactics as a whole but also holds particular promise for Religious Education, where questions of legitimacy, orientation, and practice intersect in especially complex ways.

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