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12. RELIGIOUS EDUCATION IN FINNISH SCHOOL SYSTEM

ABSTRACT

The Finnish solution for RE in public education is a unique model if we compare it to the solutions used in other European countries. In Finland RE is given according to the pupils' own religions. The Finnish model of RE implies the idea of democratic, civil society, where different faiths, beliefs and worldviews can co-exist. The curriculum of RE in Finland emphasises religious literacy and religious competence. Furthermore, elements of cultural heritage and identity are also present in the curriculum. The pupils need skills for inter-religious dialogue and also skills for living in a multi-religious society. The Finnish approach to RE emphasises tolerance towards others. The subject teachers of RE have very good education; they have a master's degree from a university and they are also qualified to teach some other school subject, usually psychology. Although RE is not a PISA-subject it has a role in comprehensive education in supporting the formulation of pupils' attitudes and worldviews in Finnish schools.

Keywords: religious education, identity, RE subject teacher education, curriculum

BACKGROUND

This chapter focuses on religious education (hence RE) in Finnish basic education. Religious education has in recent years been the focus of international research and political debate. Most European societies provide some kind of RE in their school curricula. Internationally, there has been much active discussion about the function of and the most suitable solution for RE in public schools in multicultural, post-modern societies, and whether RE could be made more uniform in European Union states in order to handle and teach religions contextually as a part of the cultural and religious diversity of Europe (see Everington, 2007). In addition, recently scholars have debated about how RE can be linked to topics such as value education in schools and to education concerning human rights, other democratic ideals, citizenship and multiculturalism.

The Europeanization of RE is a fairly recent trend as traditionally RE in different societies and the accepted concepts of nationality, citizens' rights, the integration of minorities in society, and questions of multiculturalism, have been seen as

intertwined (Skeie, 2001, p. 237; Plesner, 2002, p. 111; Hull, 2002, pp. 123–125; Willaime, 2007, pp. 62–65). However, in many European societies there have been shared concerns about what will happen to the present generation of minority youth. Religious education has been viewed as one way to integrate minorities into society. It has been argued that RE gives young people skills for living with, and an ability to respect the dialogue and tolerance associated with adapting diverse lifestyles and customs into the receiving cultures and societies (Willaime, 2007, p. 63; Sakaranaho, 2007, pp. 7–8). Furthermore, it has been maintained that RE can provide important support for pupils' identity formation processes. It gives pupils tools to understand their own identities as human beings and opens pathways for living and acting in a multicultural world (Niemi, 2005, pp. 42–43).

This chapter will begin with describing the background of the Finnish religious education solution and by examining it within a broader European and Nordic context. Then the chapter will proceed to more practical matters. The chapter will then focus on religious education teachers. It will then describe the role of religious education in Finnish school education. Finally, the chapter will close with some current issues and development challenges for religious education in Finland.

THE FINNISH SOLUTION FOR RELIGIOUS EDUCATION IN PUBLIC SCHOOLS

The current Finnish solution for RE is a unique way of organising RE in public schools. Finland has a very strong public school tradition and there are few private schools in the country. There are only a few religious based private schools in Finland and the role of churches and religious communities is very limited in public education. The educational system in Finland differs from many other societies where the role of religious communities is very strong in basic education. Nowadays, there are less than twenty religious schools in Finland, and their role in comprehensive education is very marginal, despite the fact that in the 1990s some evangelical Protestant schools were founded in Finland. The Finnish school system is thus essentially non-religious (Kallioniemi, 2008; Ubani & Tirri, 2014).

In Finland the teaching of religion is generally seen as a function of society. Over time there have been debates about the function and contents of RE in public schools. In some periods of Finnish school history it had been suggested that RE should be replaced by some other subject, e.g., common ethics, but after discussions by Finnish school policy makers and in the Finnish Parliament it has been accepted that there should be compulsory RE lessons in public schools. The background of this decision is the sociological religious situation of Finnish society: the majority of people are members of the Lutheran Church and the society has been very homogenous in religious matters. Muslims constitute the second largest religious minority in Finland. Another religious minority of almost equal size is the Greek Orthodox Church. Its status in Finnish society is very similar to the Lutheran Church, which has been akin to a state church since the Reformation. The historical roots of the current solution for RE date back to the 1920s. It was then deemed that

RE in grammar schools should be taught according to the religion to which the majority of the pupils in the schools belonged. No big changes to the organizational model of RE have been made since and the basic structure for the organization of RE has remained unaltered (Kallioniemi, 2004, pp. 146–148).

The Finnish solution for religious education can be characterized from an international perspective as a religion-based model to organize religious education in state-owned schools (Schreiner, 2001, p. 263). However, in Finland religious education has different aims and functions than catechetical confessional education. Skeie (2001, p. 243) has formulated a framework for comparing religious education in Europe. According to Skeie, solutions for religious education in Europe can be divided into two different types: (a) the uniform, strong solution and (b) the multiform, weak solution. In the uniform, strong solution there is an emphasis on society's willingness to adopt one model for religious education, which can be confessional or non-confessional religious education. The other model can be labelled the multiform, weak solution, which is emphasised in societies less willing to adopt a uniform solution for religious education. Finland's solution belongs to the multiform, weak solution group. Actually, the Finnish solution belongs to a sub-category of the secular system, as there are different kinds of religious education of respective religions operating side-by-side in schools (Skeie, 2001, pp. 241–243).

From the European perspective the Finnish solution is unique, as religious minority students participate in RE according to their own religion in state-owned schools. The Finnish model differs from the models in other Nordic countries, too. For instance, in Sweden, the renewal of RE took place in 1962 and the subject is non-denominational in its character (Larsson, 1996, pp. 70–71). The same kind of solution was accepted in Norway in 1997 (Haakedal, 2000, 88–97). In Europe, only the Austrian model is similar to the Finnish solution. However, in Austria the religious communities are responsible for the RE syllabus and they also authorise the textbooks for RE (Pollitt, 2007, p. 19; Schreiner, 2001, p. 97). In Finland the religious education syllabi are developed co-operatively between the National Board of Education and religious communities – but the instruction is controlled and enforced by the state. This is a very unique way to organise religious education in a state-owned school system (Davie, 2000, pp. 90–91; Kodelja & Bassler, 2004).

At the beginning of 2000 changes in RE occurred again on legislative grounds. The Finnish Parliament renewed the Act of Freedom from Religion in 2003. After amending the Freedom from Religion Law, the Law for Comprehensive School (454/2003) was also amended. According to the Law, pupils have a right to religious education in school, if some regulations are fulfilled (e.g. the Board of Education has accepted the curriculum for that specific form of religious education and there are three pupils whose parents have asked for it). The background of the renewed law was the idea of positive freedom from religion. The state was to ensure the right to freedom of religion and also ensure that individuals have possibilities to practice their religions. The law also formulated the right to RE in the more positive than negative spirit of freedom from religion. This involved changes to

RE in schools. While “confessional RE” changed to “RE according to one’s own religion”, pupils who did not belong to religious communities could no longer ask for exemption from RE. The law has been framed to put all religions on the same footing and tries to promote religious equality (Seppo, 2003, pp. 177–179). In Finland there is a specific subject called “life questions and ethics” (secular ethics) for those pupils who do not belong to any religious community. “Life questions and ethics” is based mainly on philosophy. Despite its name, the contents of “life questions and ethics” also include religious studies and cultural anthropology. As the Finnish solution of RE is based on individuals’ membership in state recognized religious communities, the schools not only give instruction in different religions but also teach different forms of the same religion, e.g. Lutheran, Orthodox and Catholic Christianity. Despite the fact that the number of students who belong to any religious community has been decreasing over the years, approximately 90% of Finnish pupils participate in Lutheran RE lessons in comprehensive school. RE is a very popular school subject for the youngest pupils, but its popularity decreases in the higher classes.

After the new legislation was passed, the Board of Education began to prepare new curricula for RE, which was completed in 2004. In addition to Lutheran and Orthodox RE curricula, 11 different curricula at the comprehensive level were written and accepted in 2006 (Framework for Comprehensive Curriculum for Other Religions 2006). The framework for minority RE has been produced in co-operation with the religious groups and the Board of Education. This curriculum set out the common aims for all models of RE. It also stated the aims for Lutheran and Greek Orthodox RE. After the early 2000s, the variety of religions has increased in schools to the extent that it is possible that some schools provide religious education lessons in at least six or seven different forms, e.g. Lutheran, Orthodox, Islam, Catholic, Adventist RE and also Life Questions and Ethics (Kallioniemi & Siitonen, 2003, p. 53).

In 2004, the general aims for all the religion-based groups’ curricula were formulated to look at the religious and ethical dimensions of life from the viewpoint of the pupils’ own development and also as a broader phenomenon in society. The aim of RE was to produce all-around literacy. According to the general aims of RE the task of this education was to make the pupils familiar with their own religions, with the Finnish religious traditions, and with other religions to help the pupils understand the cultural and human meaning of religion, to introduce the pupils to ethical responsibility and to help them understand the ethical dimension of religion (National Core Curriculum for Basic Education, 2004). Although all different forms of RE had the same general aims, their interpretations varied significantly in their curricula. In principle, minority religious groups’ curricula were in line with these general aims, but most of them differ from these nationally accepted aims in their emphasis. For instance, Orthodox and Catholic RE were based clearly on the dominations’ own religious traditions and attempted to support the pupils’ Catholic or Orthodox identities (Kallioniemi, 2008). This dissonance was addressed in the

national curriculum in 2014 (Finnish National Board of Education, 2014). As has been stated, the objectives of RE in the new National Core Curriculum for Basic Education (Finnish National Board of Education, 2014) are quite similar to the national core curriculum in 2004 with more emphasis on dialogue between and within traditions, skills in life management and conflicts connected with religions, for instance. The key difference between the curricula in RE in 2004 and 2014 is the shift from knowledge to skills and competence in the curricular thinking that reflects the change in the whole curricular thinking (Finnish National Board of Education, 2014).

THE NATURE AND ROLE OF RE IN BASIC EDUCATION

Religious Education is a subject taught in basic education. The subject can be approached from two viewpoints: the characteristics of the subject itself and its school legislative status. These two viewpoints overlap so that in both instances RE is related to other school subjects and school education in general. However, the characteristics of the subject are more important than the legislative aspect in this discussion. Some of the subject specific issues were covered in the discussion concerning changes in the 2000s. Concerning those differences, it can be noted that the legislative status of RE is in principle similar to other subjects: it is state-given, compulsory, and every teacher should teach it as a part of her or his duty.

The total number of RE lessons given has been reduced significantly in recent decades. Usually in the lower and higher levels of comprehensive school there is one RE lesson a week. However, the aims are very comprehensive. One of the general aims for all the religion-based groups' curricula is to look at the religious and ethical dimensions of life from the viewpoint of the pupils' own development and also as a broader phenomenon in society. The aim of RE is still to produce all-around literacy in religions, beliefs and values. According to the general aims of RE, the goal is for the pupil to become familiar with one's own religion and its diversity, but also to become familiar with religious and non-religious traditions in Finland and globally, to understand the relationship between religion and culture, and to develop well-rounded literacy of religions and non-religious worldviews. In addition, the pupils are encouraged to think critically and to reflect on religions and non-religious worldviews from different viewpoints, and on the relationship between belief and knowledge along with reflecting on the symbolism, language and concepts typical for religion. The aim is also to provide tools for dialogue between and within religions and other traditions and to encourage the students to honor life, human dignity and the H(h)oly of one's own tradition and of other people's tradition. In the instruction, the students are familiarised with the ethical thinking of the religion that is being studied and of other religious and non-religious traditions, and are encouraged to think ethically and to personally reflect on ethical issues. The purpose of instruction is to support knowledge of oneself, self-esteem and development of life management skills. The instruction also gives tools for

constructing and evaluating one's own identity, world-view and approach in life. Finally, the instruction supports the pupils' development into responsible members of the community and society, including global citizenship (Finnish National Board of Education, 2014).

The main pedagogical idea of RE has been very contextual for decades: originally, the instruction began with the children's proximate environments. Then the questions were broadened to other areas. In recent decades, the shift has moved toward religious studies. The content of Religious Education in the current National Core Curriculum for Basic Education (Finnish National Board of Education, 2014) is divided into three topics: good life, relationship to one's own religion and the world of religions. These topics apply for all religions.

The first content area is called *good life*. The teaching of ethics and life questions has been a vital part of RE in Finland. Usually life question and ethics approaches RE in a very child-centred way, i.e., the basic aim of the contents is to strengthen children's and young people's familiarization with themselves and also to help them maintain a positive self-image. Also, ethical issues such as human rights and religious freedom are discussed here. The second content area is *relationship to one's own religion*. The main topics deal with the children's own religion and religious habits at home and in society: e.g., how families in Finland celebrate Christmas and Easter and the church festivals in a typical life cycle, such as confirmation, marriage and funerals. The third content area focuses on the *world of religions*. Learning about other faiths and religions begins in the local environment: in the lower grades, investigations are made about which religions are observed in the children's communities and about the habits and rituals of followers of these religions. Gradually there is a shift towards broader questions such as: inter-religious dialogue, culture, and religion in politics (NCCBE, 2016).

These three content areas act more like topics than a list of content requirements in instruction: the idea is that the contents represent a continuum from primary education and lower secondary education and give a schema based on which the knowledge of the pupil is developed during basic education. In fact, as in the whole curriculum in basic education, the amount of content has been significantly reduced following the shift from a knowledge-based curriculum to skill and competence-based instruction (Finnish National Board of Education, 2014). The emphasis on cultural understanding and life in communities has become more integral in the curriculum, too. Likewise in RE, the curriculum encourages cooperation among the different groups represented in various RE lessons, along with ethics and life questions, in its characterisation of the learning environment (Finnish National Board of Education, 2014).

There are a variety of textbooks for RE. Usually pupils in each school get their own new RE textbook every year. The textbooks are produced by commercial publishers and they are usually written as a collaborative effort by RE specialists and teachers. Usually the textbooks are of a very high-level, as they are kept up-to-date. Nowadays there are also a lot of suitable teaching materials for teachers and

working materials for pupils on the Internet. RE is a very popular school subject for the youngest pupils, but its popularity decreases in the higher grades. When RE is compared to other basic education subjects there are certain unique characteristics in religious education beyond the obvious differences in substance (Finnish National Board of Education, 2014). These characteristics can be grouped under four descriptive qualities: integrative practice, intimate interaction, critical thinking and holistic knowledge.

Integrative practice. First, religious education is an integrative subject. Although the classical contents of RE: church history, bible stories and religious festivals and ceremonies, have been a central part of RE curricula, they are taught from an integrative approach. Integration characterizes both its practice and aims. In pedagogical practice, the content of religious education covers, for instance, History, Arts, Music and Literature. Furthermore, human rights education, citizenship education and environmental education have been a vital part of RE curricula. Likewise, the instruction is methodically diverse as it uses methods from different subjects and related fields. On the other hand, the aims of the subjects include an integrative approach underlying the instruction, namely, supporting the formation of a personal worldview and emphasising pupils' life-questions. The formation of a personal worldview and the examination of pupils' life-questions have been leading aspects in the aims and contents of RE since the 1970s when comprehensive schools were first introduced in Finland. Many different kinds of pupils' autobiographic materials are used in basic teaching. For example, in the lower classes the pupils reflect on their self-images by drawing different kinds of self-images and in the higher classes pupils have to answer different kinds of questionnaires concerning their own self-reflections. Different kinds of actual life questions of pupils are a very central part of RE curricula (NCCBE, 2016).

Intimate interaction. Second, religious education is increasingly becoming an intimate subject. As the number of religious traditions included in RE has increased, the number of pupils in each instructional group has decreased. In addition to the strong tradition of Biblical story telling used in the lower grades, in the 2000s, methods that include elements of contemplation, quiet, peace and wondering about nature have increased in use. This approach, which focuses on children's spirituality, is nowadays very strong in RE in the lower classes (Kallioniemi, 2007). The current classroom culture emphasis on sharing and wonder in religious education contrasts with everyday haste and to some extent traditional frontal instruction (see *ibid.*). The pedagogy of RE in Finland has in recent years developed towards a more co-operational direction: typical teaching methods in lower classes include story-telling, group tasks and methods which focus on creativity.

Critical thinking. Third, religious education in Finland emphasises critical thinking. While the denominational elements are still included in the instruction, the emphasis

is increasingly on open-endedness and integrity of personal convictions. Dialogical methods are used for supporting the development of personal argumentation and views on life, ethics and other issues concerning religion. Since the 1980s, the denominational elements have increasingly become a source for reflection on personal meaning rather than something adopted as such (Kallioniemi & Ubani, 2008). The emphasis of meaningfulness has been very strong in RE. At the background of this approach is existential philosophy and humanistic psychology (Niemi, 1991, pp. 37–38).

Holistic knowledge. When compared to other theoretical subjects with content aims, religious education is relatively inclusive as it has different ways of being aware of and conceptualising phenomena in life. At the background of this is an emphasis on the holistic development of the pupil. This is actualised in the approach towards subject specific contents such as belief, conviction, faith, or emotions. As phenomena they are not necessarily sufficiently reducible cognitive conceptualisations. While conceptualisations are used for understanding such phenomena, the formulations are not used to normatively explain them.

RE TEACHERS IN FINLAND

In Finland the teacher qualifications for RE in public schools are completely academic. In other words, religion professionals are not qualified to teach RE without proper teacher education. Religious education is usually provided by primary teachers (grades 1–6), in the lower basic education grades. In the lower secondary level (grades 7 and above) subject teachers are responsible for teaching RE. In Finland, religious education teacher education is a function of universities. The vast majority of RE subject teachers in Finland are theologians, but in recent years there have been more and more RE teachers who have taken religious studies. Most RE teachers have specialised in some other school subjects, e.g. psychology or history. They have to pass the content studies courses in their subject faculty and studies in pedagogy at departments of teacher education. New forms of RE subject teacher education have been developed in recent years. The leading idea is to develop this education in a research-based direction. The teacher as an action researcher is one leading idea of RE teacher education. As the studies in subject pedagogy in RE are mainly based on the educational research, student RE teachers also have to pass a course in research methods in education. All religious education teachers have to take part in a seminar as part of their studies in the teacher education programme. This seminar work is like a minor master's thesis in education. Students choose a research topic; usually they collect some research data, analyse the data and then write a report. The topics vary: in recent decades the most popular research topics have been concerned with how learning occurs in RE. There are also increasing numbers of research projects in RE teacher education (Kallioniemi, 1997; Hella, 2007; Ubani, 2011).

The subject RE teachers' professional identity has been shifting from the theological profession toward more pedagogical professionalism especially since the 1970s. Schools have emphasised the RE teachers' status and function in schools as representatives of their own area of expertise. The RE teachers have also clearly emphasised their own professional identity and wanted to see themselves as part of the school staff rather than being representatives of a religion or religious traditions in schools (Kallioniemi, 1997, p. 153). In an international study, Finnish RE teachers' pedagogical orientation has been compared to teachers in 15 other European countries. The study described the Finnish RE teachers' professional orientation as modern traditionalist. On the other hand they appreciate and have adapted themselves to the multicultural and pluralist trends in Finnish society. Almost all (99.6 percent) of the Finnish teachers that took part in the study agreed that the most important goal of RE is teaching about religions. However, two-thirds (62.7 percent) of the very same teachers agreed also on the importance of teaching religion. Finnish RE teachers also seemed to be versatile in their use of teaching methods (Räsänen & Ubani, 2009; Ubani, 2011).

Primary teachers pass a specific course for teaching RE in their basic education. The courses are not the same in different universities, but usually there are lectures and groups in which the student primary teachers are taught to understand the function of RE as a part of the school curriculum. Furthermore, they become prepared to understand the meaning of religion in the life of human beings, humankind and societies. They also learn how to plan RE curricula and to apply different kinds of methods in teaching RE. Some 10% of student primary teachers continue their studies to specialise more in RE. They do this by studying in a faculty of theology, which provides specific courses for them. Some students also do their master's thesis in the field of RE. Student primary school teachers think that RE is an important subject for pupils and society, but they have problems in teaching it in actual school situations. Many student primary teachers have pointed out that their motivation for teaching RE is low and they have problems with the content knowledge of RE (Kallioniemi & Ubani, 2010, pp. 260–261).

Currently, the key challenge in RE teacher education is minority RE teachers' qualifications. Teacher education for teachers in these groups began in 2007 at the University of Helsinki with financial aid from the Ministry of Education, but there are many problems that have not yet been solved. For example, in Finland all teachers' education is at the university level. In many minority groups there are candidates who do not speak Finnish very well. When a teacher teaches at the comprehensive level she or he should be able to speak Finnish fluently. In addition there have not been many candidates who have the required basic education. Many candidates, who, e.g., want to teach Islamic RE in Finnish schools, have not been through basic Finnish education. In Finland we have had no chairs for Islamic Studies either. However, the Department of Religious Studies has now developed a specific education programme for content knowledge in Islamic and Buddhist Studies.

DISCUSSION

The latest discussions in Finland concerning religious education in state schools have brought up the need for a common curriculum for religious education and ethics in schools. In basic education, two options of how the current practice can be modified have been suggested. First, one proposal is to develop one common religious education subject for all students. The other option is to continue the present practice with the inclusion of shared instruction in upper grades for all students, such as ethics instruction that would be based on class dialogue. Since the early 2000s, discussions on the legitimacy of religious education in Finnish school education have decreased. As Finnish state education has included religious education since its beginning, any changes in the subject or its discontinuation would lead to the need to re-evaluate and re-analyse all Finnish comprehensive education and its constitution from a holistic viewpoint. Furthermore, while religious education is not directly measured in PISA, it can be argued that the subject contributes to balancing the Finnish curriculum in an integrative manner.

Although there has been much debate about the model of RE in comprehensive schools, the majority of Finnish citizens, headmasters and teachers are of the opinion that teaching RE is very important to comprehensive education. The significance of RE has in recent years become more obvious in Finnish society, because changes towards a multicultural society have been so prominent. The Finnish model for RE is a unique one; it takes paternal rights as the focus of education. Everybody gets RE according to his or her own religion. Although the background of RE is according to one's own religion, the subject can include many opportunities to educate children to understand the vast diversity of different religions. In addition, it may also create occasions to participate in religious dialogue in everyday life. Furthermore, while it aims to promote critical understanding and ethical thinking, it strives to give a basic competence for living as a citizen in a post-modern multi-religious society.

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