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Encountering Worldviews: Pupil Perspectives on Integrative Worldview Education in a Finnish Secondary School Context

ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to explore pupils' views on integrative worldview education that encompasses pupils from both religious and non-religious backgrounds.¹ The research material consists of surveys (N=174) and pupil interviews (N=40) which are analysed with a mixed methods approach. The theoretical basis of this study are the concepts of worldview, safe place, dialogue and lived religion. The results of this study indicate that pupils find the integrative religious education class a safe place to learn about worldviews and encounter others. This study suggests that the removal of pupils' physical separation on the basis of worldview has a significant positive impact on the experiences of adolescents.

Keywords: *worldview education, religious education, integrated education, safe place, peer learning dialogue, encountering*

Introduction

In Europe and other parts of the world, discussion and debate on religious education and its implementation in state schools has intensified in recent years, with the issue currently attracting an unprecedented public and academic interest.² In Europe, a key issue is how to organize RE and worldview education in an increasingly plural Europe.³ Furthermore, multiculturalism itself has come under scrutiny.⁴ RE can be seen as a school subject where pupils learn both from and about religions and worldviews. The phenomenological approach of *learning about religions* emphasizes the role RE plays in providing pupils with information and knowledge about various worldviews and religious traditions. In contrast, if RE is seen as *learning from religions*, pupils' own life-worlds, personal growth and life questions are emphasized, and the various faith traditions and worldviews are examined through these lenses. RE can also be seen as *learning into religion* where the goals are to impart religious truths and lifestyle to the pupils, but as this approach is religious and confessional in nature, it is seen in many countries including Finland as inappropriate in a public school context.⁵

In this article we explore pupils' perceptions of integrative worldview education (WE) in a Finnish school context. We use the term *worldview education* to refer to the teaching of RE and secular ethics in the Finnish context, since this term emphasizes both the religious and non-religious worldviews of the pupils attending the classes in question. When using the term *integrative WE* in a Finnish context, we refer to recent pedagogical innovations in the field of RE, adopted by some schools, involving a shift from the segregated model of RE towards a more inclusive, common subject for all pupils, regardless of their belonging to a certain religious denomination. In terms of this study's theoretical approach, we make reference to inclusive religious and worldview

education, which involves teaching pupils from both religious and secular^a backgrounds together in the same physical space.⁶ For legislative reasons, teaching in Finland must formally follow the National Core Curriculum of Basic Education (NCCBE) approved by the National Board of Education, which entails that integrative WE classes simultaneously teach different syllabuses for religions and secular ethics integrated.⁷ In practice, this means that a teacher of integrative WE must ensure that every pupil receives education according to the aims of the curriculum in her own religion or secular ethics.⁸ The research on integrative worldview education is timely from both Finnish and European perspectives in a plural and multicultural age where WE can be seen as an important tool for societal integration and fostering peaceful coexistence between various ethnicities, cultures and worldviews.⁹

Officially, Finnish WE is a plural, nondenominational, but segregated, model of WE, organized *according to pupils' own religion*, that offers education in both Lutheran and Orthodox Christianity, secular ethics and 11 different minority religions.^b The current model was redefined in the 2003 reform of the Freedom of Religion Act to emphasize the positive freedom of religion. Although WE continued to be organized according to pupils' religion, as a consequence of the 2003 reform, 'confession' was changed to expression of 'one's own religion' (Basic Education Act, Amendment 2003/454, 13§). The model has been justified by the need to recognize children's right to their own religion and by claims that the model promotes the integration of minorities into Finnish society.¹⁰ However, as Finland becomes more diverse and the need for common understanding and dialogue between different worldviews increases these arguments have been challenged.¹¹ It is also argued that the current model of WE, where pupils are separated, may increase the risk of marginalizing ethnic minorities, as these individuals feel alienated from the majority.¹²

Although influential ethnic and religious minorities such as Christian orthodox and Muslim Tatar communities have been an important part of Finnish history, political and societal discussion about multiculturalism and plurality in society is currently more active than ever.¹³ Since the 1970's the mix of languages, cultures and religions in Finland has increased and this in turn has set new requirements for worldview education. Moreover, there is empirical evidence that traditional Finnish religiosity is rapidly changing, while the rate of church membership is steadily falling.¹⁴ The number of new religious movements is also growing, Islam being the fastest growing religion over the last few decades.¹⁵ These changes require evaluation and discussion of the way RE is implemented in state schools

^a Currently according to the NCCBE (National Core Curriculum of Basic Education), pupils who do not belong to a particular religious denomination, whose background is non-religious or whose religious denomination is too small in the area for that certain RE to be taught, attend a subject called secular ethics, where students study subjects such as culture, ethics, the concept of worldview, different religions and the relationship between humans and nature (NCCBE 2014). Although the official name of the subject is secular ethics, a name more in line with the content of the classes would be 'life questions and secular ethics'. Opting out of WE is also possible but rare in the Finnish school system.

^b These minority religions are: Adventism, Bahá'í, Buddhism, The Lord's People (Herran Kansa), Islam, Judaism, Catholic Christianity, Hare Krishna, The Christian Community, Mormonism and the Free Church.

Recently some schools in Finland have recently begun to develop a partly integrated, dialogical approach to worldview education, with the particular aim of bringing pupils together to enhance learning from other worldviews. The first school to implement fully integrative WE in Finland was European Schooling Helsinki, founded in 2008.¹⁶ There is growing interest in this approach to the school subject, but to date no serious academic contribution has been made. The largest challenge in implementing integrative WE is the fact that these developments have been initiated by individual schools without governmental action, legislative or otherwise; thus, these schools have independently interpreted the possibilities of implementing an integrative subject within the framework of the current segregative REWE model. The two secondary schools chosen for this study were the only schools in Helsinki piloting integrative WE at the time. Both schools have a more multicultural, academically oriented profile than the average Finnish school, and there are some differences in the way WE is put into practice. Nevertheless, there are sufficient similarities to treat them as exemplars of the same phenomenon of Finnish integrative WE and also to compare them internationally and theoretically to different models of integrative REWE.

This study examines the views of pupils in grades 7 and 8 (from age 13 to 15) on the change in RE/secular ethics in their schools. We opted for a mixed methods approach in which we utilized both qualitative and quantitative data to examine our research questions. By using such an approach, it is possible both to draw comparisons between the data sets and examine the same research questions through the lens of each set of data.¹⁷ The study's quantitative analysis consists of the statistical analysis of pupils' questionnaire responses, which then guides the analysis of the qualitative data. The quantitative data were gathered using validated measures from previous studies on RE in Europe. The main goal of the quantitative data is to form a general statistical understanding of the way pupils relate to integrative WE. These observations then guide the focus of the qualitative analysis and clarify the findings from the qualitative data.¹⁸

The data were gathered during the 2013-2014 and 2014-2015 academic years. Data collection was based on a questionnaire (N=174) conducted in the autumn of 2013 and spring of 2014 in one of the schools. Pupils were asked to complete a three-part questionnaire during a homeroom teacher's class. All pupils attending integrative WE were asked to participate. One-to-one interviews (N=40) were conducted in the spring of 2014 and 2015 in two secondary schools in Helsinki. The questionnaire served as a starting point for the study and as a basis for the formulation of the interview questions. It was thus only conducted in one school. All survey and interview data were treated as confidential, and all participants were clearly informed that they could withdraw from the study at any time and that their answers would be handled anonymously. The questionnaire was completed anonymously and the interview participants were given pseudonyms. Written consent from a parent or guardian was collected for the participation of underage pupils in the survey and possible interview.

This article aims to explore the following questions:

(1) How do pupils perceive integrative WE (and school in general) as a place to safely encounter different worldviews?

- (2) How do pupils see integrative WE as a platform for learning from and about worldviews?
- (3) How important do pupils consider teaching in their own religious or non-religious worldview in school?
- (4) How do pupils' gender, religious or non-religious background and grade affect their evaluation of WE?

Theoretical considerations

The theoretical basis of this research is the study of integrative religious education. We address key theoretical concepts from RE and worldview education research and use them as tools-for-thinking.¹⁹ This study will also utilize several studies in international RE research, especially those published on the REDCo projects.²⁰ In international research there have been many studies categorizing or offering different models to describe RE.²¹ According to Alberts an integrative model of RE can be defined as a non-confessional approach based on the plurality of school and society.²² We use this approach within the framework of worldview education, and hence we do not aim to make a sharp distinction between religious and non-religious worldviews. Rather, when addressing the question of how worldviews are positioned in education, we stress the importance of viewing 'religious' and 'non-religious' worldviews together – especially their intersections.²³ The concept of worldview is used in this study to refer to various interpretations of the world and ways of life that are individual in nature but also become communal when shared with other individuals.²⁴ They also entail a particular ontological, epistemological and ethical orientation to the world.²⁵ Unlike terms such as 'religious' or 'non-religious', the concept of worldview allows for variations and fluidity at the individual level, while also acknowledging the subjective element in both religious and non-religious worldviews. In this way both the religious and non-religious stances are better acknowledged since they both fall under the category of worldviews. Importantly, from a worldview perspective religion or non-religiousness are not seen as rigidly imposed belief systems that determines one's private life; rather, they present a vision and a way of life for all areas of a person's existence.²⁶ In the context of Finnish WE, worldview as a theoretical tool does not aim to obscure what might be considered 'my own' religion; quite the contrary, it critically challenges pupils to recognize the links between their own religion and other religions and non-religious worldviews. Importantly, pupils are encouraged to rethink worldviews in the light of constantly changing contexts and circumstances and as a part of their identity.

Safe place is a metaphor used for the optimal classroom atmosphere for communicating openly about diversity and teaching religions and non-religious worldviews.²⁷ In a safe classroom space, pupils are able to express their views openly, without a fear of being ridiculed or marginalized because of their religion or belief or because their views differ from those of their teacher or peers. In order to create such a safe space, teachers plays a key role: they need to help pupils understand the basic principles of democracy and human rights in the form of respect, tolerance, sensitivity towards the plurality of perspectives, representation of minority groups and inclusion of all.²⁸ In this study we critically assess whether such a concept is seen by pupils as a necessary part of WE class and what elements are necessary for constructing such a safe place in the experiences of pupils.

The concept of lived religion has been conceptualized in various different ways.²⁹ *Lived religion* can be seen to refer to the level of religious practice in everyday life.³⁰ This concept shifts the focus from the official dogma of ‘world religions’ to religiosity in the life worlds of individuals and the groups they inhabit.³¹ Although religions emphasize commonalities and specific traditions in their beliefs, by using the term *lived religion* we focus on the heterogeneity inside religious traditions and their possible individual understandings and interpretations. One of the main strengths of the move towards an integrative form of WE is the possibility of making the level of lived religion more visible while also presenting religious traditions through their larger tendencies.³² As Professor John M. Hull states, dialogue between different worldviews necessitates encountering both a world different to one’s own in the form of various religious traditions and also an individual with all her similarities and differences.³³ It is our aim to examine whether pupils themselves place emphasis on encountering individual lived religion in the integrative WE classroom and how the integrative subject could serve as a platform for this encounter.

Methodological considerations

Pupils’ views on integrative WE and religion in school were assessed using 32 statements. A 5-point scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree) was used to measure opinions on these statements. The 32 statements were modified from the REDCo questionnaires used in other European countries in order to gather comparative data.³⁴ In this study we focus on differences related to gender, grade and religious or non-religious background. The data from the questionnaires provided the foundation for a semi-structured interview.

The questionnaire was conducted in the spring of 2014 and was completed by a total of 174 pupils, the majority of whom were girls (N = 95, 55%), with boys accounting for 45 percent of respondents (n = 79). The pupils were in grades 7 (N = 96, 55%) and 8 (N = 77, 45%), and their ages varied from 12 years to 15 years, with the majority being either 13 (N = 65, 37%) or 14 years of age (N = 85, 49%). The majority of participants were members of a religious denomination (N = 119, 71%), while less than a third of participants had no religious affiliation (N = 49, 29%).

In the statistical analysis, which used *SPSS 22*, the general sentiments of pupils were analysed, and their responses to statements concerning WE and religion in school were selected for exploratory factor analysis. The principal component analysis and direct oblimin rotation were used. The conditions for factor analysis were met, with Bartlett’s test yielding a chi-square value of 2090.9 and $p=.000$, and Kaiser-Meyer Olkin’s test yielding a value of .806. In order to obtain a clear interpretation of the factors, five rotations were conducted. The solution of four factors gave the clearest form of interpretation, with the factors explaining 51.7% of the total variance present in the data. Four scales were formulated on the basis of the factor analysis to describe these factors. Variables which had a loading of over .40 were calculated.³⁵ In contrast, variables which had side loadings of over .30 were not calculated in the scales. Cronbach’s alpha was calculated for each scale. An independent samples t-test was calculated with the different scales as dependent variables and the age, religious or non-religious background and current grade of the pupils as separate independent variables. We chose to use grade instead of age as an independent variable since the

content of the curriculum differs in grades 7 and 8 and could therefore account for differences in the data; this would not be apparent if only age, per se, were examined.

The semi-structured interviews were conducted during the spring of 2014 and 2015. Due to Finland's religious landscape, the majority of pupils have an Evangelical Lutheran background. However, to avoid skewing the interview data in favour of the majority, we interviewed pupils (N = 40) from different religious and non-religious groups. Approximately half the pupils interviewed were Lutheran, and the remainder were from various religious and non-religious minorities. As a result of widespread media coverage and political interest in the integrative WE projects of the target schools, along with the potential sensitivity of the topic, we chose to respect the anonymity of the participants by conducting individual interviews rather than group interviews.

The qualitative research material was studied using content-based analysis, allowing the content of the data to intersect with theoretical ideas, thus resulting in new categories for understanding the phenomenon and explaining the content.³⁶ The content analysis used in the study focused on verbal expressions that defined and described the elements that the pupils saw as fundamental in terms of the research questions.

Quantitative results

The majority of pupils agreed with the statement that integrative WE should be taught in every school (63%). Many of the participants also agreed with the statement that integrative WE helps pupils understand different worldviews (72%). Moreover, the majority of pupils also felt that the subject helped them personally to understand different religions (71%) and agreed with the statement that they felt safe to study in the integrative classes (75%).

Exploratory factor analysis of the variables resulted in four factors. The factors were given the following names:

1. The presence of worldview and religion in the school and classroom ($\alpha = 0.8$)
2. Integrative WE as an important tool for learning about worldviews and ethics ($\alpha = 0.8$)
3. Fears and doubts about integrative WE ($\alpha = 0.6$)
4. Religion and worldview affecting daily school life ($\alpha = 0.7$)

The scales (see Table 1.) formed according to the factors (see Table 2.) were calculated for means and standard deviation.

Table 1.

Table 2.

The pupils viewed school and the classroom as places where religions and worldviews should be visible both in the topics taught and the school space in general (M = 3.9, s=0.8) and felt that religion and worldview should be allowed to affect school life, for instance by pupils being able to be absent from classes during a religious holiday or by pupils being offered meals which accommodate their religious orientation (M = 3.6, s=1.0). The pupils were also generally positive

towards integrative WE as a subject which provided knowledge ($M = 3.3, s=0.8$) and in general felt little doubt about the new subject ($M = 2.6, s=0.8$).

Differences in gender, religious background and class level

Although all pupils saw the importance of the presence of worldview and religion in the classroom and school and appreciated the possibility of discussing it, girls viewed it as more important ($M = 4.2, s=0.6$) than did boys ($M = 3.6, s=0.9$). This difference was statistically significant: $t(122)=4.26, p = .000$.

In general the pupils did not harbour fears and doubts about integrative WE ($M = 2.6, s=0.8$). However, boys ($M = 2.9, s=0.7$) had more doubts about integrative WE and WE in general than did girls ($M = 2.4, s=0.8$), and the difference here was also statistically significant: $t(159)=-3.66, p = .000$. The participants also felt that a pupil's religion or worldview should be allowed to affect daily school life ($M = 3.6, s=1.0$).

There was no significant difference between pupils with religious or non-religious backgrounds in any of the factors except in their views about integrative WE as a tool for learning about worldviews and ethics. Religious pupils were more positive regarding this factor ($M = 3.4, s=0.7$) compared to pupils with a non-religious background ($M = 3.1, s=0.9$). This factor offered the only statistically significant difference between pupils with religious and non-religious backgrounds: $t(152)=-2.25, p=.026$.

The correlation between pupils' current grade and age was $r = 0.7$, so there was no need for age-specific measurements. Pupils' current grade yielded significant differences in two of the factors. Pupils in grade 8 were more inclined to see the presence of religion and worldview in school in a positive light ($M = 4.1, s=0.7$) than were 7th graders ($M = 3.8, s=0.9$), and this difference was also statistically significant: $t(154)=-2.45, p=.015$. Those in grade 7 also had slightly more doubts about WE as a subject ($M = 2.8, s=0.8$) than did 8th graders ($M = 2.4, s=0.8$). Again this difference was statistically significant: $t(158)=3.19, p=.002$. The reason for this difference can also be explained by the relative familiarity of 8th graders with the school, compared to 7th graders, who were in their first year of secondary school.^c

The broad themes that arose from the quantitative data were general positive feelings towards integrative WE and the relative similarity in opinion between religious and non-religious pupils. More specifically, pupils placed importance on integrative WE as tool for learning about worldviews, both their own and those of others ($M = 3.3, s=0.7$). In order to gain a more comprehensive understanding of this and the difference in the quantitative data regarding pupils from religious and non-religious backgrounds, the qualitative data focused on the importance pupils

^c Finnish compulsory education, which lasts a total of nine years, consists of comprehensive school, which is divided into primary school (grades 1 to 6) and lower secondary school (grades 7 to 9). When moving to lower secondary level, the teaching changes from being provided by class teachers to being provided by subject teachers. Most schools are not combined primary and lower-secondary schools, so pupils often change schools at this point in their education.

gave to learning about their own worldview and the significance they attached to learning about the worldview of others. Moreover, although there was more positivity than doubt and fear associated with integrative WE, pupils also differed in this area. Consequently, another important aim of the qualitative data was to specifically assess the question of what contributes to a safe space for learning about worldviews.

Qualitative results

Four interpretative categories resulted from content analysis of the interview data. The first category dealt with the experience of safety in the integrative WE classroom. Pupils described the elements which they considered vital for constructing a safe environment for learning and the possible reasons behind experiences of otherness or alienation. The second category consisted of comments relating to encountering similarities and differences in worldviews in the classroom. Here, pupils shared their experiences of integrative WE as a tool for seeing and understanding worldviews as inherently different, even as a source of conflict, but, nevertheless, as having many similarities and representing an opportunity for encounter and dialogue.

The third category dealt with pupils' experiences of how integrative WE, and school in general, can serve as a context for reflection on their own worldviews and how important they considered this. This category includes comments on the subject as a source of individual development and building worldview identity. The fourth category gathered comments relating to learning about worldviews through peers. Pupils shared their thoughts on how integrative WE might help them learn about lived religiosity and the different worldviews represented in the classroom.

The vast majority of pupils interviewed considered attending integrative WE a positive experience. Many pupils mentioned that learning from peers about their worldviews was interesting, and the majority saw the new model of WE as superior to the segregated model.

Interviewer (I): Well, you can start with the positives if you like...

Pupil (P)17: Well like... it's nice that all the different opinions are present in the classroom and I think it is nice that we discuss with different people, for example, their religions and it's not always just discussion about your own religion... But yeah, I really can't think of any negative things, at least now.

In contrast, pupils from secular ethics voiced some reservations about the integrated classroom, although they also enjoyed the new subject. These reservations arose from the amount of knowledge about religions provided in WE classes, which differed from their past experiences in secular ethics. Some of them had felt at the start, and continued to feel, that pupils with a religious background should learn about religions, but pupils from a non-religious background did not need this knowledge. This was manifested in some pupils distancing themselves from the aims of integrative RE.

I: You used the term religious education, so do you consider this (integrative subject) to be more like RE or still more like secular ethics?

P30: Well I say religious education but... I don't think that we have learned anything about secular ethics as such. When this new thing (integrative subject) started I was really against it because I didn't understand why I should learn things about religions.

I: What do you think of this kind of integrated teaching from a pupil perspective?

P9: The pupils that learn religion can now also learn more about other religions. I think they used to focus more just on their own religion, but I'm not certain. I think that's what they have been studying previously.

I: How do you think it might help them?

P9: Those people can learn to understand different ways of doing things, and like... when they are dealing with other religions, now they can also meet pupils from other religions if they are all studying in the same space.

According to the pupils, the main elements that made the integrated classroom safe were the actions of the teacher and the opportunity to express their own opinions. They also held the opinion that pupils themselves contributed to this feeling of safety through their own actions and comments.

I: What elements contribute to a safe and good environment for learning? Can you say who contributes to that?

P4: Well it depends on the teacher a lot, like how the teacher takes it (the class). Our secular ethics teacher (the current teacher also in integrative WE) has been nice and everything, but a safe atmosphere also depends on the pupils. But since we know each other very well, you can kind of trust them and you can tell them what you think.

Almost no respondents mentioned that being with pupils with the same religious or non-religious background would improve the feeling of safety or the general atmosphere of the classes. On the contrary, pupils mentioned that in WE being together with their own class in its entirety added to the sense of security, and the segregated practice of dividing the class on the basis of worldview was seen as unnecessary.

I: Can you describe what the atmosphere has been like in the integrative classes?

P3: Well I think it has been open. Like, there hasn't been anything like "Catholics to that corner, others to that corner and like that...". It has been open-minded. Quite many in our class have been interested in the lessons.

P3: ... I think the practice of like... separating us into different groups so that we have our RE classes at different times is kind of isolating... So I feel like this has been nice for others too.

P4: Well I'm myself in secular ethics and there used to be a really small group of us and I didn't have like... all my friends were in RE so I was kind of there alone all the time and it wasn't nice that I couldn't work with my friends.

In the teenagers' world, it seemed very important for them not to be separated from the group or their friends or to be labelled as different. The pupils also exhibited a strong sense of justice when discussing the atmosphere and general feelings towards integrative WE. They considered that the new model of WE served to put different pupils in an equal position regarding the quality of teaching, materials, timetables and acquired knowledge. Both majority and minority pupils felt that these aspects of school life were improved compared to their past segregated experiences.

I: Have you discussed with your friends how they find this subject?

P29: Well one of my friends, who is an Orthodox Christian, he's my best friend and we are in the same class. We were thinking on the first day of school that now that we have returned back to school we will again have to attend separate RE lessons like we did back in primary school. But now we are together and it's very different, I think in a much better way.

I: What do you think has changed now that everyone is in the same class in RE?

P36: Well I think that the fact that everyone gets to hear the same things and no one is left out of anything.

Generally speaking, the pupils enjoyed encountering different worldviews in the classroom. However, there were certain topics related to worldviews, and specifically Islam, that the pupils felt should be addressed with caution in an integrative WE classroom.

I: How would you describe the atmosphere in your classroom?

P21: Quite often you can say stuff freely. But then at times you have these situations where it's best not to say what you think.

I: Why not?

P21: Well then you could possibly hurt the feelings of the Muslims.

I: Do you have any example in your mind?

P21: Well if you for example speak about their veils... it's best not to say anything.

Although some topics concerning worldviews were considered potentially problematic, the majority of pupils felt that the heterogeneity of the classroom presented new possibilities for encountering and learning from different worldviews and finding both differences and similarities between them.

I: This new model is kind of unique in the Finnish context, so what do you think personally: is it a good thing or a bad thing if we consider the relationship between the majority and the minority? Does it enhance or restrict the possibilities for dialogue between them?

P20: I think it enhances them quite a lot. Because like... if your friend is for example Muslim, then it is so much easier to understand those things when she tells you about her own religion and daily practices. Then it's much easier to understand rather than if you put everyone into a different classroom... then you would not learn to see things through the other pupil's eyes.

I: How has the teaching changed?

P28: Well it is much more effective (now) and I learn a lot more. And then you do learn stuff from many different perspectives. For example, in our class we have pupils from many different religions and so you can look and learn about the same thing from many different perspectives.

The pupils commented on the relationship between their own worldviews and integrative WE from different standpoints. Some pupils felt that integrative WE failed to offer them sufficient knowledge about their own religion. This ties in with the findings in the quantitative data concerning how some pupils relate to WE as a tool for gaining more knowledge. While these pupils enjoy the mutual classroom and feel it provides a safe learning environment to explore different worldviews, they feel that the information they receive should focus more on their own religion. This was especially true when considering minority religions such as Islam.

I: Would you like to continue studying like this, for example in upper secondary school, or would you rather return to the previous model, to Islamic RE?

P11: I would like to return to the previous model of Islamic RE because then I can answer people better. Like if they saw that I couldn't answer their questions then they would think that "she doesn't know anything about her own religion" and that would be quite embarrassing. So that way I would know more things. The more you know the better...

I: What have you thought of this year's integrated classes in religion and secular ethics?

P37: It has been nice. But since I am Muslim it would be good if I could study Islam separately.

I: You'd like that more?

P37: Yeah.

I: What benefits would that have for you personally?

P37: Well... I really don't know that much about my own religion and I would like to know more things.

On the other hand, the majority of pupils felt that the integrative model provided them with sufficient knowledge, especially since they had already spent the most of their time in primary school RE learning about their own religious or worldview background. The pupils also remarked that the new model provided a space where they did not feel the pressure to adhere to a certain set of beliefs.

P3: It's like... when you have your own religion as a subject and it's separated and then when you discuss things in those classes, especially in primary school, there is a strong expectation that because you are in these classes, you automatically believe in these things too. But now in the integrated classes, it doesn't matter what religion you are in. And you don't have to... like in Orthodox Christian RE even the textbooks said "WE do things this way and God saves US". So it was somehow a given that if you are in these classes, then you also adhere to this religion, which was kind of uncomfortable... Now it's nice since it doesn't matter and you cannot single out pupils in the classroom.

The vast majority of the pupils interviewed felt that one of most significant advantages provided by the integrative model was the possibility to learn about worldviews through peers and the opportunity to encounter lived religiosity in the classroom, as opposed to learning from textbooks or from the teacher. This is considered important both for learning to understand others as well as for gaining general knowledge about worldviews.

I: Wouldn't it be possible to learn these same things from textbooks?

P28: Well of course, and we do learn things from textbooks, but now everyone brings something... or we discuss a lot in the classroom and everyone contributes with their own opinions and experiences and you learn really well from those things. For example I remember a lot better when someone tells me rather than when I read about things.

This form of peer learning was not felt to exert pressure on those pupils who were seen as representatives of certain religions. On the contrary, the pupils mentioned that being able to describe their own worldview or religion to other pupils with different worldviews was a positive experience.

I: Have you studied for example [the pupil's own minority religion]? How did it feel? Did the teacher single you out or anything like that?

P25: It was really nice! I enjoyed it a lot and I always gladly went to the classes and answered as many things as I could and then sometimes there were things that even the teacher did not know so I could provide the answers to those too. So I had the opportunity to contribute things that no one else knew.

I: That's really nice; so you enjoyed it?

P25: Very much so; I even got some attention from it!

I: How do you think the other pupils took it?

P25: I think it's good that you get information straight from the pupils and you can learn from that the same way as you can learn stuff from the things the teacher says. I think it's good that the pupils can contribute like that.

The pupils felt that the possibility of sharing experiences and learning from peers with different worldviews gave them the opportunity not only to gain more knowledge but also to increase their understanding and challenge their preconceptions.

I: What good things does the fact that you are studying together bring to your class?

P24: Well I think that when you are part of your cultural background you know very well how things are done in your own context. So it is like gaining more space not always to be with similar people but with different people. For example, I'd love to make friends with Muslims, to see things from their perspective, what it feels like to live here and make friends. That I would gain more perspectives, not always what I think but what they think.

I: Yes, is it somehow connected to the thing that you don't just receive new facts about religion but you would understand that person...?

P24: Yes, that I understand you, what you mean, and not just about learning things.

Discussion

Both the quantitative and qualitative data support the view that pupils strongly favour integrative WE and do not wish to be separated on the basis of their religious or non-religious background when studying about religions and worldviews. This result is in line with several international studies of RE. Moreover, both the survey and interviews support the view that the religious or non-religious background of pupils does not affect the experience of safety in the classes. Although there are pupils from various backgrounds in WE, the classroom is still regarded as a safe place where worldviews can be studied without excessive fear. This observation echoes those made in previous studies of integrative WE in Norway and England, where the pupils interviewed did not feel that their different religious backgrounds created tension or conflict in the classroom.³⁷ Moreover, there have been similar findings for other European adolescents, who do not see religion as an obstacle to tolerance. However, it is interesting to note that in our study, similar to the European data, pupils with a religious background were more likely to see religion as a positive force, while non-religious pupils seemed to express more negative sentiments towards the possible positive effects of religion.³⁸

It is also worthy of note that the pupils in this study saw integrative WE as a safe and open space to learn. In Finnish scholarly debate, the role religious background plays in the experience of safety has been a hotly contested issue. It has been argued both that a common religious background increases the safety and openness of the classroom in WE and, conversely, that segregated practice in Finnish WE creates alienation and feelings of otherness, especially among minority pupils.³⁹ The findings of this study, however, do not support the view that a common worldview background is a

precondition for creating a safe environment for learning in the WE classroom. It seems that pupils view other factors, such as remaining together with peers in the same class, the presence of friends and an atmosphere of tolerance as being more central in creating a sense of security in the WE classroom.

It is important to note that when discussing religion or worldview in a school context, we are not solely discussing the categories themselves. In real life, social categories are never fixed, uniform or harmonious; rather, they are dynamic, complex, context-bound and intersectional. In order to understand 'religion' or 'worldview', we must simultaneously look at many other factors, such as gender, social class, language or hierarchies in the class and ask how they intersect through different power relations and produce certain positions in a school social setting.⁴⁰ Thus, when pupils talk, for instance, about Islam, the term is used to refer to many trends and phenomena that might not be directly connected to the Islam itself. It should also be noted that in line with other studies of Finnish RE,⁴¹ the pupils in our research constantly emphasized the role of the teacher in fostering a safe learning environment. This indicates that rather than the model of WE, the teacher and her ability to reflect upon her work and encounter pupils in a spirit of openness and acceptance provides the most important foundation for a safe space to meet and learn about worldviews.

The pupils in our study saw peer-learning and the encountering of lived religion and worldviews as important and crucial parts of the integrated classroom. For them, it seemed significant for pupils – not just the teacher or teaching material – to be able to provide valuable knowledge in the class, knowledge which might even contradict the textbooks. As previous studies on segregative WE have shown, pupils value the knowledge they gain during WE lessons and prefer the acquisition of 'neutral' knowledge on religions to examining the possible ambiguous nature of worldviews and values.⁴² In the case of integrative WE however, the pupils also emphasized the importance of learning about the everyday and individual level of worldviews. This might be an effect of the pupils actually inhabiting a space where the pluralism of worldviews was apparent both between and inside different worldviews. The emphasis on lived religion rather than a monolithic understanding of world religions was apparent in the views of the pupils. As Schihalejev (2013) points out, pupils are likely to develop strategies that develop skills of dialogue and support personal development and social skills when they are created learning environments where religious diversity is visible and spoken about.⁴³

The pupils also enjoyed having the opportunity to present their own views and worldview practices to their classmates. However, as the European data suggests, the pupils do not enjoy the role of representative of a certain worldview.⁴⁴ In our data the pupils certainly saw the labelling of individuals as adherents of a certain worldview as a negative, but they also enjoyed sharing their own personal views to others. The pupils saw themselves more as individuals sharing their life and stories rather than as representatives of a certain worldview. This enforced the religiousness or adherence to worldview as lived, individual and personal. The question of how pupils are positioned in the integrated classroom is vital when discussing the future of WE; are they individuals or merely representatives defined from the outside. In addition to this it remains uncertain as to whether there are certain worldviews that are more readily acknowledged than others in the classroom and whether they have more visibility and voice in the classroom. This

question is also relevant in a larger societal setting as shown by a research by the Finnish Church Research Institute.⁴⁵ Furthermore, it is unclear whether tolerance in the classroom is created through the encountering and acknowledgement of differences or whether tolerance is a demand imposed on pupils that results in their reluctance to openly express themselves and in an over cautiousness in relation to religious topics. As with other European teenagers,⁴⁶ the pupils in this study were positive towards the possibility of dialogue between worldviews, but they still exhibited some reservations towards discussing religious differences for fear of insulting pupils with certain beliefs. As was shown in the REDCo projects, however, the fact that some pupils' state the wish to avoid conflict could allow 'conflict' to be used constructively in teaching and learning, even as a basis for dialogue.⁴⁷

In general both the quantitative and qualitative data support the view that pupils are positive towards the integrative model of WE. According to the pupils interviewed, the official form of segregated, non-confessional RE not only strengthened pupils' knowledge and identity vis-à-vis their own religion but also exerted pressure on them to share a certain set of religious beliefs. This is in accord with other findings on the subject.⁴⁸ Thus, Pupils experienced integrative WE as freedom from the pressure and expectations of having a specific identity and religious beliefs. However, some minority pupils, in particular Muslims, were worried that they would not acquire enough knowledge about their own worldview in these classes. These pupils felt that WE should be implemented in a more confessional manner, which would give them the necessary tools for strengthening their knowledge. In such responses, the participants clearly referred to their previous WE experience in a class of their 'own religion'. The notions held by the minority students is an important avenue for further research since the effects of the teaching of own religion on these pupils is contested.⁴⁹

The current Finnish RE model as education according to a pupil's 'own religion' (singular) has been criticized by scholars of intercultural education for its effect on pupils' construction of identity, as identity is commonly held to be a fluid, multi-layered entity, whereas current educational practice creates a dichotomy between pupils' own religion and other religions and worldviews.⁵⁰ The interview data support this criticism, with pupils emphasizing the individual and fluid elements of their religious identity, which were sometimes in conflict with the assumptions of teachers and certain textbooks in the segregated model of RE. The conceptualization of an individual's orientation to religions and life questions as *worldviews* instead of religiousness or non-religiousness seems to capture the fluid nature of identities and individual life-worlds.⁵¹

Moreover the religious identity of the younger generation differs markedly from that of the older generation: both national and international studies show that while the older generation identifies more strongly with a single religious denomination, individuals from the younger generation tend to lean towards a more eclectic approach to religious identity.⁵² Consequently, it is problematic to use

^d As a study by the Finnish Church Research Institute shows, among Finns the most negative images of religion are associated with Jehovahs Witnesses, Lestadianism (a revivalist moment of the Luthern Church), charismatic Christian movements, The Luther Foundation Finland, Mormons and Islam (Kirkon tutkimuskeskus 2012, 52–54) and it can be assumed that negative attitudes towards these religions or students representing these religions are mirrored at school.

the concept of a pupil's 'own religion'. Even though one of the aims of the recently published National Core Curriculum (NCCBE 2014)⁵³ is to teach about other religions at an earlier stage than was previously the case, the structural question of enabling dialogue between religions and worldviews will remain unresolved due to the segregated model adopted for teaching RE and secular ethics in Finland.

This study suggests that the removal of the physical separation of pupils during WE classes is an important change and improvement, and it is described in mainly positive terms by pupils themselves. One of the main factors behind the efficacy of integrative WE is the opportunity it offers for peer learning and sharing experiences. It is worthy of note that pupils describe learning from others not just in cognitive terms but also as a possibility for personal growth and widening their horizons. We argue that these are the most valuable elements of integrative WE, and they should be recognized in the current discussion on the future of WE in Finland. Contrary to the polarized public debate on religion and WE in school, this study argues that it is the ethical duty of schools to provide high-quality teaching of religions and worldviews and create educational spaces where different ways of life can meet or even conflict, in order to practise how difference can be respectfully encountered. There is intrinsic value in the importance pupils place on learning from their peers and thus broadening their horizons.

The question of how to organize RE and worldview education is extremely topical both in Finland and abroad.⁵⁴ It should be noted that while the findings of this study are case sensitive, they provide insight into the experiences of pupils and their conceptions of integrative WE as a possible space to learn about and from worldviews. More research is needed on integrative WE in the Finnish context, but the data seem to indicate that from a pupil perspective integrative WE can serve as a safe space to learn from and explore worldviews as part of the life-worlds of individuals in an increasingly heterogeneous school landscape.

Notes

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