



DEVELOPING PUPILS' SKILLS IN INTER-WORLDVIEW DIALOGUE

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INTRODUCTION

The encounter between different worldviews is one of the most current issues within the development of RE. Terrorist attacks and hate speech in the social media urge educators to provide tools for dealing with complicated issues and to remain moderate. Educators, for their part, need tools to promote understanding rather than merely giving information.

This article presents findings of a research project which took place around a local development project funded by the Integration Fund of the European Union. The aim of the project was to develop the practice of enhancing dialogue between worldviews in a school. In Finland RE is separative,¹ i.e. it is taught in religion-specific classes. The majority of pupils attend Lutheran RE, and in most schools the religious minorities are small. The national curricula for the different RE subjects and the non-religious option, *elämäkatsomustieto* (ethics and life stances, hereafter ET) also cover different religious and non-religious worldviews.² There was thus a need to shift borders between the RE subjects and make minority worldviews more visible in the school context. Additionally, new curricula to be implemented in 2016-2017 require education on inter-worldview dialogue³. How these methods were designed and tested and what the results will be unfolded in what follows. I will focus on the pupils'

¹ I prefer this term by Wanda **Alberts**, *Integrative Religious Education in Europe: A Study of Religions Approach* (Berlin: Gruyter, 2012), 1, to confessional, which has many connotations.

² See e.g. Tuula **Sakaranaho**, "Religious Education in Finland" – *Temenos*, 49/2 (2013), 225-254.

³ **National Board of Education**, *Perusopetuksen opetussuunnitelman perusteet* [Core Curriculum for Basic Education] (2014) http://www.oph.fi/saadokset_ja_ohjeet/opetussuunnitelmien_ja_tutkintojen_perusteet/perusopetus, accessed 11.11.2015.

experience, both reported by the pupils themselves and observed by the teachers.

INTER-WORLDVIEW DIALOGUE IN A SCHOOL CONTEXT

Leganger-Krogstad has pointed out that inter-religious dialogue in schools differs from religious dialogue among representatives of religions⁴. This is important to note when developing classroom activities. Many guidelines for dialogue⁵ are not suitable because e.g. openness cannot be imposed on pupils but has instead to be encouraged.

Leganger-Krogstad has presented the following types of dialogue: necessary dialogue (everyday conversation to help the speakers understand each other), structured dialogue in the role as pupils (empathetic work with religions and beliefs), and spiritual dialogue (a personal encounter that results in change)⁶. Of these structured dialogue comes closest to the focus of this project. Aims are emphasized instead of forms in distinguishing dialogue from everyday conversation. Dialogue in this project could be defined as supervised interaction aiming at a better understanding of the diversity of worldviews.

Jackson lists attitudes and skills that are necessary for a successful dialogue within RE: e.g. respect for the right of a person to hold a particular religious or non-religious viewpoint, openness to learning about different religions, the willingness to suspend judgment, and empathy. These can be developed through, for example, nurturing sensitivity to the diversity of religions and non-religious convictions, promoting dialogue between people from different backgrounds, addressing sensitive and controversial issues, and combating prejudice and stereotypes.⁷

⁴ Heid **Leganger-Krogstad**, *The Religious Dimension of Intercultural Education: Contributions to a Contextual Understanding* (Zürich: Lit, 2011).

⁵ E.g. Leonard **Swidler**, "Interreligious and Interideological Dialogue: The Matrix for All Systematic Reflection Today" – *Toward a Universal Theology of Religion*. Ed. Leonard Swidler (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1987), 6, 15.

⁶ Leganger-Krogstad, *The Religious Dimension*, 167.

⁷ Robert **Jackson**, *Signposts – Policy and Practice for Teaching about Religions and Non-religious World Views in Intercultural Education* (Strasbourg: Council of Europe, 2014), 34, 44.

If pupils are expected to share their views, the learning environment must be perceived as being safe. According to Jackson, the teacher needs to act as a moderator as pupils do not like conflicts related to religion or too open criticism of their beliefs from their peers. Teachers, for their part, need to provide accurate information on different religious traditions and be aware of the possible tensions between religious groups among their pupils. Minorities represent the most vulnerable groups in these situations.⁸ Schihalejev has shown that the teacher's use of closed questions and both positive reinforcement and disapproval of responses resulted in less contribution on the pupils' side because they led the pupils to think that the aim was to produce certain answers⁹.

McKenna, Igrave and Jackson carried out a research project in which two different kinds of primary school pupil groups had e-mail exchange on religion and values. The balance between free and supervised interaction, linking to the RE contents, and developing the quality of communication were recognized as challenges in dialogue activities.¹⁰

Josza observed classroom interaction when Christian and Islamic RE groups in Germany were at one point combined. Josza's analysis shows that the conflicts that arose were in part the result of a separative model of RE that does not allow space for interreligious encounter. Additionally, the teacher did not have the tools to reflect more deeply on the disagreements which could have led to a more constructive interaction.¹¹ This is especially interesting as the space for religious encounter is also a concern in the Finnish model.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 48-57.

⁹ Olga **Schihalejev**, "Dialogue in religious education lessons – possibilities and hindrances in the Estonian context" – *British Journal of Religious Education*, 31/3 (2009), 285-287.

¹⁰ Ursula **McKenna**, Julia **Igrave** and Robert **Jackson**, *Inter Faith Dialogue by Email in Primary Schools* (Münster: Waxmann, 2008), 116.

¹¹ Dan-Paul **Josza**, "Interreligious Dialogue in the Framework of Confessional Religious Education" – *Dialogue and Conflict on Religion: Studies of Classroom Interaction in European Countries*. Eds. Ina ter Avest, Dan-Paul Josza, Thorsten Knauth, Javier Rosón and Geir Skeie (Münster: Waxmann, 2009).

BASELINE OF THE LOCAL DEVELOPMENT PROJECT

The local development project on the inter-worldview dialogue project had some guiding principles which were partly derived from research literature and partly from the teachers' experience. First, a common presupposition that one has to know his/her own worldview thoroughly in order to participate in a dialogue was converted into another form: every pupil deserves support and sensitive treatment when representing a religious tradition or presenting his/her own developing personal worldview. In the case of Finland, support is usually provided by RE teachers who can explain practices and beliefs relying on their expertise in one specific religious tradition. Nonetheless, this is not always enough due to internal diversity of religions and the fact that not all the minorities have applied for RE in their own religion. Sensitivity is a more general requirement. Pupils should not be pressured into sharing their views or affiliation. If a clarification to a point made by a pupil is needed, it should be asked in a discreet manner.

Second, non-religious worldviews have to be included in the dialogue. Although it is not wise to exclude them from interfaith dialogue anywhere, at school it is necessary to take into account that not everybody is personally committed to a religion.¹² Themes or techniques must be used that also accept non-religious responses.

Third, the aim of dialogue is to increase mutual understanding. It is not gained if differences are downplayed or worldviews are considered too intimate¹³. The activities should also aim at examining meanings instead of mere external habits.

Fourth, certain stages can be observed in the development of dialogue skills. Streib has observed some levels in the dialogue skills from non-verbal methods to an openness to selfcritique. In his studies, the pupils also employed more complicated strategies when conversing with peers

¹² See also Mike **Castelli**, "Faith Dialogue as a Pedagogy for a Post Secular Religious Education" – *Journal of Beliefs and Values*, 33/2 (2012), 210-212.

¹³ Judith A. **Berling**, *Understanding Other Religious Worlds: A Guide for Interreligious Education* (New York: Orbis Book, 2004), 80, 89, 93.

than with adults.¹⁴ Abu-Nimer has introduced stages of interreligious sensitivity: e.g. denial, defence, minimization, acceptance, and adaptation. Denial means indifference to other worldviews than one's own. Defence is regarding other worldviews as a threat. Minimization entails the tendency to emphasize common aspects, and acceptance means a stage where a person feels comfortable with diversity. Abu-Nimer did not find adaptation to be suitable for interreligious development as typically religions are exclusive.¹⁵

In the project the Abu-Nimer model was used as a working frame of reference with two changes. First, adaptation was seen as an advanced level of acceptance, where other worldviews are allowed to enter the person's personal space e.g. by accepting adjustments in the environment to meet the other's needs. Second, the sixth stage was added, namely critical reflection¹⁶. It meant the ability to address controversial issues and to direct criticism towards practices of worldviews, including one's own. Using this stage model meant that different kinds of exercises were developed: displaying diversity of worldviews to lift pupils from the stage of denial or minimization, encountering real people to realise that people with other worldviews are not a threat, reflecting equality to approach the stage of adaptation, and conversational skills to tackle difficult issues.

Fifth, worldviews cannot be excluded from school but they have their impact on pupils wherever they are: different subject lessons, school festivities and traditions, and meal times. The project wanted to give pupils with strong religious or non-religious worldviews a sense of being accepted, to provide tools to deal with possible conflicts, and to turn diversity into a positive resource within the school community.

¹⁴ Heinz **Streib**, "Inter-Religious Negotiations: Case Studies on Students' Perception of and Dealing with Religious Diversity" – *Towards Religious Competence: Diversity as a Challenge for Education in Europe*. Eds. Hans-Gunter Heimbrock, Christoph Scheilke and Peter Schreiner (Münster: Lit, 2001).

¹⁵ Mohammed **Abu-Nimer**, "Conflict Resolution, Culture and Religion: Toward a Training Model of Interreligious Peacebuilding" – *Journal of Peace Research*, 38/6 (2001), 697-700.

¹⁶ E.g. Jackson, *Signposts*, 44.

RESEARCH DESIGN

Cycles of Reflection and Action

The local development project was launched in 2014 in Espoo, in the capital region of Finland. A fund was granted by the Integration Fund of the European Union to develop certain integration activities within comprehensive education in Espoo. Part of the project was devoted to producing material for interaction between worldviews in the spirit of the teacher-as-researcher movement. I coordinated the project along with my work as a fulltime RE teacher and provided it with a theoretical basis.

Nine teachers from different RE subjects and one arts teacher participated in the project. In the beginning we discussed their role in the research. Nobody was interested in a deeper commitment to the study but everybody promised to help in creating the data. The project thus had a twofold research status: the participant teachers were improving their work through critical reflection and by implementing something new, and at the same time I aspired to conduct an action research project that would achieve a suitably high academic level.¹⁷

The research followed the cyclic model provided by Macintyre where the general idea is followed by scanning the literature and discussing with colleagues. I gathered knowledge on previous projects as well as research on interfaith dialogue, and introduced them to the participating teachers. Some specialists in the practice of intercultural dialogue were also invited. During the spring and summer the elements we wanted to include became more precise, and we started getting ready for the next cycle, namely taking action.¹⁸

We finished the action plans in September 2014. Interventions were carried out in five schools as most of the participants worked in teams. To a large extent, the dialogue activities emerged from the participants' personal strengths and the cooperation models available in different schools. There was, however, a common pattern accepted by all participants, and I provided material to help implement it. The pattern was inspired by

¹⁷ See David **Hopkins**, *A Teacher's Guide to Classroom Research* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 2001), 1, 33.

¹⁸ Christine **Macintyre**, *The Art of Action Research in the Classroom* (London: David Fulton, 2000), 1.

McKenna, Ipgrave and Jackson¹⁹ and included the following elements: preparations, the actual encounter, and reflection within one's own group. The preparations included rousing interest, exploring one's own worldview, and giving the tools, like the concept of stereotyping, and the guidance to make questions.

By early 2015 we had finished the interventions and evaluated them in a discussion. The best practices were compiled into a teacher's manual, which was published in April. The manual was also influenced by the teacher-as-researcher movement as it encouraged the teacher to first examine the attitudes of the pupils and evaluate the process at the end.

Data

In the project I had two roles, one as researcher and one as participant teacher. As I worked as a fulltime teacher I was able to observe only my own participant group. After the evaluation of the project I also conducted another dialogue sequence with minor adjustments with another pupil group. Apart from my observation notes (partly written together with another teacher) from these sequences I have 34 diaries written by pupils. It was voluntary for pupils (mine as well as the others) whether they allowed permission to use this written material in the research. Pupils' reflection on the outcomes of the project was also expressed in the reflection lessons after the encounter with the other worldviews.

The picture from my own sequence is widened by other material. We had agreed on certain observation and feedback routines but these did not take place in all the schools. Five other participant teachers forwarded written feedback from altogether 42 pupils. The problem with this material (as well as the diaries of my own pupils) is that some pupils possibly evaluated the RE course as a whole, not only the dialogue sequence. Other teachers filled in observation forms from six lessons. The interventions were best documented in the evaluation discussion that was used for research purposes as a focus group interview. In this interview my double role was highlighted as I both reported my experience and led the discussion. These two roles could be performed sequentially, but I sometimes used my own experience to provoke discussion.

¹⁹ McKenna, Ipgrave and Jackson, *Inter Faith Dialogue*, 17-19.

I will focus on the three best-documented cases in which pupil feedback is also available. Still, all the teachers' observations brought up in the evaluation discussion are included. The data was read in relation to the objectives of the project, and signs of both success and failure were sought.

School A was the only one that had remarkable religious diversity among its pupils. There three joint lessons were given by ET, Islamic and Catholic RE teachers to their pupils at levels 7-9. Schools B and C were located in privileged areas and only had a handful of pupils with other religious affiliations than Lutheran. I worked in school B. Together with an ET teacher we combined a Lutheran RE class at level 7 (13-year-olds) and an ET group at levels 7-9 to host visiting panellists representing Catholic and Orthodox Christianity and Islam. The preparatory and the reflection lessons took place within groups tutored by their own RE or ET teacher. Later, in the second sequence, I invited three Muslim visitors to the lesson of another level 7 class, but on this occasion two of them cancelled. In school C a Lutheran RE class at level 7 made questions in a digital learning environment for an Islamic RE group at the same level in another school which did not participate fully in the project.

RESULTS

The following two subsections discuss to what extent the objectives of the project were reached. Finally, an overall reflection on the challenges and outcomes of the dialogue sequences is provided.

Emerging worldviews

In the intervention I conducted pupils were not required to represent Lutheranism. In the preparatory lessons they had the opportunity to reflect on their own worldview privately and share only what they chose to. The dialogue lesson consisted mostly of a one-direction interview rather than true dialogue, and the panellists were volunteers aged 16-22. On the second occasion the sole panellist was also encouraged to make questions, and some pupils answered them from the Lutheran side on a voluntary basis.

In the interventions conducted in schools A and C, the pupils prepared answers to possible questions within their own RE groups. In school C, though, the time ran out so only the Muslim pupils answered questions. Additionally, in school A and B the teachers introduced games and started with lighter subjects, like discussing first names, to warm pupils up in the encounter lessons. This was meant to create a safe space. The pupils did not report situations where they had to represent a tradition against their will.

There were differences in the relation of the teachers towards the contents of their own worldviews. The Roman Catholic and Islamic RE teachers had discussed with their pupils questions that were likely to come up and possible ways to answer them. The Lutheran teachers did not expect their pupils to answer the questions from others, but approached the issue from the personal worldview perspective, allowing the pupils to reflect freely and consider the idea that worldviews are not only possessed by religious people. The ET teachers did not use either of these techniques. These teachers considered that all of the courses were about reflecting one's own worldview. One of them even felt that it was inappropriate for her to indicate her convictions to her pupils. Many Lutheran RE and ethics teachers, however, considered that their pupils' consciousness about their own worldview had grown. For some Lutheran pupils this meant simply knowing the name of the church they were affiliated to.

The balance between personal worldview and membership from the pupil's perspective can be observed in the diaries of my pupils. I introduced my first group to an assignment where they individually reflected on their aims, values and views on eternity and then shared with others what they wished. This was experienced as difficult by many but truly fascinating by others. For all of them it was the first time they had reflected on these issues. One pupil felt that the task was embarrassing. Probably he/she referred to the sharing part. More attention could have been paid to creating a safe space, e.g. offering the pupils a possibility to talk in small groups with their friends.

As the evaluation discussion had directed my attention to the different positions in relation to the pupil's own RE subject, I designed for the second group an assignment where the pupils had to relate their own views to Lutheran Christian beliefs or practices. This, in turn, was regarded as easy

but also as boring by some, who reported “we already had this in primary school”. Some pupils’ reflections showed how the assignment and discussion on the responses shaped their worldviews:

“At first I did not really get how these [elements of religion presented by the teacher] were supposed to have a connection with Christianity because at that time I thought Christianity was a free faith without anything forbidden. After considering it for a while I understood it because we do have duties e.g. if you get confirmed or a christening of a child. (--) I started to believe more in the idea that God created the earth and that Jesus did really exist.”

“About my own worldview I noticed that I do not believe in God and the Bible and its interpretations almost at all, or in fact I think that in a way I balance between religion and science.”

The assignment that was not bound to the particular RE subject, however, provided more room for non-religious responses. Overall, non-religious convictions were approached in many ways. In school C the pupils took ‘selfie’ photos in the art lessons in order to express particular aspects of their identity. In school A, when religious objects and practices were presented, non-religious counterparts could not be provided. ET was introduced as a subject. This was supplemented by discussion on general subjects like ‘what is important in life?’. The problem with this approach was that no comparison of views occurred, since all the pupils mentioned universal values like friends and family. The reason may have been in the wordings or the context of the assignment, but also the first contributions may have affected the others. In school B there was no non-religious panellist but one of the ET pupils spontaneously contributed to the discussion with his non-religious worldview.

As to the issue how a conscious worldview is needed in order to participate in dialogue, one teacher pointed out in the evaluation discussion that a safe space was created by the fact that the pupils compared incomplete worldviews or identities with each other. This was reaffirmed by my pupils in our reflection lesson when I asked them about the importance of the visitors being young. The pupils said that it created a more relaxed atmosphere and made them feel able to ask questions without being regarded as ignorant. They also thought that they had more in common with a young person.

Understanding and solving conflicts

Increasing mutual understanding was primarily addressed in the form of posing questions. The idea was to educate the pupils to postpone their judgements until they had gained an understanding of the topic. Simultaneously, it was considered important to allow the pupils to choose at least some of the topics according to their interests.

The questions posed in the panels in school B and in the digital intercourse were saved. The range of questions varied from details (“Who was the mother of Mohammad?”) and basics (“Do you have a holy book?”) to practicalities (“What do Muslims do in their spare time?”, “How do you swim with a scarf?”) and society (“Do you face many prejudices in Finland?”). Some questions dealt with negative connotations like “Is a Muslim allowed to get acquainted with other religions?” or “Can a woman refuse marriage?”. Some sought understanding of a practice like fasting or wearing a veil. These last two kinds of questions supported the objectives of the project well.

Although guidelines for making questions had been covered, some teachers felt that some of the first formulations were inappropriate. This suggests that practice in this kind of activity is needed. Simultaneously, the power of dialogue in solving conflicts was not tested because issues that might lead to dissonance were avoided. The tendency of young people to avoid discussion for fear of conflict has been reported in research²⁰. In school B pupils mentioned in the reflection lesson a few questions that they did not want to ask the panellists for fear of causing tensions like “Why do all but one of the Muslim panellists wear a skirt?”. Another reason for not wanting to ask was the fear of appearing ignorant. Some pupils suggested that there should be a possibility of writing the questions down on pieces of paper or discussing in smaller groups.

According to the teachers, only in school A was there a short heated debate on Jesus, the Trinity, and *jihad* possibly due to the fact that the pupils were familiar with each other. These tensions were, however, solved as the pupils themselves clarified their positions. Overall, the time limits and the age level of most of the pupils also made it difficult to develop critical thinking skills.

²⁰ Kerstin von Brömssen, *Tolkningar, förhandlingar och tystnader: Elevers tal om religion i det mångkulturella och postkoloniala rummet* (Göteborg: Göteborg Universitet, 2003), 329.

One of the teachers reported a discouraging incident. Pupils with whom she had just discussed ways of being respectful towards other people's worldviews showed the opposite kind of behaviour during school lunch. There may be a problem in transferring skills or attitudes from one context to another²¹.

The results concerning the transformation from theory into action also remained modest. When asked in their diaries in school B how peaceful encounters and equality between worldviews could be enhanced, the pupils mostly referred to education about religions and worldviews or arranging similar dialogue sessions for more people. Obviously, the encounter was a powerful experience at least for school B pupils, who are located in a neighbourhood with little diversity.

Benefits and challenges

The overall feedback of the pupils was mostly (63%) positive. One fourth gave both positive and negative evaluations, and only 12% solely negative. Two pupils stated that they were simply not interested in the topic. Thus, the project could not lift them from the Abu-Nimer model's stage of denial²². One negative feature that was referred to was other pupils' distracting behaviour. There was also a critique of teachers talking too much. Sometimes preferences conflicted, like when some pupils wanted to have 'less talk and more action' and others 'more talk and fewer games'. One pupil also felt that exercises on making questions were useless for her as she already knew how to treat people. Diverse starting levels are clearly a challenge for any subject.

In school A many Muslim pupils reported having learnt that 'elämänkatsomustieto [ET] is not a religion'. For them the project meant understanding that non-religious worldviews also exist and are taught in school. It is true that the contents of other RE subjects or ET is seldom addressed within RE.

It seems that the project provided new kinds of reflexivity and

²¹ See Marie von der Lippe, "Scenes from a Classroom: Video Analysis of Classroom Interaction in Religious Education in Norway" – *Dialogue and Conflict on Religion: Studies of Classroom Interaction in European Countries*. Eds. Ina ter Avest, Dan-Paul Jozsa, Thorsten Knauth, Javier Rosón and Geir Skeie (Münster: Waxmann, 2009).

²² Abu-Nimer, "Conflict Resolution, Culture and Religion", 697.

applicability to the normally informative contents of RE. Pupils wrote for instance: "It made me think", "It provided me with more confidence and skills", "I learn better this way than reading a book!".

The most important result of the dialogue sequences for many pupils was that they changed their preconceptions related to some religions or inter-worldview dialogue. This was stated both in the reflection lessons and in the diaries. Most of the changed stereotypes concerned Islam.

One pupil wrote: "I realized most how all the religions have something in common. HUMANITY. Everybody believes in something." At first glance, this could be identified as the minimization stage in Abu-Nimer's model,²³ namely downplaying the diversity of religions. On the other hand, it shows that a necessary step before acceptance is to realize that despite different worldviews people have the same needs. Understanding this is probably more a matter of emotions than reason. In the McKenna, Ipgrave and Jackson project one consideration was balancing between creating friendship and talking about religion²⁴. This was also faced by the Lutheran RE teacher in school C as she noticed that sharing Instagram usernames with the previously unknown dialogue counterparts distracted the pupils' attention to the assignment.

One aspect of the teacher experience is important in the evaluation of the project as a whole, namely, constant running out of time. The 45-minute lesson is a short time to create an atmosphere for dialogue to pass beyond the surface level. One RE lesson a week with other curricular topics to cover means difficult choices if 4-6 lessons are devoted to dialogue skills. Finally, a sequence of 4-6 lessons can only help the pupils take one step towards an understanding of diversity. This means that some challenges in conducting dialogue education within RE are beyond the power of a single teacher.

CONCLUSION

My double role as participant and researcher in this project probably had both benefits and drawbacks. Doing research and working simultaneously limited the possibilities of gathering data and of having an outsider's

²³ *Ibid.*, 698-699.

²⁴ McKenna, Ipgrave and Jackson, *Inter Faith Dialogue*, 59-60, 116.

perspective on the classroom events. At the same time I knew the research-based objectives of the project well and was committed to them. A critical stance towards both practice and intervention is a vital part of any action research project.

In all, the project reached some of its aims, but not all of them. However, those aims that were achieved did prove to be meaningful. Creating a dialogue curriculum that would address various age levels and allow gradual development might help to reach the other objectives.

There were both benefits and drawbacks in the context of separative RE. Teachers with expertise concerning particular religions were available, and some issues could be addressed within one's 'own' group. On the other hand, cooperation between teachers took time, and so did warming pupils up for a short dialogue sequence. The challenge in both separative and integrative RE is that when the majority is so large it is difficult to find counterparts for a dialogue for every majority RE group. More consideration could also be invested in addressing the pupil's religious community.

Some aspects of the project are clearly worthwhile. First, the encounter with other people seemed to give RE a connection to praxis. Second, rousing empathy and giving practical tools for communication gave the pupils confidence in the possibility of peaceful dialogue. Third, different techniques may be introduced to protect the pupils' diverse and fragile, non-religious or religious identities. And finally, dialogue skills require conscious and longterm education. This might well mean adjustments in other parts of the curriculum.