



Teaching Islamic education in Finnish schools: A field of negotiations

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ABSTRACT

The challenges of contemporary multicultural societies have resulted in changing aims for religious education and the necessity to adjust teacher education accordingly. The processes of negotiation related to the coexistence of different religious and cultural groups are intertwined in the Finnish curriculum for religious education. This case study examines three Islamic education teachers who negotiated intra- and inter-religious tensions as well as tensions between societal and religious orientations of education. Through their ideological, pedagogical and interpersonal negotiations teachers can mediate the contested practices of Islam as well as the ideals of liberal democracies and contribute to the emergence of Finnish Islam.

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1. Introduction

According to [Thomas Popkewitz \(1997\)](#), the curriculum is “the practice of social regulation and the effect of power” related to state authority, and includes standards of truth that direct individuals to understand the world in a certain way. Educational theorists increasingly perceive the curriculum as a social construction that is shaped by historical and cultural factors. It can be seen as a process of negotiation and social practice existing between social context and individuals ([Hökkä, Eteläpelto, & Rasku-Puttonen, 2010](#)). In this study, the Finnish curriculum for religious education is understood to reflect the negotiations of the coexistence of different religious and cultural groups as well as ideologies in Finnish society and more generally the negotiations between minorities and dominant cultures in modern multicultural societies. The focus is on the emergence of these negotiations in the context of Finnish Islamic education and in the ways in which Islamic education teachers mediate them. In this way, the practices of social regulation and ways of changing people associated with the curriculum will be recognised as well as the standards of truth that guide the practices of teaching.

The need to reconsider educational orientations for religious education teachers has increased in times of cultural change: the challenges of contemporary multicultural societies have resulted in

changing aims for religious education and the necessity to adjust teacher education accordingly ([Bakker & Heimbrock, 2007, 7–8](#)). Even though there is a great variety of approaches to religious education, in general a shift from confessionalism to liberal approaches is observable ([Barnes, 2007](#)). This means that religious socialisation has been replaced with more distanced and objective ways of studying religion as well as with an increased focus on social aims, such as tolerance and respect for difference. In the contemporary situation, where the relationship between culture and religion has become more complex ([Roy, 2010](#)), religions are battling for authenticity and barriers are built between exclusivist religiosity and the secular world ([Hull, 2006](#)), the significance of religious education is seen as preventing the political instrumentalisation of religion and contributing to dialogue. Religions are increasingly considered to contribute to tolerance. Religious education in which students are seen as actors in their own traditions and encouragement towards the critical consideration of religious influences comes from insiders within religious groups might have a vital role in enhancing this positive role of religions, because students with a commitment to an absolute religious truth are not easily affected by educational interventions which judge their religion from the outside ([Hull, 2006; Skeie, 2006](#)).

These perspectives have also affected the curricula for religious education in Finland. According to the Freedom of Religion Act ([Uskonnonvapauslaki, 2003](#)), students have the right to their own religious education if there are a sufficient number of students belonging to the same religious affiliation in the same area. Currently there are 13 different curricula for religious education

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in Finnish schools. However, the content and aims of religious education are not constructed according to the interests of religious communities, and religious instruction is no longer defined as confessional in nature. In practice, this means that religious practice in the classroom is prohibited and the aims of religious socialisation have been replaced with goals which concern the students' personal development. The Finnish national core curriculum for religious education stresses both the acquisition of knowledge and the personal development of pupils (Finnish National Board of Education, 2004). Even though the focus is on students' own religious tradition, other religions are also covered and one of the main goals of religious education is to educate the students' readiness to encounter plurality in their environment. Thus, it is possible to regard religious education as a space for negotiating the coexistence of different religious groups in a multicultural society.

The Muslim population in Finland only began to grow in the late 1980s. Over the past few decades the number of Muslims in Finland has rapidly increased, but the Muslim population is still relatively small – approximately 0.8 per cent of the Finnish population (Martikainen, 2009). Finland has long been regarded as quite a homogeneous nation, most of its population (nowadays roughly 80 per cent) belonging to the Evangelic Lutheran Church. When an awareness of the Islamic presence in Finland awoke in the 1990s, it was considered alien and threatening, and the general opinion concerning Muslims is still negative (Martikainen, 2009; Sakaranaho, 2006, 252–253). However, educational policies are a good example of efforts that have been made to make the Finnish mainstream more sensitive to cultural and religious diversity.

Education in Islam is a relatively new phenomenon in Finnish schools. When the first curriculum for Islam was drafted in the 1990s, the nature of Islamic education was clearly confessional. The new National framework curriculum for Islam, designed after the Freedom of Religion Act came into effect in 2003, was not made in close co-operation with the Muslim communities, although some Muslim teachers were consulted (Sakaranaho, 2006, 359). Instead of religious socialisation, the 2006 Curriculum for Islam declared the strengthening of students' Islamic identity to be a goal of Islamic education (Finnish National Board of Education, 2006a, 2006b). According to the curriculum, students should be aided in understanding the significance of Islam for themselves and for society. Education in Islam should also aim at helping pupils to understand, and interact with, those who think and behave differently. Despite the marked plurality of the Muslim population, due to practical limitations only one kind of Islamic education, "general Islam", is being offered. This necessarily positions Islamic education as a space for negotiating the coexistence of different Muslims. Even though researchers are talking about "the emergence of local Islams in Europe", due to the ethnic and cultural diversity of migrant Muslims and the fact that these subgroups often form their own associations, it has sometimes been difficult to improve co-operation between them (Buijs & Rath, 2002; Jensen, 2010).

The challenges facing Islamic education are numerous: there is a lack of teaching material, teachers are obliged to circulate between numerous schools, classes are heterogeneous and parents of Muslim pupils are sometimes very demanding (Sakaranaho, 2006, 373–382). Furthermore, only a few teachers have formal qualifications for this challenging job. However, there are teachers who are very active in developing Islamic education as a school subject and in improving the position of its teachers: in the beginning of 2011 The Association for Finnish teachers of Islamic education was established. According to a qualitative interview study, teachers of Islam support this present way of organising religious education according to the

students' own religion which, according to them, best takes into account the interests of minorities and the majority, as well as facilitating the integration of Muslims into Finnish society (Lempinen, 2002, 106, 120).

The Finnish curriculum combines liberal and confessional approaches to religious education, the former offering knowledge about religions but primarily aiming at the well-being of society, the latter supporting religious socialisation and students' religious development. This requires teachers to mediate between the self-understanding of religions and the social aims of education prominent in the liberal democratic context. Thus, religious education becomes a meeting point of societal and religious viewpoints and a space for negotiating the possibility of committing to the common values of liberal democracies while still holding on to a particular religious tradition. According to Moran (2006), maintaining a fruitful tension between the nation state and religion can be seen as one of the most important roles of religious education. Religious education can also provide a context for evaluating politically and ideologically loaded topics, such as clashes between the ideals of religious traditions and modern liberal democracy (see Gearon, 2006). These perspectives seem to fit quite naturally into the Finnish curriculum for religious education that positions teachers as mediators in negotiations between religion and society. In this way, RE teachers play a significant role in mediating politics and religion (Skeie, 2006, 317).

Recognising the teachers' need to mediate the negotiations connected with the curriculum for religious education indicates a shift of focus from the role of the RE teacher simply as a transmitter of religious tradition towards more transformative aspects of teaching. Balancing between conserving and critical practices of teaching has been a widely debated subject among philosophers of education. Mark Mason (2000) has attempted to overcome this juxtaposition by representing teachers as socio-cultural critics and critical mediators of knowledge. He regards teaching as both a conserving practice reproducing socio-cultural arrangements and as a subversive practice making cultural practices accessible to students and helping them to see the socially constructed nature of their assumptions. In this way, the teachers should deepen the students' understanding of the norms in which they are socialised (Mason, 2000). This kind of way of helping students make their own informed choices about socio-cultural practices has also become a common goal for religious education. However, in educational research concerning religion in schools, it is often assumed that teachers are "neutral agents of the state", and discussions centre on students and religion with no attention paid to how teachers' religious views affect their ways of implementing the curriculum (White, 2009).

Furthermore, these kinds of transformative roles for teachers are not encouraged by market-oriented policy makers, who seem to prefer an uncritical celebration of different voices with no need to educate the students' critical capacities (Niyozov & Pluim, 2009). However, according to Hargreaves (2003, 2), meeting the challenges of knowledge societies in a global community requires that "teaching and teachers will reach far beyond the technical tasks of producing acceptable test results, to pursuing teaching as a life shaping, world-shaping social mission again". The increased permeability of schools have made it necessary to engage more intensively with groups outside of schooling and take their concerns into account, actively creating trust and respect by negotiating common values and principles with these groups (Hargreaves, 2000; Sachs, 2000). Thus, there is a need to consider teachers' perspectives in order to keep in mind the complexity of the interactions integral to their profession and to fight against the deprofessionalisation of teaching (Niyozov, 2010, 36).

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