

Das wissenschaftlich- religionspädagogische Lexikon im Internet

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Jahrgang 2016

Religionsunterricht in Finnland

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erstellt: Februar 2020

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1. General framework

The official name of the subject is Religion (*Uskonto*). The subject was established in the state educational system in the 1860's as part of the development of the system. During that time, Finland was part of Russian empire. Prior to that, basic education in Finland was a responsibility of the Lutheran Church.

2. Legal framework

Today the organising of religious education (RE) in public education is a responsibility and task of the state. In principle, the basis for the RE solution in Finland was formulated in 1920's (Ubani/Tirri, 2014; Kallioniemi/Ubani, 2016). During that time, Religion (and an alternative subject for the non-members of the Lutheran Church: History of Religions and moral instruction) was connected with the Finnish constitution. The organisational basis for teaching RE in a municipality was formulated to be based on the religion of the majority in the municipality. However, the negative right to withdraw from Religion was legitimised in the educational system, too, and also the cases of being exempt from state education (Jehovah's Witnesses, Adventists).

In 2000's, the positive right to freedom of religion was re-verified as a part of the constitutional reform. However, the educational laws also stipulate that education in public schools is to be non-confessional and non-political. In order to take into account both positive and negative rights to freedom of religion and non-confessionality in public education, religious education was defined to be given "according to one's own religion": the wording was changed from confessional respectively (National Core Curriculum for Basic Education, 2014). In practice this means that the student is familiarised with his or her own tradition but the integrity of personal convictions is secured, the instruction does not include devotional elements and the objectives do not include faith formation. In concrete, there are now eight different denominational syllabi for one subject Religion in effect that have been developed for the current national core curriculum for basic education (2014). The National Board of Education is in charge of devising the curriculum but invites representatives of the minorities to contribute in the process. Also, in this reform the qualification of the teacher was stipulated to be completely based on education combined with religious studies

and not on membership of the religious tradition. However, the institutional instruction in religious education is still relatively uniform in Finland as about 85 percent of students take part in Lutheran Religion and similarly 90 percent of Finnish eight-graders (aged 14-15 years) take part in confirmation education of the Lutheran Church (Saarelainen, 2018; Ubani/Tirri, 2014).

3. Didactical conception and task of RE

In Finland, until 1980's and 1990's many of the didactical conceptions of religious education was influenced by the German conceptions of contextualised religious education and problem-centred approaches in Religious Education and by existential questions/themes approaches from the UK and also Sweden. These still provide the basis for religious education. Currently, the didactical conception can be described as diverse: there is no strong theoretical model. However, the aforementioned influences are still present in much of the instruction. On the other hand, Religious Education in schools is becoming increasingly an application of educational sciences. Today the task of RE is to give a broad knowledge of religion and to support the development of the student's worldview. When RE is compared to other basic education subjects there are certain specific characteristics such as integrative practice, intimate interaction, critical thinking and holistic knowledge that characterise RE in schools (Kallioniemi/Ubani, 2016).

4. Ways to deal with religious diversity

The outcome is a segregated denomination-based model: Religious Education is taught according to one's own religion. If there are a minimum of five students belonging to the same religious background in the same municipality, there will be provided their respective Religion if their guardians wish so and if there is a syllabus for the respective religion. If not, the students attend Lutheran Religion, Ethics or a "proximate" Religion. There are three to four parallel Religion and Ethics lessons usually taught at school. However, today there are also increasingly integrated forms of instruction given in larger cities.

5. Current challenges concerning framework, conceptions or „reality“

Currently, challenges in the system include a lack of qualified teachers in the minorities's Religions. Furthermore, the class teachers of majority Religion (Lutheran) often lack motivation in teaching such a challenging but little appreciated subject. In addition, the organization of parallel instruction is problematic: sometimes students have to be brought from different schools for a

lesson and the lessons are taught at inconvenient hours. There is still some concern about the increasing number of religions in the curriculum. In addition, there have been some initiatives for the division between the Russian Orthodox/Greek Orthodox and the Sunni/Shia Islam in syllabi. The perhaps fundamentally most concerning issue is that during the past five years there has been a school-based and municipality-based integration of instruction that neglects the legislative grounds of Religious Education. Integrating some portions of internal faith instruction by pedagogical arguments is, however, supported by the current curriculum. Some recent arguments for integrative practices have started to include the need for dialogue. However, much of the integration in practice is not well-informed or research-based.

Regarding the handling of religion in public education, there is one development in recent years that may be of importance when discussing the religious education future. In short, the schools have gradually been moving from isolating religion to Religious Education lessons and objective handling of religion to a more *culturalised* handling of religion in schools (Ubani, 2019). While the former is connected to the secularization thesis, the latter form neglects the truth-claims of religion and emphasizes the practices and customs of religions and stems from a type of multiculturalism. In my opinion, we are heading toward some type of pragmatic liberal school and that this is part of the process. As the cultural aspects of religions is now being emphasized in the new curriculum in upper secondary education, too, there are some developments – in addition to research – that may prove to be foundational elements concerning the development of Religious Education into an integrated subject, perhaps comparable to the Quebec solution.

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Empfohlene Zitierweise

Ubani, Martin, Art. Religionsunterricht in Finnland, in: Wissenschaftlich Religionspädagogisches Lexikon im Internet (www.wirelex.de), 2020

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Impressum

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