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Article

# Why Teach about Religions? Perspectives from Finnish Professionals

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**Abstract:** Acknowledging recent research literature on professionalism and religious education across Europe, the article examines the scholars' and senior professionals' views on the curricula aims and objectives in religious education in Finland. Through asking the professionals' views on the aims of RE in relation to supporting of child's growth and development on one hand and the societal aims of RE on the other, the findings were thematically classified into the following categories. Firstly, the aims regarding the supporting of child's growth and development were focused on literacy on religions and worldviews, increasing the understanding on oneself and others, personal growth, and the skills for global citizenship. From the societal perspective, RE was seen important for supporting the understanding as literacy, understanding as empathy, and competences for global citizenship. Finally, as regards the educational model of teaching about religions, these professionals held somewhat varied views. Some favoured an RE model based on teaching groups reflecting children's own worldview affiliations, others supported whole-class instruction, and still others a hybrid model combining elements of both. However, the way in which the instruction is implemented and the position from which religions are examined in education were perceived to be in a key role in this, whatever the formal structures for instruction.

**Keywords:** professionals; religion; education; aims; literacy; Finland

## 1. Introduction

Lifelong learning of educational professionals involves continuous reflexivity and development. This process includes negotiations between the old and new whenever curriculum guidelines, or the paradigms of teaching and learning, or the methods or age group or organization of teaching groups are renewed and updated. This process sometimes involves elements of juggling between the particular aims of education and instruction from the perspective of the developing child versus the society.

Acknowledging recent research literature on professionalism and the Religious Education (RE) profession across Europe (Baumfield 2010, 2015, 2016; Conroy 2016; Freathy et al. 2016; Grunder 2016; Heil and Ziebertz 2004; Ubani 2016; Vargas-Herrera and Moya-Marchant 2016), this article provides an examination of Finnish RE professionals' views on the curricula aims and objectives in religious education as embedded in the particular sociohistorical context.

Theoretically the article is grounded in the literature of teacher professionalism and cognizant of the multi-disciplinary debate around religion in public life, and the related framings of political theology that demarcate discussions of secularity, secularism and secularization in religious education (Author, various dates; Berger 1999; Bruce 2002; Casanova 1994, 2009; Chaves 1994; Davie et al. 2008; Habermas 2008; Habermas and Ratzinger 2008; Lewin 2017; Micklethwait and Wooldridge 2009; Stark 1999; Taylor 2007) and as part of the formation of values in education more widely (Arthur 2013;

Arthur and Lovat 2013; Carr 2011, 2013). Its empirical evidence is based on the accounts of religious education among Finnish academics involved in research and teaching of education on religions and worldviews in the Finnish universities and other educational institutions.

This study thus provides perspectives to how highly experienced professionals perceive the religious education aims and the RE teaching model as embedded in the societal educational system; in the context of heated and highly contested societal and political debates on the role of religion in increasingly secularized Finnish society.

## 2. Life Trajectory Approach to Professionalism

The here reported data is a part of a wider examination of professional trajectories and the there embedded expert views of the highly professional religious and worldview education experts regarding how they negotiate their position in the heated societal and political debate on the position of RE as their subject of teaching and research (Kuusisto and Gearon 2017a, 2017b). Besides being embedded in a particular societal situation, this value positioning also takes place throughout the individual's professional trajectory, where one has to take into account the altering sociohistorical context with its particular challenges and contestations (e.g., Luodeslampi and Kuusisto 2017). Even though the here reported study does not analyse the longitudinal trajectories of the participants, also these views are embedded in a particular time-space-continuum, both in terms of the life trajectory approach to/and professionalism and as regards the RE model and its contestations in the changing Finnish societal setting.

In *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, Durkheim (2008) advanced a theory of religion that was also a theory of value, postulating in people in a given society making 'a god' out of what they place their highest value in. Drawing on the anthropological literature of his day, for Durkheim, this notional god- and value-creation was nowhere better and materially embodied than in the totem, as a figure of power and mystical significance. Mary Douglas (2002) would later frame totem as a symbol of purity and danger—a symbolic externalized form which determined collective actions and held sway over individual motivations. Metaphorically, our approach combines an exploration of determinant values in the context of the accounts of our research participants. Our synthesis of value learning and life trajectory research approach is dependent then on listening and giving voice to narrative reflections on the shaping of life stories and those impetuses and motivations, life events and formative influences, which interact in complex way to take (auto-)biographical form. Our approach is part of the wider dependence on language which is the essence of course of all qualitative research methods in the social sciences (Cohen et al. 2017; Flick 2014; Punch and Oancea 2014; Robson and McCartan 2015). Distinguishing, as (Gadamer 2004, p. 4) once put it, the framing of law and regulation in the natural sciences from the messier forms of knowledge which are part of human life and experience, the 'sociohistorical world': "... the specific problem the human sciences present to thought is that one has not rightly grasped their nature if one measures them by the yardstick of a progressive knowledge of regularity". The life trajectory approach, in specific narrative ways, here the lives of value-seeking professionals, seeks then "to understand the phenomenon itself in its unique and historical concreteness" (Gadamer 2004, p. 4).

We are aware here, as with Durkheim, that what shapes individual values, is influenced by and embedded in societal and political complexities. Life trajectory research is not simply then an exploration of individual lives but life biographies in the value-forming contexts of the political and societal. In terms of values acquisition, development and learning in the life trajectory we have defined as a process of socio-politically, often human-rights determined choices from a (socio-politically, human rights determined) 'spectrum of values', deviations against are determined as extreme, radical, even societally threatening (Kuusisto and Gearon 2017a, 2017b; Gearon and Kuusisto 2017). All of this makes our life trajectory research multi-levelled in terms of ethical framing of value determination in professional contexts all the more interesting, as we set professional value positions and choices in the main focus (on 'narrative ethics', see Baldwin 2017; Bolen and Adams 2017; Denzin 2017; Reed 2017;

Vicars 2017; also Andrews 2017; Bolen and Adams 2017; Phoenix 2017; Plummer 2017; Sandino 2017; Tamboukou 2017). The synthesis of value learning and life trajectory research is not merely the study of how individuals learn, and understanding those values which guide their lives, but an approach which incorporates such value learning as part of—and in its turn potentially influential on—societal and political formation.

Building on our previous conceptualization of value learning trajectories (Kuusisto and Gearon 2017a, 2017b), our epistemological and methodological perspective thus combines theories of value construction, socialization and change in temporal and spatial context (Bronfenbrenner 1979; Sameroff 2010; Kuusisto 2011; Bardi et al. 2014; Bardi and Goodwin 2011; Bertaux 1981), with the use of biographical and narrative methods in life history research (Atkinson 1998; Bathmaker and Harnett 2010; Bertaux 1981; Goodson et al. 2017; Sikes and Everington 2001). Our life trajectory methodology aims to penetrate to the personal heartland of value orientation and decision-making from empirical data in which the nuance of professional voice as narrative biography is less heard. With Bertaux (1981), we note that “life stories constitute a constant reminder of the existence and relevance for social life of the singularity of persons, of their historicity, of their acts and what they mean to them, they are disturbing for sociology’s project to eventually become a natural science”.

### 2.1. Professionalism and Professional Expertise

Our examination here among religious educational professionals was carried out through a case study among Finnish academics involved in the research and teaching of education on religions and worldviews in the Finnish universities and other educational institutions. The aim was to look into the accounts of the highly professional individuals on negotiating their position in the heated societal and political debate on the position of their subject, education on religions and worldviews—or Religious Education and the non-religious Ethics option—in a societal situation where the present teaching model is highly contested. The viewpoint in our examination derives from the previous literature on professionalism (e.g., Karila 2008; Karila and Nummenmaa 2005), value socialization and change in temporal and spatial context (e.g., Bardi et al. 2014; Bardi and Goodwin 2011), and our previous conceptualization of value learning trajectories along personal life histories (Kuusisto and Gearon 2017a, 2017b) based on the literature on life history approach (Goodson et al. 2017; Sikes and Everington 2001).

*Professionalism* or *professional expertise* has here, in line with Karila (2008), been seen to include sociocultural, legislative, and political questions and matters related to working communities and individuals working within these. Furthermore, *professional development* has been understood to encompass three dimensions that together construct the foundation for the individual professionalism. Firstly, a personal dimension of Self and personal life history; secondly the specialized knowledge related to the topic area, and thirdly, the work environment. The interplay between these is embedded in the cultural context of the society—thereby the professional expertise is situated and cultural, with a personal dimension (Karila 2008). Additionally, professionalism includes the core areas of work specific to the nature of the occupation. Karila (2008) and Karila and Nummenmaa (2001, 2005) write about the Finnish educational setting, using the early childhood contexts as a case, detecting various areas of expertise. Firstly, they refer to contextual knowhow includes one’s interpretations of the operational environment and the core aims of the profession—acknowledging the societal and cultural underpinnings, legislative and other framing for the carrying out of the work in question. Secondly, another important area of expertise is substance knowledge, which here would include the academic and theoretical knowledge related to research as well as the content knowledge on religions, worldviews, as well as the knowledge on the educational, didactic and other knowledge related to the teaching and supervision in all levels; together forming the pedagogical content knowledge needed in the teaching and supervision of students (of e.g., RE subject teachers, and kindergarten/primary class teachers) at the universities and other educational institutions. Thirdly, Karila and Nummenmaa write about co-operation and interaction which are an essential part of research and teaching; both within the academia and in the dissemination of research findings to the media and to policy makers and

practitioners. Fourthly, there is the knowhow related to continuous professional development through one's career trajectory. (Karila 2008; Karila and Nummenmaa 2001, 2005).

## 2.2. Old and New Diversities in Finnish Worldview Landscape

In placing the present study—the context within which these professionals work within—we will present an overview of Finland's broader societal worldview landscape in the following. Vertovec (2015) provides an insightful perspective on the layered and situated effects of 'old' and 'new' diversities and how these can also replicate segregation, inequality and conflict in a society. The old religious diversity in the Finnish societal landscape includes a long history of, for example, Tatar and Jewish communities and various Christian minority groups. More recently, the societal worldview landscape has been gradually complemented with 'new diversity' due to amplified migration, secularization, and a growing interest in new religious movements and spirituality among Finns. Many issues relating to religious or worldview diversity in societal educational settings have so far gone somewhat unattended: the number of minority background pupils was long scarce enough for the policy makers not to be compelled to create designated adjustments to suit every particular educational practice. Rather, these have been made case by case, through negotiating with the family—or if the parents have not brought up any 'issues', the minority perspectives may simply have gone unrecognized.

Besides the increasing mosaic of worldview traditions in the society, the traditional Christian elements have secularized rapidly, whereas the interest in 'new religions' or spiritual interpretations has increased. Religious membership and commitment connected to the traditional institutionalized Christianity are diminishing and religious worldviews are becoming increasingly privatized. These changes are significant both politically and socially, and hold several implications to aims and practices of societal instruction on religions and worldviews. Furthermore, due to the decrease in religious education in homes and communities, the individual agency of children and youth holds an increasingly important role in navigating in the maze of alternative worldviews. The determining and continuous re-evaluation of personal choices related to values, worldviews and memberships in individual life trajectories is increasingly left for the children and youth themselves. Traditionally, one of the aims of religious education has been to support the children and youth in these choices as a part of their growth and development. Historically, Lutheranism has formed an important part of national and moral societal hegemony in Finland, also informing schooling. Traces of this are still trackable: although presently in an increasingly secularized form, Lutheranism holds strong ties to societal hegemony and construction of Finnishness. Many educational practices can be seen as 'marinated in Lutheran Protestantism', as Berglund (2013) puts it in the Swedish setting. Furthermore, the secular Lutheran hegemony is closely connected with the construction of 'Finnishness' (Lappalainen 2006, 2009; Riitaoja et al. 2010) and the boundaries between 'us' and 'them', which can also be othering in educational settings, if it excludes, besides 'other' religions than Lutheranism, also 'religious' Lutheranism (Riitaoja et al. 2010; Poulter et al. 2016). The exclusionary politics of secularism can also be seen in the peer groups of youth (Zackariasson 2014; Kuusisto et al. 2016). Discussion about the role of religion in education is politically and intellectually polarized (Poulter et al. 2016; Kuusisto et al. 2016; Kuusisto 2017).

The presence of religious elements is not generally putative in societal institutions such as ECEC and schools. Exceptions to this are the elements that are perceived as components of national cultural heritage (Poulter 2013, p. 165; Kääriäinen et al. 2005, pp. 114, 168). How these are defined and what their position in practice regularly sparks societal discussion, for instance in relation to whether a traditional Christian hymn can or should be a part of the mutual programme for the school community Spring concert. In this debate, some stakeholders have utilized new diversities as an excuse to also remove the rest of the religious elements from the societal educational settings by stipulating to the 'diversity card'—despite the fact that a large number of the immigrants to the Lutheran Finland are in fact Christians.

### 2.3. *Worldview Education in Finnish Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC)*

The new diversity and the presence of Christian-based traditions have caused uncertainty also in the Finnish Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) settings. The previous ECEC national curriculum guidelines were more of a guiding nature than those directing the comprehensive school side, which contributed to a spectrum of variance in the practices of implementing worldview education. The element of ambiguity in some of the employed structures and practices has at times generated unintended exclusion at ECEC, when for example the non-religious alternatives to Christmas or Easter celebrations have not provided an equally high pedagogical quality to the children opting for these (Kuusisto and Lamminmäki-Vartia 2012; Kuusisto 2017). However, the renewed National Core Curriculum for Early Childhood Education and Care (NCCFBE 2018), which have now replaced the previous national curriculum guidelines, oblige, for the first time, ECEC educators to plan the pedagogical contents according to its set aims. Worldview education is there positioned as a part of the wider competences on cultures, interaction and expression as well as thinking and learning. Its aims are connected to the entity focusing on the individual, communities and cultures. Religious and non-religious worldviews are to be discussed side by side. The nature of all instruction on worldviews in Finnish societal education is non-confessional, and hence it cannot aim to commit the children into any ideology, be that religious or political or something else. (NCCFBE 2018).

The curriculum renewal sparked yet another heated societal debate in relation to the position of worldviews in the public realm. Interestingly, although the guidelines in fact, for the first time, actually oblige the educators to implement worldview education as a part of the pedagogical contents in the ECEC—the previous curricula documents were not equally binding in nature—, several initial media scoops employed a completely different viewpoint to the discussion by emphasizing that now the religious elements were ‘removed’ from the ECEC. This misconception was related to the conceptual change between the two curricula documents, as the notion used in the new ECEC National Curriculum is ‘worldview education’ rather than the previously utilized reference to ‘religious orientation’. The aim of the conceptual change was for the education and instruction to include all worldviews, also the non-religious ones, however, the interpretation of the adversaries was that ‘religion’ has now been removed from the curriculum altogether. In the Finnish ECEC, worldview education is, in contrast to the below described Finnish comprehensive school RE and Ethics, to be taught for the whole group together.

### 2.4. *Worldview Education in Finnish Comprehensive Schools*

As a part of the Finnish comprehensive school education, the Finnish model of religious education in pedagogic terms has school instruction based on or around teaching groups according to the child’s ‘own’<sup>1</sup> worldview tradition. The model presently includes curricula for Lutheran and Orthodox RE and 11 minority religions and an optional Ethics instruction. Although so organized, also here the religious or worldview education is non-confessional, it is plural in its approach, and non-denominational (*Uskonnonvapauslaki* [Freedom of Religion Act] 2003; *Perusopetuslaki* [Basic Education Act] 1998, Amendment 2003/454, 13§; Kallioniemi and Ubani 2012, pp. 178–79). Nationally, 92% of pupils participate in Lutheran religious education; that is, outside the capital Helsinki area, minority religions

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<sup>1</sup> Based on the formal membership in religious communities, if any, or the decision of the parent(s)—mother, if there is no agreement between the parents on this—, with different opportunities to choose the RE instruction participated, or opt out and choose Ethics, depending on the particular membership or lack of any. For example, the formal members of the majority Evangelical Lutheran Church are required to attend the Ev. Lutheran RE instruction, although many of the families nowadays are increasingly secularized, and the child and/or the parents would prefer the ‘secular’ Ethics alternative. Those without a religious membership, on the other hand, are free to choose between these two options. In any case, and as the parents already hold elements of more than one ‘tradition’ in their worldviews, besides the children being influenced by other people, the media, and so on, in their growing-up context, and gradually constructing their personal views in relation to these and through their own agency, the definition of one’s ‘own’ religion in the RE instruction setting can be seen as rather problematic.

are rarely taught. The recently renewed *National Core Curriculum for Basic Education* (NCCFBE 2014), the updated document which came into force in August 2016, outlines the following:

In instruction in religion, life's religious and ethical dimension comes under examination from the standpoint of the pupil's own growth, and as a broader social phenomenon. Religion is treated as one of the undercurrents influencing human culture. Instruction in religion is to offer the pupils knowledge, skills, and experiences, from which they obtain materials for building an identity and a world-view. The instruction prepares pupils for encountering the religious and ethical dimension in one's own life and life of the community. The objective of instruction is a general education in religion and philosophy of life. (NCCFBE 2014, p. 202)

This general description is followed by more precise objectives for the RE instruction of all religious education groups. These include familiarizing the pupil with his or her own religion, and introducing the pupil to the Finnish worldview traditions and to other religions. Furthermore, the objectives state that religious education aims to "help the pupil understand the cultural and human meaning of religions" and to educate pupils in "ethical living" and helping them to understand the ethical dimension of religion (NCCFBE 2014, p. 202).

The strengths of this model based on the child's 'own' affiliation are traditionally seen in that the perspective in regard to contents is to some extent familiar to children, and through the knowledge on one's own tradition, perspective is gradually widened into understanding 'other' views. From the viewpoint of religious minority traditions, this approach has also been seen supportive for the development of minority identities, and for immigrant pupils, small group religious education can also help the children bridge 'old' and 'new' home cultures, for example interpreting and constructing 'Finnish Islam' identities, practices and tradition (Rissanen 2014).

However, with regard to the above mentioned 'new' societal diversities (Vertovec 2015), and the fact that there are more and more children from other than 'Secular Lutheran' (Riitaoja et al. 2010) mainstream (over 70% of Finns belong to Evangelical Lutheran Church) homes; what does this mean in terms of Finnish school, its' religious or worldview education? The need for the educational practices and structures to be re-considered is becoming highlighted. This is due to the growing numbers of minority pupils, which in many schools necessitate the establishing of new teaching groups. Although 'new' diversity is now the norm, there are different perceptions of this diversity, and the resulting inclusion and exclusion (Rizvi 2009, 2011), which now need to be negotiated in the Finnish societal setting (e.g., Kuusisto 2017).

Those who support the renewal of the RE model in Finland argue that it is too expensive and time consuming for the society, municipality and the school, as (qualified) teachers, (equally resourced) venues, (reasonable) times and (good quality) materials need to be allocated for all groups. It has been regarded as particularly difficult to find qualified teachers for smaller RE groups, as for some, there are nearly no qualified personnel in the country. This further problematizes pupils' equality in receiving quality instruction. Thereby, alternative models have been piloted in some schools—which has added some additional turmoil into the already heated societal debate on the aims and purposes of RE.

### 3. Method

#### 3.1. Research Questions

The aim of this study was to look into the views of highly professional religious and worldview education experts as regards the heated societal and political debate on the position of their subject, education on religions and worldviews, in a societal situation with intensified religious plurality, where the present teaching model is highly contested. More precisely, our research questions were the following:

1. What kinds of views do Finnish teacher educators and researchers of Religious Education hold in terms of the aims of RE from the perspective of the developing child?

2. What kinds of views do Finnish teacher educators and researchers of Religious Education hold in terms of the aims of RE from the perspective of the society?
3. What kinds of pros and cons do these Religious Education professionals see in the alternative models, the presently employed model based on the pupils' own worldview on one hand, and the proposed integrated model on the other?

### 3.2. Data Gathering

The data were gathered through e-mail interviews ( $n = 16$ ) as well as further face-to-face interviews with two ( $n = 2$ ) of the Finnish religious education professionals who had answered the e-mail interview already but were chosen for further in-depth life history approach interviews. The main themes covered in both data gathering instances were the same, but the two further life history interviews enabled us to add to the depth and nuance of the overall data. The analysis here focuses on the e-mail interviews.

The electronic interview outlines were sent out personally through e-mail to the professionals operating in this relatively small research field of religious education in Finland. It was made possible for the respondents to either print out the interview questions with personal responses and to mail it back anonymously, or to respond to the questions by e-mail. All 16 participants opted for returning their responses by e-mail.

### 3.3. Tools

The question outline utilized in both the e-mail interviews and the further face-to-face ones consisted of the following sections and themes: (1) Background information (age, gender); (2) Individual account on Religious Education in one's personal life trajectory (RE related education, work history incl. present occupation); (3) Respondent's views on the main aims of RE (a) in relation to child's growth and development, and (b) from societal perspective; (4) Respondent's views on what kind of RE model would best serve in supporting pupil's growth and development, and why; (5) According to respondents, what strengths and weaknesses do the following have: (a) presently utilized RE model (instruction based on pupils' affiliation), (b) integrated RE model where whole class is taught together, and (c) would a combination of these models be a good solution? If so, what kind of combination or 'hybrid' would the respondent suggest? (6) How have their own views on the aims of RE and the RE model altered during the years? Which factors have, according to the respondent's views, influenced this change?

### 3.4. Sample

The data includes responses from RE faculty representatives from three different universities as well as various other institutions and establishments and university practice schools.<sup>2</sup> The altogether 16 respondents were of the ages 30–53 (average age 41.25 years) and included four males and 12 females. The sample includes professors, university lecturers, junior or post doc level researchers as well as other RE professionals holding positions in different educational or RE organizations, some of which are related to churches or religious communities. Out of the respondents, all except one (also qualified as an RE teacher) held at least a MA degree either in Education, Theology, or both; 10 out of the 16 held a doctorate (PhD) in an RE related area (Theology or Education), and three others were in the process of completing their PhD. Although most of the respondents presently teach at the higher education setting, most of them have previously taught religious education in schools themselves, and their

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<sup>2</sup> These schools are a part of the universities and are run in close connection with the teacher education programmes. Student teachers complete some of their teaching practices at these 'Normal Lyceums' which include primary and secondary school levels. The teachers in these schools regularly supervise student teachers as a part of their work. Hence, many of the staff members at these schools hold a PhD in Education or in a related field.

students are future teachers of children in ECCE, preschool, comprehensive school, or upper secondary school levels. Most university teachers teaching worldview education to students would thereby have to maintain their understanding of the up-to-date curricula of several or all of these levels as regards the teaching of religious and worldview education to children and youth.

### 3.5. Ethics

Due to the small size of the national RE research community, and a very limited number of formally employed university RE staff in the country, in the reporting of the data, all detailed information about each respondent (e.g., affiliation such as professor/lecturer) is not connected to the direct quotes in order to guarantee individual anonymity. Additionally, the responses are not generally matched with the respondent's exact age, gender, and profession, as these, too, in many cases, could make individuals recognizable and thereby breach their anonymity. However, this was not regarded as a crucial methodological dilemma, as the overall population of top RE professionals in Finland is so small that no gender variances or other quantifiable differences could at any rate be calculated from the sample. Furthermore, the differences between genders or age groups were not the focus here in the first place.

The data were analyzed with a qualitative content analysis, where the below indicated frequencies are merely in the role of supplementary information. As the interview outline sections were thematically matched with the research questions, all responses were first grouped under each of these categories before a further sub-categorization took place.

## 4. Results

### 4.1. Aims of Religious Education for Supporting the Child's Growth and Development

The views of the respondents on the aims of RE in relation to supporting of child's growth and development could be classified under four main categories, namely: Literacy, Understanding oneself and others, Personal growth, and Skills for global citizenship. More precisely, the following perspectives on these were brought up in the data.

The aims of RE related to *literacy* were seen to include the literacy related to cultures, religions and worldviews, including knowledge on religions, and tools for recognizing worldview related matters in life ( $n = 9$ ).<sup>3</sup> Literacy was seen to provide support for children's cultural and spiritual sensitivity, and deepen their understanding about worldview or spirituality as one dimension in life ( $n = 5$ ).

[U]nderstanding worldview dimension of life as a part of life's many-sided phenomena. Pondering life questions and existential questions, questions related to ethics and morality [13].<sup>4</sup>

And:

Sensitivity to a bigger picture of life (the transcendent dimension). Recognition of the multitude of perspectives and the courage to criticize dominant discourses (critical pedagogy). Preparing for encountering otherness [9].

It was also regarded to construct understanding on the interrelationship between culture and religion, their history and present ( $n = 4$ ), as well as develop children's literacy for symbolic language of religions ( $n = 2$ ) and the realizing of the diverse nature within any worldview tradition ( $n = 1$ ).

<sup>3</sup> The numbers illustrate how many participants brought up a particular theme or notion in their responses. Most respondents have included several aspects in their personal responses, and some of the classifications are somewhat overlapping, so the numbers are merely to inform the reader, how many references there were to each topic.

<sup>4</sup> Questionnaire numbers. These numbers at the end of data extracts refer to randomly allocated respondent numbers in the data. These are included so that the reader is able to differentiate or make connections between the various responses given by different/the same professionals where the same expert is cited in relation to more than one thematic matter.

The second category of aims emphasized the importance of *increasing children's understanding and appreciation of different traditions*, both their "own" worldview tradition and other views ( $n = 9$ ).

Clarification for one's own worldview, selfhood and morality. Realization of one's own position, responsibility and meaning in life [11].

Thirdly, the aims of RE included the *dimension of personal growth*: Tools for constructing one's own identity ( $n = 7$ ), values and worldview ( $n = 7$ ), ethical education and development of personal morality ( $n = 6$ ), holistic personality development and life skills ( $n = 4$ ).

Holistic personality development, literacy on religions and worldviews, strengthening of worldview identity and construction of values, skills for dialogue [1].

Furthermore, the aims of RE were seen in the increasing of interest and providing of tools for pondering existential and life questions ( $n = 3$ ) and in the developing of critical thinking skills ( $n = 3$ ).

Development of critical thinking skills. This includes the widening of horizons and familiarity with different justifications and symbolic languages (at least in the level that variance exists) as well as the pondering of one's own worldview [2].

Finally, these aims included self-appreciation and the providing of courage to be oneself and to do good deeds ( $n = 2$ ).

Fourthly, the aims of RE were seen to include the *skills for global citizenship*: Skills for dialogue ( $n = 3$ ), social competences ( $n = 2$ ), learning to justify arguments ( $n = 2$ ), and, more generally, providing tools for citizenship in pluralistic society ( $n = 2$ ).

Religious and worldview literacy and basic skills for global citizenship [11].

#### 4.2. Aims of RE from Societal Perspective

The aims of RE from the societal perspective were somewhat overlapping with the above described aims, however, the outlook in these is naturally different. For instance, global citizenship is in an important role in both, but where the first topic area examined this as an aim as regards the child's competences for operating successfully in the globalized society, as a societal level value this would entail the interest of the society to be functional.

These responses in the data were typically broad and comprehensive in nature, often including elements of various thematic subcategories. Still, three clearly distinguishable themes were recognizable in the responses to this question, too. We named these as: *Understanding as literacy*, *Understanding as empathy*, and *Competences for global citizenship*. The responses to this question included for example these two accounts:

[–] RE presents the living life to youth in a fine way. In RE, a young person gains information on topical issues and competences for dealing with/pondering these. From societal perspective, RE holds an important task to provide knowledge on religions and worldviews. At the moment, the global significance of religions seems to be ever more increasing, so it would be peculiar not to include RE among the taught contents at school [10].

And:

Citizens recognize the significance of religion in the construction of culture [–] the cultural features and societal practices originating in religion. [–] When people know their own religious and historical roots, it is possible to contribute to the construction of society [14].

*Understanding as literacy* included the providing of a wide literacy on worldviews and educating citizens who have knowledge and understanding on religions as a constructing force in cultures ( $n = 14$ ). It also included the familiarizing with one's own family worldview background ( $n = 1$ ), and the learning of the basic terminology and symbols of religions ( $n = 2$ )

*Understanding as empathy* included mentions of mutual respect ( $n = 2$ ), empathy ( $n = 2$ ), consideration ( $n = 1$ ), sensitivity ( $n = 1$ ) and appreciation of diversity (cultural, religious and historical) ( $n = 2$ ), and tolerance or mutual understanding ( $n = 7$ ) as well as the appreciation of and supporting of pupils different identities—that of one's own and those of others ( $n = 2$ ). Furthermore, interest towards worldviews ( $n = 1$ ) and competences related to these ( $n = 1$ ) were mentioned, as well as "religion as a positive common denominator" ( $n = 1$ ).

*Competences for global citizenship* included references to communication and co-operation with individuals from different backgrounds ( $n = 4$ ) and dialogue skills ( $n = 2$ ); Values supporting maintenance and renewal of society ( $n = 1$ ), citizenship skills ( $n = 1$ ) or skills for operating in a diverse society; for recognizing, comparing, and critically evaluating religion related action and news reporting in the media ( $n = 4$ ). This category also included references to abilities to constructively handle also problems related to religions ( $n = 1$ ), societal peace ( $n = 2$ ), and guaranteeing adherence to Human Rights and UN Rights of the Child in society ( $n = 1$ ). Finally, skills for constructing the society of the future ( $n = 2$ ) and within it, multicultural, multi-faith, actively participating societal membership ( $n = 1$ ) and ethics ( $n = 1$ ) were mentioned.

To bring up tolerant, co-operative, empathetic and considerate citizens. In my view, RE is quite a radical subject. The lessons include dealing with topics that otherwise would not be brought up at school. It is also an alternative subject as well as critical to that what otherwise is regarded as self-evident and generally accepted in the society [5].

Also other elements of societal coherence and mutual dialogue were brought up:

Strengthening moderate and wide interpretations of faith and combatting extremism. Bringing up critical citizens. Dialogue between religions [9].

Along with:

Citizenship education, literacy on religions and cultures—the relationship between religious membership and societal membership, evaluating society from the perspective of religion and vice versa [8].

#### 4.3. Views on the Most Suitable RE Model

The religious education professionals' views on what kind of religious education model would be optimal for the Finnish setting varied, as expected, rather widely. Some of the respondents were in favour of the present model—some added that "in a developed form" [1], others were more in favour of an integrated RE model. Some professionals who did not have a clear stance and/or argued that the means, contents and approaches of the instruction are more critical than such external structures as the formal 'model'. For example, the following response depicts the deeper and more foundational questions presented in the data:

[–] Challenges (problems that can be solved, however, that should not be disregarded): It needs to be critically pondered, what is the position from which religions are examined. "Scientific," secular position is not neutral. It also needs to be pondered, on which grounds is the [teaching] time divided between different worldviews and which ones will be included.

And:

How will the critical research perspective and the examining of problems be balanced with the self-understanding of religion and apology? What kinds of experiential teaching approaches will be possible without harming pupils'/families' own worldview identities?

How to balance relativism and the exclusivism typical for (monotheistic) religions? Relativism is, in my view, rather a good starting point for instruction, as long as exclusivism will be dealt with in a respectful way; yet, at the same time, one needs to avoid triggering the sense among pupils that Religious Education is whatever each and everyone just expresses as their own opinions (there is research evidence on this)." [2]

Additionally, different hybrid models were presented so as to include "the strengths of both" models. These included RE models with an age progression from the children's "own" worldview tradition to mutual instruction, but also the other way was suggested, from a more general mutual worldview education in the earlier grade levels into a more fine-tuned learning on one's "own" tradition. Additionally, combinations of mixtures of the mutual and own RE instruction groups in different, altering grade levels were suggested.

"[–] I would personally [–] be more inclined towards such a combination model which would include both mutually taught and segregated elements, for example a mutually taught subject that would include a shared part and so called streams or an opportunity to choose from different emphases/courses." [4]

And:

"A dual model of own religion and mutual instruction. Emphasis more on own religion in the beginning of schooling than in the mutual RE, et vice versa." [5]

## 5. Discussion

The findings of this small scale study of Finnish religious educational professionals can be read as part of the recent research literature on professionalism and the religious education profession across Europe (Baumfield 2010, 2015, 2016; Conroy 2016; Freathy et al. 2016; Heil and Ziebertz 2004; Ubani 2016; Vargas-Herrera and Moya-Marchant 2016). What it adds is a rich data in the form of informed reflections on the curricula aims and objectives in (here Finnish) religious education. These findings also resonate with the international multi-disciplinary debate on the place of religion in public life—or public square (Habermas 2008)—, and the related framings of political theology that demarcate discussions of secularity, secularism and secularization in religious education (Reimers 2019; Berger 1999; Bruce 2002; Casanova 1994, 2009; Chaves 1994; Davie et al. 2008; Habermas 2008; Habermas and Ratzinger 2008; Lewin 2017; Micklethwait and Wooldridge 2009; Stark 1999). To an extent, though that was not in focus here, these positionings may sometimes be entangled with the professionals' personal alignment to either a blend of theology (including denominational association) (Luodeslampi and Kuusisto 2017; Horn 2016; Vargas-Herrera and Moya-Marchant 2016) or a more confessionally- and critically-distanced religious studies oriented religious education (Barnes 2014; Baumfield 2016; Cush and Robinson 2014; Freathy et al. 2016).

Carl Schmitt (2005) in his classic *Political Theology* framed nearly a century ago that around the often problematic of the relationship of religious and political authority in the modern world, "All significant concepts of the modern theory of the state are secularized theological concepts". For Schmitt, the theological becomes transposed into the political "... not only because of their historic development—in which they were transferred from theology to the theory of the state, whereby, for example, the omnipotent God became the omnipotent lawgiver—but also because of their systematic structure". As Schmitt declares: "The idea of the modern constitutional state triumphed with deism [over] a theology and metaphysics ..." (Schmitt 2005, p. 32).

The effective patterns of religious education have previously been the subject of an extensive study which asked *Does Religious Education Work?* (Conroy 2016; Conroy et al. 2015), where the findings suggest a plethora of teaching and learning objectives in religious education. Ambiguity on the position that the subject matter is examined from may risk an epistemological confusion amongst pupils as well as amongst religious education professionals themselves. Some of the international literature

on teacher professionalism long regarded teaching as in a category of the ‘semi-professional’, since teachers were perceived to be called to respond in often mechanical ways, making their decision making limited, a disempowerment which results from their subject to ideological frameworks which may not be their own (Ozga and Gewirtz 1994; Ozga and Lawn 1981; Lawn and Ozga 1986). In contrast, though, the Finnish teacher has, throughout the history of the nation, been highly regarded as a professional, ‘the candle of the people’ (*kansankynttilä*) who has brought wisdom and ‘light’ to their community. Demirkasımoğlu (2010) operational model on teaching profession is more in line with this in suggesting that achieving proficiency defines teacher professionalism. In more general terms, this can and has been framed as part of a methodological and ideologically engaged research across a range of social science and political science disciplines which involve research elites, leaders and the powerful (Williams 2012), which has risen to some prominence in education (Ozga 2011; Walford 1994).

An radical interpretive frame here would be that presented by classic studies such as Ivan Illich (1972) in *De-Schooling Society*, in Paolo Freire (2000) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, across the broader school of critical pedagogy arising from the Frankfurt School and the variant past decades syntheses of critical theory (Darder et al. 2017) or the penetrative analyses of Bourdieu (1986) on forms and uses of social and cultural capital or Foucault (e.g., Foucault 2009, 2010) on knowledge, power and societal control through institutions like education.

## 6. Conclusions

When it comes to the main contributions of the present study as regards religious education or education on or about religions and other worldviews more generally, some of the core findings include the following. Firstly, these RE experts regarded the main aims of the subject area as regards the perspective of the developing child in the societal educational system to be the development of literacy about religions and other worldviews, the developing of mutual understanding as well as personal growth, and developing an understanding of oneself and one’s own value positions and worldview. In addition to these, skills for global citizenship was brought up both as a personal level aim to be supported in child development, and as a societal level aim. It was also highlighted that as a societal level aim, mutual understanding is related to literacy on religions and other worldviews: mutual understanding builds on familiarity and awareness of the immense diversity of perspectives that is present in the multicultural, pluralistic societies these days. This mutual understanding as a societal level aim was also highlighted as ‘*understanding as empathy*’, which would follow the recognition of the ‘other’ perspectives; perhaps understanding of how someone else in one’s peer group perceives the world; awareness of the spectrum of ontologies in all their complexity.

Finally, many of the points raised in the third thematic category of the pros and cons of different RE teaching models would provide useful discussion topics in any educational level or national context. One of the points that was raised as important in the responses was that the ‘scientific’, secular position is not a neutral position, either—education is always value laden and any societal context holds its particular blind spots. These perspectives influence also in the pedagogical choices and the ways which educational contents are delivered in the classroom. For example, which religions or worldview traditions are included in the educational contents and in which way are they to be introduced in the classroom, and for what purposes? To what extent is this done in order to provide recognition to minority perspectives and thereby possibly contribute into supporting the children affiliated to these in understanding their ‘own’ tradition and developing their identity? Additionally, to what extent is education on worldviews serving the purpose of developing literacy and mutual understanding, and how are these aims to be reached in a particular educational context?

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