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Chapter 24

Religions and Worldviews as “The Problem” in Finnish Schools



Inkeri Rissanen and Salla Poulter

Abstract Finland has a rather unique model of non-confessional worldview education that draws on pupils’ “own worldview”. Internationally this model has been applauded for ensuring freedom of religion and belief, but in Finland it is regularly debated. In this chapter we employ a wider notion of worldview education that takes into account the role of worldviews in school culture and allows scrutiny of how all education is nested in a system of values and can be analysed as education into (and from) worldview. We introduce the foundations of worldview education in Finnish basic education, and analyse negotiations about the inclusion of worldview plurality in the every-day life of schools in light of our empirical studies. We argue that, despite the official multiculturalist and inclusivist ideals, unrecognised monoculturalism prevails in Finnish schools as majority worldviews are not seen as worldviews but deemed universal and therefore neutral. This universalism induces perceptions of religions and worldviews as “the problem” in school: while more superficial cultural differences are celebrated, recognition of diversity at the more profound ethical, ontological and epistemological level would demand willingness to question the universality of the core values and ideals of the education system. We discuss the necessity and prospects of departing from monoculturalism and moving towards critical worldview education.

Worldview refers to the ways in which individuals, groups or traditions perceive and understand the world and attach meaning to it. These stances may be secular, religious, or hybrid: spiritual and secular elements often intertwine. Worldviews are classified as organised (*Weltanschauung*) and personal (*Lebensanschauung*) ontological, epistemological and ethical orientations which ascribe meaning to the world but also orient people in their everyday and function as identity markers and social

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categories.¹ This chapter focuses particularly on worldview education in Finland at the level of basic education, where pupils are taught religious and worldview education according to their “own religion” in separate groups but not in a confessional manner, while pupils with no religious affiliation study Secular Ethics. This model reflects the rather strong multiculturalist policies in Finland,² which also manifest in official norms of developing inclusive school cultures and supporting minority identities.

The Finnish model of worldview education sometimes receives international praise for its way of ensuring freedom of religion and belief (both positive and negative), but in Finland it is much debated and there are many unresolved practical issues as well as matters of principle. The practical issues mostly relate to the worldview education of minorities—there is a lack of qualified teachers and proper teaching materials, sometimes the lessons need to be scheduled outside regular school hours and pupils have to travel to other schools to participate in religious education (RE).

Matters of principle include the very idea of separating pupils into different groups, which has been criticised since it can be seen to essentialise pupils’ identities through fixed affiliation to organised religious denominations, whereas there should be options for pupils to explore and adopt various different worldview positions.³ The Ombudsman for Children in Finland (*lapsiasiavaltuutettu*) announced that Finnish religious education model should be re-evaluated to better correspond with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child as membership-based religious education reveals the child’s religious identity and is not based on voluntary announcement.⁴ However, the model is defended especially by minorities, who see RE as an important safe space for identity development. In addition to these debates concerning the school subject RE, the role of worldviews (and particularly the issue of singing traditional Lutheran hymns) at end-of-the-term festivities is regularly debated in public.

Altogether, in both Finnish public and professional discussions, religions and worldviews often emerge as particular problems in schools and appear as separate entities to be “dealt with” or learned about, whereas discussions on the worldview basis of all education are scarce. However, all education is nested in a system of values and can be analysed as education into (and from) worldview. We consider it reasonable to differentiate between three different dimensions of worldview education in Finnish schools, which also mirror distinct but interlinked academic areas of discussion. These are: (1) the worldview basis of basic education that manifests, for instance, in the mission and values of education expressed in the national core curriculum and should serve as the background for all education planning; (2) ways of accommodating worldview diversity in the school culture; and (3) instruction within particular school subjects. These levels are intertwined and contribute to transversal competences such as multi-literacy and cultural competence as key skills in working and civic life. They all contribute to citizenship formation and the development of distinct collective identities—often through the exclusion of Others⁵—but they are rarely analysed jointly as the constituents of holistic worldview education in school.

We begin here by introducing the foundations of worldview education in Finnish basic education and some of the challenges it faces. We then delve deeper by analysing

the minority-majority positions and power-structures related to worldview plurality in Finnish basic education, giving concrete examples of how this plurality is handled as observed in our empirical studies. In particular, we draw on studies concerning the inclusion of Muslims in Finnish schools as well as integrated religious education.⁶ Finally, we develop discussion on the possible ways of understanding and developing worldview education in Finland—alongside the wider task of rethinking the core and purpose of education in the face of the current ‘wicked problems’ of humanity.

Worldviews in Finnish Basic Education

The history of Finnish education cannot be understood without studying its Protestant Christian origin. The role of religion in the making of modern nation-states in the Nordic countries, in general, has been a blind spot to many scholars. The Reformation and Lutheranism have had close connections to Finnish nation-state building and therefore also to the origins of educational institutions in the nineteenth century. Lutheranism as secular Lutheranism is still inextricably linked to contemporary Finnish national identity, values and society in general.⁷ The trinity of religious values, national identity formation and respect for education created the value basis on which the Finnish education system was established, and from which stemmed many educational ideals claimed to account for the success of Finnish education, including equal learning opportunities and autonomy of teachers.⁸ Along with the secularisation of society, the religious and moral connections to civic identity have dissolved; nevertheless, citizenship education is still connected to the dimension of worldviews through values, beliefs and norms.⁹

Against this historical background, the homogeneity of the Finnish population has been a cherished illusion: some minority religious and worldview communities have existed in Finland for centuries but have not gained public recognition. Visible religious diversity has been closely linked to immigration: for instance, media discourses of religious diversity emerged at the same time as the increase in immigration in the late 1990s. Before that a shift from “taken-for-granted Lutheranism” to secularism had already occurred. Current media depictions of religion portray what can be regarded as the mainstream stance: the social and cultural role of Lutheranism and the Evangelical-Lutheran Church are supported, but negative depictions emerge whenever there is (perceived) friction between religion and liberal values.

A current powerful mainstream worldview position in Finland, which has replaced Lutheranism as the often taken-for-granted basis for education discourses, policies and practices, could be described as culturalised Protestantism intertwined with the values of liberalism, neoliberalism, secularism, multiculturalism and human rights. A comprehensive analysis of the currently prevailing worldview basis of Finnish basic education is beyond the scope of this chapter, but a short overview of the value bases of education as manifested in the current National Core Curriculum for Basic Education (henceforth NCCBE) will give an indication of some of its aspects. The ethical baseline for education is provided by the UN Declaration of Human Rights

and international human rights treaties to which Finland is committed. The child's best interest as the paramount consideration of all teachers is the core principle that arises from the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and should form the ethical basis for education.¹⁰

The current curriculum mentions four central underlying values of education, all of which reflect the high value of individualism. The first, "*Uniqueness of each pupil and right to a good education*" proclaims the well-being and good life of the individual pupils as the core aim of education and emphasises the importance of value education (as individuation)—pupils are encouraged to construct "their own value-bases", and respect for pupils' and families' autonomy and diversity is called for. The second, "*Humanity, general knowledge and ability, equality and democracy*" further emphasises the development of pupils' individual critical ethical thinking skills and the ability to participate in democratic decision-making.

However, the curriculum also states that "Education shall not demand or lead to religious, philosophical or political commitment of the pupils". According to the third value, "*Cultural diversity as a richness*", education should support the development of pupils' personal cultural identities and growth into active members of their own communities but at the same time towards global citizenship. The fourth value is "*Necessity of a sustainable way of living*". Education should aim at cultivating the "eco social knowledge and ability" of the pupils, which means that they should understand the seriousness of climate change and strive for sustainability.¹¹

The manner in which the curriculum manifests, on the one hand, values and ideals based on enlightenment, liberalism and human rights culture and, on the other hand, emphasises the philosophical, political and religious impartiality of education as well as the accommodation of diversity, gives an impression of ideas of universality being attached to this value basis. The way this general worldview basis of education goes much undiscussed in Finland, and the fact that both educators and the public mostly associate questions of religious and worldview influences with school celebrations as well as the subjects of religious education and ethics,¹² hints at the perceptions of worldview neutrality attached to education outside these particular visible issues and the continuation of the monoculturalist conception of education.

Accommodating Worldview Plurality in School Culture

The official ideals and norms of accommodating the constantly increasing worldview diversity in Finnish schools have shifted from assimilationism to multiculturalism and interculturalism.¹³ NCCBE 2014 refers to diversity as richness and demands respectful treatment for it, while worldviews and religions are mentioned as one form of this diversity. For instance, it is noted how the appreciation of diversity should guide school-home collaboration: "The joint reflection of school and homes on values, and cooperation underpinned by this, promote security and the pupils' holistic well-being. The staff's open-minded and respectful attitude towards different religions, views, traditions and conceptions of education lays the foundation for constructive

instruction”.¹⁴ The curriculum further demands that “the knowledge that the pupils and their guardians and communities have of the nature, ways of living, history, languages and culture in their own linguistic and cultural areas are drawn upon in the instruction”.¹⁵

However, research has identified a big gap between these official principles and the practical reality: monoculturalist and assimilationist practices prevail in the everyday life of schools.¹⁶ Despite the growing multiculturalist awareness in curriculum development, there is much to improve in the resources and practices of including cultural and worldview diversity in preservice and in-service teacher education.¹⁷ Furthermore, even though mainstream educational discourses increasingly acknowledge intercultural competencies (and focus on the promotion of equality and social justice) as necessary for all teachers, it is only in recent years that the acknowledgement of particular needs related to worldviews and worldview diversity has become more prominent. The increased public prominence and political relevance of religions has enhanced the recognition of the educational relevance of worldviews—for instance, the Finnish Innovation Fund Sitra¹⁸ forecasts the importance of understanding religions and ideologies as a part of future civic skills.

At the same time, the need to ‘understand worldviews’ is typically associated with the importance of comprehending ‘others’ and ‘dealing with’ those professing non-Western worldviews. It is still very common for Finnish teachers and student teachers to make claims about the need to safeguard the neutrality of the public space of school and to emphasise worldviews as a personal and private matter.¹⁹

Instruction on Worldviews

The Finnish model of religious education can also be seen as an example of striking a balance between multiculturalist ideals (catering for the rights of minorities to their identity and culture by organising separate RE) and a monoculturalist educational ethos (aiming at supporting commitment to common civic values “through religions” in all types of RE). Currently there are individual national curricula for 11 minority religions and secular ethics parallel to mainstream Lutheran education and Orthodox Christian education. RE is a knowledge-based subject steered by the general pedagogical aims of state schools rather than by the interests of religious communities. According to the current National Core Curriculum for Basic Education,²⁰ the “... instruction in religion supports the pupil’s growth into becoming a responsible member of his or her community and a democratic society as well as becoming a global citizen”. These civic aims of RE are pursued by offering teaching about one’s own as well as other religions and supporting the development of dialogue and other relevant skills.

Secular ethics, on the other hand, aims at helping pupils to search for good life. Both subjects emphasise critical thinking skills in constructing comprehensive knowledge about worldviews and cultures. Similar to RE, “the goal of secular ethics is to develop pupils’ abilities to become independent, tolerant, responsible

and discerning members of the community”.²¹ There are typically educators with minority worldviews involved in the curriculum process, but, in principle, worldview communities do not have any role in defining the national curriculum because RE is defined as a non-confessional and non-binding subject. Religious observance is not permitted in RE classes and teachers are expected to use language that is impartial and inclusive.

The centrality of the civic aims in RE reflect the ways in which the legitimacy of the subject has been tied to adaptation to the changing political and ideological needs of society. The development of RE in Finland has reflected the increasing influence of transnational actors: the Finnish case has to be seen against the broader European educational framework and policy documents concerning RE, such as the *Toledo Guiding Principles*²² and the Council of Europe’s publication on religion and intercultural education, *Signposts*.²³ In these documents, RE is increasingly framed as closely linked to intercultural education and seen as an instrument for the promotion of social cohesion. Its aims are formulated in the language of the competency-based discourses of education influenced by neoliberal educational thinking.

These developments have given rise to some criticism of the skills-based goal setting and instrumentalisation of RE both internationally and in Finland, as well as of using RE as a tool to enhance security around and governing of religious minorities.²⁴ However, in Finland, religious minorities generally support the current model and its spirit of supporting societal values “through religions”.²⁵

Empirical Examples of Negotiating Worldview Diversity in Finnish Schools: The Case of Muslims

We have demonstrated how perceptions of universality and neutrality attached to the majority worldview influence the development of worldview education in Finland in its different levels. Yet this illusion of neutrality which maintains monoculturalist educational practices is increasingly challenged in many Finnish educational contexts. We now discuss such negotiations on worldview diversity in education with the help of some empirical examples.

In Finnish society, as in many other European societies, negotiations of pluralism and secularism often revolve around the question of Islam and Muslims and the perceptions of them as challengers of liberalism—this is also the case in the field of education. Finnish Muslims are a diverse group holding very different views on religion and its importance, but they have brought to the fore the question of visible religiosity that resists restriction to private sphere and discussions about the “inclusion of worldview diversity in schools” very often concern the issue of inclusion of Muslims. The first author’s recent qualitative research based on semi-structured interviews with Muslim “cultural broker” teachers and school principals,²⁶ describes negotiations around the development of an inclusive school culture and aligned processes of citizenship construction.

In many ways, Muslim students are in a marginalised minority position in Finnish schools. Despite the inner diversity of this group, they suffer from stereotyped views and prejudiced treatment,²⁷ reflecting the generally negative attitudes of Finns towards Islam and Muslims.²⁸ According to Muslim teachers, this has much to do with low levels of experience and knowledge of Islam among Finns, low levels of cultural self-awareness on the part of educators, and lack of open dialogue that could help to increase understanding.²⁹ Naturalisation of culture-bound (i.e. Protestant) conceptualisations of religion among educators is mirrored in their expectations that Islam in Finland should follow the same assumed logic as the Protestant tradition—for instance, having canonised doctrines or a local religious leader who can be consulted as a representative of Muslims in the school. When this logic fails and Muslim families resist school policies based on a single local imam’s views or present internally diverse perceptions, they are easily regarded as “difficult” or “overly religious”.³⁰

However, it is not only reticence towards religiosity but also towards “strong” non-religiosity that is common among Finns.³¹ The group that most visibly challenges the hegemony of culturalised Protestantism in schools and which most often publicly discusses experiences of exclusion is those with markedly secular worldviews. These two groups, Muslims and secularists are the ones sometimes being claimed to be “difficult” by Finnish educators—and who feel exasperation at having to bear this stigma of being difficult when striving for equal rights. Therefore, many Muslim teachers work to present Islam as a value system and life choice comparable with other (religious and non-religious) values and practices. According to their view, adjustments may at times be easily made for other practices or identities (e.g., vegetarianism vs. the halal diet), but choices based on religion are interpreted as a threat to “Finnish values”.³²

At the same time, ideas of equality and equity are at the core of the Finnish educational ethos. The case of Muslims shows that, despite the curricular ideals of multicultural recognition, equity and inclusion are still mostly promoted through the strategy of colour-blindness—by focusing on the similarities, togetherness and individuality of the pupils.³³ The problems of the colour-blind strategy are that it is often based on ethnocentric conceptions of similarity and fails to support minorities’ participation and belonging.³⁴ Even those Finnish educators, who have traded colour-blindness for more intercultural pedagogies typically regard religion—particularly Islam—as an exception.³⁵

This strategy of “religion-blindness” is based on assumptions of the irrelevance or shamefulness of Muslim identities for pupils—making sure that they “do not need to be seen as Muslims”. Sometimes religion-blindness implies religionisation of the minority: for instance, Islam is regarded as “too religious” to have any prominence in the public space of the school and its festivities—in which, at the same time, elements from the majority tradition of Lutheranism are continuously present as cultural heritage.³⁶ Such monoculturalist ideas of cultural heritage uphold the tying of citizenship with holding a majority worldview; furthermore, lack of recognition of minority cultural heritage as cultural capital can have an impact on pupils’ educational performance.³⁷

Culturalisation (the way of characterising majority religious symbols as cultural heritage) can be seen as a strategy on the part of the majority to retain their power in the changing context: the presence of the majority worldview is legitimised by arguing that the values it promotes reflect universal values.³⁸ Thus, culturalisation may lead majority pupils to adopt ideas of universality and superiority, while preserving the stigma attached to minority identities emerging in the every-day life of the school as “restrictions”.

However, these dynamics are challenged by many Muslim teachers and parents. Their claims for positive religious rights vary—some support the restriction of religion mostly to the private sphere and not being a too visible a part of the school culture. None of the Muslim cultural broker informants of these studies, however, demanded the removal of Christian elements from the schools; mostly they hoped that minority religions could be granted a more equal status with Protestant Christianity. Connotations of backwardness attached to Islam could be deconstructed by giving the high culture and values of Islam some visible space as “cultural heritage” in school, aligned with the celebration of Protestant heritage in the secular space. In fact, there are schools in Finland which have endeavoured to develop more inclusive school cultures with the help of cultural broker teachers and parents. Obvious examples of this may, for instance, include the celebration of Ramadan in schools, or simply creating more space for mutual learning, openness and dialogue in home-school collaboration and actively developing ways for parents from different backgrounds to contribute in school.³⁹

Sometimes Finnish principals prefer to try to meet the multiculturalist demands of the curriculum by recruiting minority teachers and “outsourcing” questions of cultural and worldview plurality to them.⁴⁰ This seemingly inclusive aim of diversifying the teaching staff, however, has its risks when linked to the idea of promoting inclusion by “giving minorities more space” without ideas of the reciprocity of inclusion. Muslim teachers question this idea of inclusion as being up to minorities. It is based on ideas of one-way rather than reciprocal inclusion, without any demands for self-awareness, self-criticism and change given to the majority culture. However, even though the initial purpose of these efforts has been to manage the worldview minorities rather than to learn from them, they have opened up a space for minority members to gradually challenge the monoculturalism of schools.⁴¹

Negotiating Worldview Diversity in Integrative Worldview Education

The public debate on the worldview education model in Finland has been active in recent years but without political outcomes that change the fundamentals of the model established in the 1920s. Demands to modify the worldview education model that would integrate the teaching of religions and other worldviews not only in practice but also in theory to create a platform for dialogical learning, have gained

strength among educators. The challenges with the current religious education model also reveal that there is a need for critical discussion of the concept of “a pupil’s own religion” as a juridical and curricular principle for assigning pupils to certain worldview categories. Several schools across the country have pioneered integrative teaching, where different religious education subjects and secular ethics are partly taught in a common classroom space. There has been some anxiety and resistance, especially among minority religious and secular groups, to these integrative initiatives as they are sometimes seen as violating children’s rights to their own religions or as a violation the principle of freedom of religion.

The second author and colleagues⁴² have examined teacher discourses in both separative and integrative classes to scrutinise the inclusive and exclusive effects of language in reproducing and legitimising certain worldview positions and identities. Typically, teachers use so-called “scientific language” (vocabulary and expressions used in academic theology or religious studies) or the “language of belonging” (harnessing pupils’ experiences and feelings of belonging using expressions such as ‘we’ or ‘us’ and other ways of marking the borders between insiders and outsiders) which are different discursive strategies and balancing techniques in aiming at inclusivity. For instance, the language of belonging was used in discussing the role in pupils’ lives of Christian rituals such as Lutheran confirmation or to mirror great worldview conflicts from church history to the present situation where pupils were able to study together despite differences in worldviews. Scientific language, on the other hand, was visible in comparative approaches, for instance when a teacher challenged a pupil’s understanding of the originality of the Golden Rule in Christianity and in the debates concerning the nature of science versus religion.

When scientific discourse is dominant in a worldview education class, it often suppresses religious stances.⁴³ For instance, teachers in an integrative class ignored pupils’ religiously charged views, which can be a message to pupils not to make religious claims at school.⁴⁴ Furthermore, pupils from secular ethics were concerned that the religious views were too strongly present in a classroom space and wished the religious content to be addressed to those pupils actually studying RE “according to their own religion”.⁴⁵ Both teachers and pupils being concerned about “too much religion” and considering the presence of religious views and epistemologies to be dubious implies the prevailing of secular-Protestant monoculturalism also in the RE classroom.

A pervasive theme in the aforementioned studies has been to investigate the perceptions of epistemological neutrality attached to strong secular worldview positions, leading to the exploitation of religious positions while the secular positions go unanalysed in the classroom, thereby creating exclusion of the more religious pupils. Anna-Leena Riitaioja and Fred Dervin⁴⁶ critically note that the secularist bias is located in the belief that a secular-liberal subject is able to ‘step outside’ of his own framework and that religious people are not free to choose or to think independently. Thus, the idea of scientific language as epistemologically neutral should be critically elaborated and particular ideological influences behind any notion of the ‘scientific’ should be identified.

On the other hand, when the language of belonging is used in a worldview education class, positions outside the mainstream religious group are often ignored. When the discourse is constructed in a manner that emphasises minorities versus the majority, the majority position goes unrecognised and sets the standards for worldview objectivity to which all other positions are compared.⁴⁷ The teachers' approach designed for inclusive and multicultural initiative translates into latent monoculturalism when, for instance, they assume that pupils to share similar culturally Lutheran ways of life or consider certain knowledge, such as church history, to be a general starting point for learning for all pupils.⁴⁸

Comparing different worldviews and their similarities to and differences from one's own worldview is a much-used didactical tool in worldview education. However, these didactical practices are often based on the idea of an epistemologically neutral observer and can either strengthen the conception of worldviews as radically different, as others being 'alien', reduce difference into sameness and blur the profound uniqueness of each worldview. When identity is reinforced through the dialectic between similarity and difference, it leaves little room to imagine alternatives.⁴⁹ As scholars of post-colonial studies argue, to emphasise the common, similar or same features of religions or people can be seen as a blind universalism of hegemonic and privileged identities.⁵⁰ Again, worldview difference in Finnish education means placing particular worldviews outside "normal religion" (Lutheranism) and outside non-religiosity (secularity), which are most often seen to apply to conservative Christian views and Islam.

Some minority worldviews like Buddhism are often exoticised and discussed only in a positive light without criticality similar to that levelled at Islam, for instance. As the number of minority pupils is typically small in Finnish schools, teachers can make an effort to "bring minorities in", with unintended consequences. We observed instances when teachers reinforced and essentialised minority pupils' assumed identities and belonging to certain worldview categories through comments that were not meant to be discriminatory but represented pupils' identities through cultural artefacts such as clothing or food. This discourse also reduces the internal diversity of a religion into single features to be generalised to the entire religious tradition.⁵¹

Yet it is important to note that the challenge concerning education on worldviews reflects a wider scholarly debate on the concepts of religion and worldview.⁵² Also, more emphasis should be placed on speaking about worldviews without bypassing diverse personal interpretations and the way they are actually lived.⁵³ Nevertheless, the idea of simply "putting all worldviews together" is not enough to create an epistemologically plural and socially just education. Integrative teaching of religious and secular worldviews requires that teachers recognise how complex is the issue of making non-discriminatory and inclusive learning possible for all.

Conclusion: From Seeing Worldviews as Problems Towards Harnessing Their Critical Potential

We have demonstrated how on different levels of Finnish worldview education the understanding and inclusion of diversity is rather superficial and that at the more profound epistemological and ethical levels universalism and monoculturalism prevail. As a result, religions and worldviews appear as problems in Finnish schools from the perspective of those representing hegemonic positions shaped e.g., by enlightenment rationality and culturalised Protestantism. However, we have also presented empirical examples of grassroots-level negotiations on inclusion in Finnish schools, through which the exclusion and othering of minority worldviews is resisted.

What should these negotiations achieve? As noted at the beginning of the chapter, Finland has followed the wider European trend in developing worldview education increasingly as an instrument for the promotion of social cohesion. Much of the research in the field, including our own, has focused on questions of inclusion. However, the current pressing global problems call for prioritising social change over social cohesion as the core purpose of education—an increasing number of education scholars question the reasonability of working to make the existing social order more equitable and sustainable, and call for solutions that “cannot yet be imagined”.⁵⁴ We would like to see research and policies of worldview education shift its focus more towards harnessing the critical potential of worldview diversity in widening imaginaries—rather than managing the problems worldview diversity causes for social harmony.

In other words, monoculturalism and universalism in Finnish schools should not be seen merely as threats to the inclusion of minorities, but also as obstacles to the necessary societal change. According to the Finnish educational philosopher Veli-Matti Väri,⁵⁵ times of global sustainability crisis call for cultural revolution, and there is a desperate need to deconstruct the taken-for-grantedness of the deep cultural structures that serve as the ground for unsustainable lifestyles—and for the education that reproduces them. Change is possible only if we are able to problematise the ways in which educational systems currently produce moral subjects who continue to see and retain the existing structures and hegemonic ontologies as taken for granted.⁵⁶ The necessary task of unravelling the metaphysical assumptions that steer socialisation processes is certainly difficult, but the existing worldview plurality in our society and education system could be regarded as a lifeline in this process rather than a problem.

There is critical educational potential in the epistemologies and ontologies as well as educational philosophies of non-mainstream worldview traditions that can be used to widen imaginaries and deconstruct the received hegemonic cultural assumptions. However, this demands efforts to find spaces at different levels of the education system—from educational policy and curriculum development to school cultures and classroom pedagogies—where it is possible to deconstruct the monoculturalist educational ethos and approach worldview diversity with intellectual courage.

The Finnish education system does have some structures that enable this. These include, for instance, the involvement of worldview minorities in curricular processes (even though in all the time more limited manner) and the principles of dialogical and culturally responsive school-home collaboration. Furthermore, the current model of worldview education, in some respect, makes room for epistemological plurality and non-Western knowledge traditions in schools and also increases the number of teachers with minority worldview background in the professional community. The development of an integrative approach to worldview education could offer new opportunities for epistemological dialogue where different knowledge positions are made visible not only as objects of study but by encountering lived experiences and the exchange of personal worldviews. However, integrative worldview education includes a risk of toning down the true plurality of perspectives—“neutral” and “objective” integrative forms of religious education in the Nordic context have been demonstrated to be profoundly influenced by cultural Protestantism but in a way that is not recognised by teachers themselves.⁵⁷

The ideals of inclusion and critical intellectual braveness are not incompatible. The starting point for worldview education should not be the aim for neutrality but rather to create a potential dialogical space of plurality. It might be useful to differentiate between the concepts of ‘dignity safety’ (absolute respect for individuals) and ‘intellectual safety’ (a need to encounter a critical debate about problematic issues in worldviews) in education.⁵⁸ Worldview education can be safe in the sense that it is inclusive and supportive of different identities—but intellectually courageous and risky, bringing to the fore diverse truth claims, taking different wisdom traditions seriously in order to enable debates on them, and courageously submitting to critical scrutiny the “received” worldview basis of education.

Worldview education, which aims at harnessing the critical potential of worldview plurality, recognises the particularity of different knowledge traditions and turns the gaze back on oneself, on one’s own position and contexts, roots of knowledge and limits of understanding.⁵⁹ Rather than finding quick fixes in dealing with worldview diversity in practical situations, we should develop educators’ awareness of how the hegemonic educational epistemologies inform our educational aims, theories and concepts,⁶⁰ and how through uncritical acceptance of these we may contribute to the production of worldview identities that place individuals in disadvantaged positions.⁶¹ Making the existing epistemological and wider worldview pluralism in our system more visible will create new opportunities for thinking, seeing, knowing, relating and being ‘otherwise’⁶² in a world in desperate need of rapid social and cultural change.

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