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# Headmasters' Conceptions of the Finnish Religious Education – Solution from the Perspective of Human Rights

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*Abstract: There has been much discussion about the most suitable model of religious education (RE hereafter) in public schools all around Europe. The Finnish model of RE has attracted great interest, because in Finland RE is given according to one's own religion. The Finnish model of RE is very unique and it emphasises the right of religious minorities to participate in RE according to their own religion in state-owned schools. In this article we examine headmasters' conceptions of the current Finnish RE solution from the perspective of human rights. The study is based on qualitative interviews.*

*Headmasters presented both advantages and disadvantages of the current RE solution. These advantages are briefly: freedom of religion, an opportunity to get RE according to one's own religion, knowing one's own roots, an opportunity to understand people from different religious backgrounds and an opportunity to study other religions for those students who are not members of religious communities. The limits of the solution are that it puts students into their own religious groups and this limits possibilities for religious dialogue, which should be one of the key elements of modern RE. RE has a strong potential to promote human rights. It is important to discuss different models of arranging education from the viewpoint of human rights. The human rights viewpoint should be central when dealing with the aims, contents and organization structure of RE. Different interpretations of religious freedom and the right to religious education are important considerations especially for RE.*

**KEYWORDS:** RELIGIOUS EDUCATION (RE), HUMAN RIGHTS, FINLAND, HEADMASTERS, FREEDOM OF RELIGION, QUALITATIVE INTERVIEWS

## 1. Introduction

Religious education (RE hereafter) has in recent years been at the focus of international research. There has been much discussion and debate about RE aims and functions in multicultural, post-modern societies all around Europe. Although most European societies are very pluralistic and multireligious in their nature, they provide various choices for RE in their school curricula. One of RE's main tasks at the European level is to handle and teach religions contextually as a part of cultural and religious diversity. There has been much discussion about the most suitable model of RE in public schools, how RE can be linked to value education and furthermore to human rights education (HRE hereafter) and citizenship education. There are also links between RE in different societies, the accepted concepts of nationality, citizens rights, the integration of minorities in society and furthermore questions of multiculturalism and the many-sided aims of education. Religious education is also linked to the understanding of human rights and democratic ideals (Willaime 2007, 62–65). In Finnish society there has also been much debate about the function of, and the most suitable model for religious education. At the international level, the Finnish model of RE has attracted great interest, because in Finland RE is given according to one's own religion. This is a very special way of organising RE in a European state-owned school system (Davie 2000, 90–91; Kodelja & Bassler 2004). In this article we examine headmasters' conceptions of the current Finnish RE solution from the perspective of human rights. The study is based on qualitative interviews.

Human rights are fundamental freedoms defined in the international human rights instruments. There has been debate about the philosophical basis of the concept of human rights and its ontology. In this article we are not going to deal with the philosophical aspects but refer to human rights as rights defined in the international human rights instruments, for example in the universal declaration of human rights (UN 1948) and related conventions (e.g. for example UN 1966a & b; UN 1989). For more discussions about the philosophical basis and the ontology of human rights see for example Gewirth (1982, 41-78; 218-233; Nickel 1987, 1-81; 171-179) and Symonides (1998, 24-28).

Human rights education principles have increasingly penetrated, for example, curricular plans and educational policies in many countries (Suarez & Ramirez 2004, 1-7.) It is now part of every aspect of education and it can be defined as education aimed at building a universal culture of human rights through the imparting of knowledge and skills and the moulding of attitudes (UN 1996).

## 2. Religious education in Finnish society

Finnish society has moved towards a multicultural society, as the number of immigrants in Finland has rapidly increased. Multiculturalism is nowadays part of school life at least in Finnish urban cities. In the capital area of Helsinki, apart from

Finnish and Swedish populations there are students from different cultural traditions who speak over 20 different languages. Religious diversity has increased remarkably in schools, to the extent that it is possible that some schools may have to provide religious education lessons in at least six or seven different forms, e.g. Lutheran, Orthodox, Muslim, Catholic and Adventist RE as well as Life Questions and Ethics (an alternative subject for non-religious students (Kallioniemi & Siitonen 2003, 53; Sakaranaho 2007, 3-16)). One reason for this is the new Freedom from Religion Law, which came into force in 2003. After amending the Freedom from Religion Law, the Law for Comprehensive School (454/2003) and Law for Senior Secondary schools (455/2003) were also amended. According to the Law, students have the right to religious education in school, if certain regulations are fulfilled (e.g. the Board of Education has accepted the curriculum for that specific form of religious education and there are three students whose parents have asked for it).

The Finnish model of RE can be characterized from the international perspective as a religion-based model to organize religious education in society owned schools (Schreiner 2001, 263). Skeie (2001, 243) has proposed a model that can be used to show how RE is organised in European countries. In this model the countries have been divided into two different types: a. the uniform, strong solution and b. the multiform, weak solution. In the former model there is an emphasis on society's willingness to adopt one model for RE, which can be confessional or non-confessional. The latter model can be labelled the multiform weak solution which is emphasised in societies less willing to adopt a uniform solution for RE. Finland's model belongs to the multiform, weak solution group: our society does not want to adopt a uniform model for RE. The Finnish model belongs to a sub-category of secular systems: in this subcategory there are different kinds of RE in schools (Skeie 2001, 241–243).

The Finnish model has similarities to the Austrian model. In Austria there are 13 different religious communities teaching RE in schools. In Austrian schools RE is taught according to the following different confessions: Catholic, Orthodox, Protestant Churches, Muslim and Jewish RE, with RE being a compulsory subject. Normally there are two RE lessons per week, but if there are less than ten students (minimum three students) there is only one lesson per week. The religious communities are responsible for the RE syllabuses and they also authorise the textbooks for RE (Pollitt 2007, 19). From this perspective the Austrian situation is slightly different from the Finnish one: In Finland RE syllabuses are written as a co-operation between the National Board of Education and religious communities. The Finnish model also differs from the models in other Scandinavian countries. In Sweden, the renewal of RE took place in 1962 and the subject is non-denominational in its character (Larsson 1996, 70–71.) The same kind of solution was accepted in Norway in 1997 (Haakedal 2000, 88–97; Hagesæther & Sandsmark 2006, 274–277). Also, in England and Wales there has been a change in the nature of RE in the past decades: the shift has been from denominational bible-oriented religious education to more open multi-religious approach and the RE aims emphasise giving a picture of different religions and

traditions. (Barnes 2012 21–32.) All around Europe, there has recently been remarkable development work in the field of RE (e.g. look at Jackson 2011, 145).

The Finnish Parliament renewed the Act of Freedom from Religion in 2003. At the background of the renewed law there is the idea of positive freedom from religion. The state has to ensure the right to freedom of religion and also ensure that individuals have possibilities to practise their religions. The new law also involves changes to RE in schools. Thus “confessional RE” was changed to “RE according to one’s own religion”. Students who do not belong to religious communities could no longer ask for exemption from RE. The law formulated the right to RE from a more positive than negative spirit of freedom from religion. The law puts all religions on the same footing and tries to promote religious equality (Seppo 2003, 177–179). The Finnish model of RE is very unique and it emphasises the right of religious minorities to participate in RE according to their own religion in state-owned schools.

The Finnish model of RE concentrates on individuals who belong to religious communities. It opens up a situation where in addition to different religions, schools also teach different forms of the same religion, e.g. Lutheran, Orthodox and Catholic Christianity. In practice, organizing different forms of RE lessons at the school level is difficult. Despite these difficulties, the right to RE according to one’s own religion is very important for minority religious groups and they appreciate the efforts being made. Religious education can also be seen to help the integration of immigrants into Finnish society. Furthermore, it is very important for students’ own identification processes. Religious identity can be seen as a part of regional identity (Sakaranaho 2007, 7–14).

This curriculum sets out the common aims for all models of religious education. The general aims for all the religion-based groups’ curricula are to look at the religious and ethical dimension of life from the viewpoint of the students’ own development and also as a broader phenomenon in society. The aim of religious education is to produce all round literacy (FNBE 2004, 202-206). According to the general aims of religious education the task of education is to familiarise students with their own religion, with the Finnish religious traditions and with other religions, help students to understand the cultural and human meaning of religion and educate the students about ethical responsibility and to help them understand the ethical dimension of religion (FNBE 2004, 202-206).

### **3. Research Question, Method and Data Analysis**

The research method and analysis of the data was qualitative. Seven headmasters working in the comprehensive schools in the Helsinki Capital area were interviewed. The interviews were based on a series of previously formulated questions and dealt with questions concerning the headmasters’ conceptions of the current model of RE. Headmasters’ conceptions of RE from the perspective of human rights were investigated as well. All the interviews were recorded and transcribed.

The analysis of the data began during the interviews. The most important steps in qualitative research are 1. reduction, 2. classification and 3. comparison (Savolainen 1991, 435). The first step was to obtain an overall impression of the research data. After that every single interview was analysed separately. Then the data was reduced to the general ideals of the interviewed headmasters and their different lines of emphasis were determined. Researchers defined the units of interpretation with the help of key questions. The units of interpretation could be used to find one or more meanings. These units of interpretation could not be defined beforehand, although they could be found when the researcher had read and analysed the material (Uljens 1992, 122–123).

The researchers read the interviews several times with some key questions in mind. The interpretations are concepts, which always form part of a process. They are also dependent on the researcher's subjective interpretation (for more about the role of the researcher see for example Ruusu vuori & Tiittula 2005, 22–56). The results for the phenomena under investigation were expressed as interpretations and categories.

#### 4. Results

Two different categories about the current solution from the perspective of human rights were uncovered by the interviews (Table 1)

TABLE 1.

*The headmasters' conceptions of the current Finnish religious education solution from the perspective of human rights: categories and main content.*

Category	Main content
1. The current solution makes possible to practice human rights	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. The current solution makes it possible to practice basic rights</li> <li>2. The current solution give a possibility to teach RE according to minority religious confession</li> <li>3. The current model improves the upbringing and maintaining of the religious identities of minorities</li> <li>4. The current solution advances tolerance towards people of different religious backgrounds</li> <li>5. The current solution makes it possible to teach life question and ethics to pupils who do not belong to any religious community</li> </ol>
2. The current solutions limits human rights	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. The current solution differentiates pupils into their own groups</li> <li>2. The current solution makes pupils representatives of religion, although they do not feel they are.</li> <li>3. In the current solution there are not enough qualified RE teachers especially in the minority RE - groups which is not a good situation</li> </ol>

In the first category 'The current solution makes it possible to practise human rights'. The current religious education solution is seen to be very important because it ensures the students' basic rights. In this situation no one has to take part in any form of RE against his or her own religious background and everyone gets religious education, which is according to his or her own religion. Examples:

*"In this solution everybody has an opportunity to become familiar with his or her own religious and cultural heritage. In multicultural societies and world it is very important to know one's own religious and cultural roots.*  
(Headmaster 4)

*"The right of religious education according own religion is one of the basic rights of human beings and each young people should be encouraged to use their rights in this question. (...) It is important that people know their own roots (...). So, they should learn their own roots via religious education"*  
(Headmaster 6)

The headmasters also mentioned that the current solution makes it possible to teach religious education according to minority religious confessions and the solution also gives the right for religious education according to the religious confession of a minority. Minority groups regard the current solution as being very important in bringing minority identity to the child. For example, the Orthodox and Catholic churches in Finland have spent a lot of the financial aid they receive develop religious education and they think that the current solution suits them well and gives them the opportunity to give minority religious identity education (e.g. Aikonen 2007, 51–54; Jaanu-Schroder 2007, 76–77).

The headmasters also pointed out that the current system gives an opportunity to teach life questions and ethics to those students who do not belong to any religious community. At the school level this subject is given if there are three students whose parents are not members of any religious community. The history of this subject dates back to the 1920's when the Law Freedom from Religion was first implemented. Until 1985 the name of this subject was religions history and ethics. The new subject was formulated in 1985. At that time the subject was also given a new profile (Salmenkivi 2003, 32–34).

In the second category: "The current solutions limits human rights" the current RE solution is seen not to be suitable, because it limits students' basic rights. These limits are seen from three different perspectives: the current solution puts students into their own religious groups, so that they do not have any possibility for religious dialogue, which should be one of the key elements of modern RE. Example:

*"The situation is not suitable in schools. The current model limits pupils' perspectives and it does not give them very broad perspectives."*  
(Headmaster 2)

Some headmasters also underlined the fact that the model is based on belonging to the students' parents' religious communities, but the young people do not feel they are religious persons. So the current solution makes students representatives of different religions. Students do not always remember their own religions and they do not think they are very religious people. The current system in which RE is based on the students' own religion does not take into consideration that participation in RE lessons is based on belonging to religious communities, not the students' own religious ideas and thinking. Although many families belong to religious communities, this does not have any meaning in their family lives. Example:

*“In the current model people assume that young people who belong to some religious communities, at some level feel they are religious. That is not always the real situation.” (Headmaster 1)*

The headmasters also pointed out that in the current system there are not enough qualified RE teachers in schools. Many minority RE teachers are persons interested in religious questions and members of religious communities, but they do not have any teacher education or academic studies in religion. It is also likely that they do not have enough theoretical knowledge of human rights to reflect deeply on the human rights ideals in religious education. In Finland we have had a project to give teacher education to minority groups RE teachers, but it is still in its beginnings. In the last five years the Department of Teacher Education has developed a model for educating Islamic teachers with the Unit of Religious Studies at the University of Helsinki. But there have been certain problems: first it has not been easy to find applicants for this education. The requirements of basic education are very high: the applicants should have passed the Finnish matriculation exam. In Finland most Muslim people are refugees or immigrants who have lived in the country for such a short time that only a small percentage of them have gone through Finnish basic education. The education is also organised so the participants have to be full-time students. Islamic teachers in schools usually have large families and they are unable to be full-time students, because they must work to support their families. Furthermore, in Finland unlike many other European countries, we do not have specific research centres for Islamic studies at the university level. Example:

*“One of our own minority RE teacher practises religion in RE lessons. This cannot be very suitable from the human rights perspective. The pupils have no opportunity to reject these kinds of practices.” (Headmaster 4)*

Summarising, the headmasters presented several advantages of the current solution. These are briefly: freedom of religion, an opportunity to get RE according to one's own religion, knowing one's own roots, an opportunity to understand people from different religious backgrounds and an opportunity to study other religions for those students who are not members of religious communities. All the conceptions, which



were linked to this category, have connections to human rights. One advantage of the current system is that it carries out the principle of freedom of religion, which is enshrined in the Finnish Constitution. Finnish society tries to protect the principle of freedom from religion from both sides. Every student has the right to get religious education according to his or her own religion and nobody needs to participate in religious education which is against his or her own religion (Pyysiäinen 2000, 145–146).

The headmasters also pointed out the main problems with the current model. Summing up, the current solution separates students into their own groups and the solution makes students representatives of their religions. The headmasters also emphasised the lack of qualified minority group teachers. Many minority RE teachers do not have any teacher education or academic studies in religion.

## 5. Conclusion

Research results based on interviews of the headmasters showed that religious education and human rights are linked together in many ways. The conceptions of the current RE model in the interviews of the headmasters highlighted many advantages and disadvantages of the current solution from the viewpoint of human rights. The categories found give a very multifaceted view of the current solution. The categories also indicated that the question of the solution for religious education has many links to other areas, for example the human rights viewpoint is and should be central when discussing the future organization structure of RE. Beside this, the human rights viewpoint is also important when dealing with the aims and contents of religious education. Religious education and HRE have many common aims and contents. Human rights education can be seen as one key element also in RE (see also Kallioniemi 2003).

Research into with HRE in upper secondary schools (Matilainen 2011, 91-162) shows that teachers and students linked RE and HRE and regarded RE as one key subject dealing with human rights and especially human dignity. Beside the fact that there is human rights education content in different school subjects and in all school life, it is important to discuss different models of arranging education in different subjects from the viewpoint of human rights. Especially in RE the different interpretations of religious freedom and the right to religious education are important considerations. There are interesting links between the study with the headmasters and the study with teachers and students. The headmasters studied presented many different perspectives about the current RE -model from the viewpoint of human rights and the students and teachers interviewed (Matilainen 2011) emphasized the centrality of the viewpoint of human rights in RE. Both these studies showed that it is important to highlight the viewpoint of human rights both in RE solutions as well as in the concrete realization of RE. Hence it is important that RE teachers as well as headmasters get enough human rights education in their compulsory education so that it is reflected in schools and in religious education.

In addition to human dignity RE and HRE have several contents in common, for example ethical education, the questions about e.g. holocaust, the human rights of human beings, especially children's rights. Children's rights have been a central consideration of Finnish society. Children's rights to freedom of thought, freedom of conscience and furthermore freedom of religion should be honoured in both RE and HRE. Both RE and in HRE emphasize the development of self-esteem, empathy and classroom culture supportive of human rights principles (see also OHCHR 2004, p. 18). It is important to give students the basic knowledge of human rights and awareness of the existence of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN 1989) and for older students in the secondary and upper secondary school levels more specific information of other human rights instruments (see also OHCHR 2004, p. 18). RE should include also lessons about different human rights violations, for example, education about the Holocaust. Holocaust education is now also highlighted in the value basis of the Finnish core curriculum (FNBE 2010).

The current RE model takes human rights into account well. It is important to take into account and highlight the significance of the religious backgrounds of students in RE. At the same time, the lack of qualified minority RE teachers is one problem in the current solution and we should think about all possible ways to improve this situation. As the study of headmasters pointed out, it is important that human rights principles are known by RE teachers and for example religious freedom is appreciated in religious education. Religious education should not include the practising of religion.

The religious and cultural life of Finnish society is likely to become more diverse in the future. In the future global, complex world it will be even more important to have enough RE so that students will know enough about different religions and cultures, giving them the cultural literacy and skills that will help them build their own philosophies of the world to deal with ethical questions. It is important to take account the holistic view of the development of the child, also highlighted in UN documents (for example UN 1959). Dealing with the spiritual and religious dimension of life and helping children or teenagers in building, structuring and assessing their own philosophies of the world can be seen as helping their holistic development. At the same time we should also think critically about different ways to arrange RE so that it can answer the challenges of the future in the best possible ways.

The terrorist attacks by a right-wing extremist as a protest against multiculturalism and Islam in July 2011 in Norway has taken Nordic countries into a new situation where we can no longer think that this cannot happen in our countries. The ability to respect people of different convictions and being capable of living and co-operating with people of different cultures and beliefs in a multicultural society, aims set for RE in the Finnish curriculum frameworks (FNBE 2004, 202-206), is vitally important. In recent years, it has been suggested in European discussions and research into RE (e.g. Heimbrock and others 2001) that the basic aim of RE is to give students religious competence. It includes among other things an ability to respect other kinds of religious concepts and beliefs, an active ability to be tolerant, an ability to act in an ethically oriented way and a readiness for interactive dialogue on religious questions. Furthermore, it includes the ability to handle religious pluralism and diversity in a

constructive way (Heimbrock and others 2001). These are also central aims in human rights education (see for example UN 1996). If we in Finnish society really think that the aims of RE areas should totally encompass these aims, the question of separate religious education classes will have to face many challenging questions. We should critically think for example if we should also arrange more possibilities for all the students in a particular class to come together to have dialogue on religious and ethical questions. Also the headmaster study brought forward considerations of human rights that argued for maintenance as well as improvement or changes to the current model.

In any case, RE has a strong potential to address and promote human rights. RE seems to be even more important than ever in today's complex world. Education for human rights should be an important aspect in the aims and content of RE and the human rights viewpoint should be central when dealing with the aims, contents and organization structure of religious education. Furthermore, all subjects in the social sciences and humanities can share the idea of human rights education. Skeie (2011) has written about a common pedagogy for these subjects. Human rights education should be a vital part of all subjects in the social sciences and humanities. In planning specific education programmes for human rights education all social sciences and humanities can share to topic: there can also be common pedagogies and approaches designed for them.

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