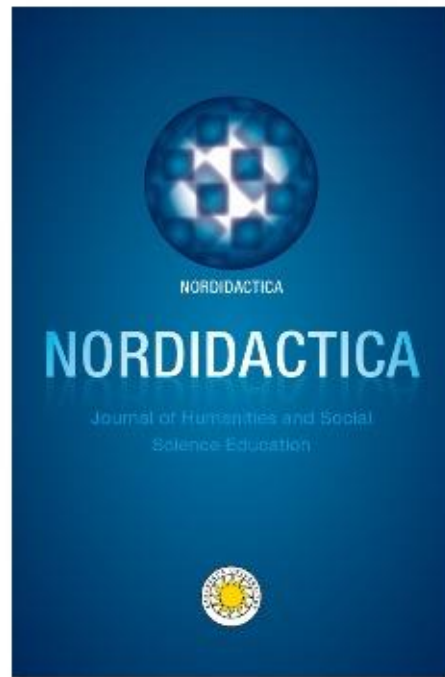


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Finnish Class Student Teachers' Perceptions of Religious Education

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Abstract: In this article we explore the perceptions of religious education of Finnish class teacher students. The research questions are: (1) What makes RE an important, positive or negative subject?(2) How the students perceive RE? (3) How do students differ in their attitudes towards RE: (a) in different institutions, (b) based on the personal level of significance of religion, and(c) depending on gender?

The data was gathered with a survey that included qualitative open-ended questions and a quantitative section. The data was collected from students (N= 538) in eight teacher education institutions in Finland. According to the study most of the students view religious education as an important subject. They emphasize elements such as education in ethics and values, acquirement of cultural skills and the pupils' growth as factors that make the subject important. In addition, the student teachers view the subject mostly in positive or neither positive nor negative terms. Pedagogical practice was considered both the solution and problem among the students when they evaluated the aspects that make RE positive and negative. There were some results connected to the personal significance and the location of the teacher education institution. However, gender and age did not make much of a difference to these perceptions.

KEY WORDS: RELIGIOUS EDUCATION, TEACHER EDUCATION, PRIMARY SCHOOL TEACHERS, STUDENT TEACHERS

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1. Introduction

The purpose of this article is to explore the perceptions of religious education as a school subject among Finnish class student teachers. Recent years have witnessed an increase in international research into religious education. The European research initiatives have for instance focused on religious education and dialogue in multicultural societies (Jackson 2011; Weisse 2009, 11) and practising RE teachers (Ziebertz & Riegel 2009). The Nordic countries have often taken part in these initiatives (Osbeck & Pettersson 2009; Räsänen & Ubani 2009; Kuusisto & Kallioniemi 2014). The study of class student teachers' perceptions of religious education is important for many reasons. First, religious education (henceforth, RE) has long been viewed as a teacher sensitive subject. Second, teachers' own attitudes may have a strong impact on teaching. Third, RE teachers also play a key role in shaping students attitudes towards the subject (Tamminen & Vesa 1982, 246). We hope that this study can contribute in research-based teacher education and professionalism among primary school teachers in religious education as prior knowledge and attitudes form the basis for individual professional development among students teachers and even challenge the effectiveness of teacher education if not acknowledged (see Korthagen 2010).

Perhaps due to the close connection between RE didactics with general subject didactics in teacher education, the Nordic countries have been quite active in studying teaching and teacher education in religious education from educational sciences empirical viewpoint. For instance since the study by Kallioniemi (1997) on the images of professionalism in practising RE teachers, a body of research into teachers, student teachers and religious education has accumulated in Finland. Such research includes studies of the development of the pedagogical thinking of RE subject student teachers during their pedagogical studies (Ubani 2012a; 2012b; 2013), a comparison of all subject student teachers' educational thoughts (Tirri & Ubani 2013) and teachers' perceptions of Lutheranism (Hella 2006). In Finland similarly to many countries, however, studies on class student teachers and RE have been scarce (but see McCreery 2005). The one exception in Finland is a study that has been repeated every ten years since the 1970's by Karttunen (1978), Tirri (1984) and Tirri & Kallioniemi (2000) that has focused on the classroom student teachers' perceptions of religious education as a subject. This article reports the latest survey in this sequence and the data was collected with the same instrument used in previous studies.

In this article we explore the perceptions of religious education of Finnish class teacher students concerning the following concrete research questions:

- (1) What makes RE an important, positive or negative subject?
- (2) How the students perceive RE?
- (3) How do students differ in their attitudes towards RE:
 - (a) in different institutions,
 - (b) based on the personal level of significance of religion, and
 - (c) depending on gender?

2. Current issues in RE in Finland

In principle, the current issues in Religious Education are tied to the question of accommodating Pluralism and Multiculturalism in Finnish society. Historically, the Lutheran church and RE were powerful tools in informing general schooling in Finland and securing national and moral unity (Poulter 2013). Finland, as an exceptionally homogeneous secular-Lutheran country (Riitaoja, Poulter & Kuusisto 2010), has undergone tremendous societal change during the last few decades. Finland is becoming a society with a multitude of languages, cultures, religions and worldviews. Empirical studies show (Ketola, 2008; Kirkon tutkimuskeskus 2012; Pessi 2013) that Finnish religiosity is rapidly changing, while the rate of church membership is steadily falling. Arguably alongside this societal secularization in Finland, there is a process of post-secularization (e.g. Habermas 2011) referring to the metamorphosis of religion and religious plurality in society and the increasing significance of religion in societal matters. Evidence for this process is for instance that the number of Finland's minority religions like Islam have been growing quickly over the last decades, while membership of the Lutheran Church has been on the decline (Martikainen 2010). Individual agency is central in constructing alternative religious identities and determining personal choices between religious and non-religious worldviews (Kuusisto, 2011; Pessi 2013).

Today, Finnish RE is officially a plural and nondenominational, yet segregated model of RE that is organized *according to the students' own religions*, which offers religious education in 13 different religions and Ethics. Outside the capital area, the number of pupils receiving teaching in a minority religion is relatively small and nationally, 92 per cent of school-age children participate in Lutheran RE. Finnish RE has traditionally been understood as a place for strengthening knowledge of students' own religions and religious identities. In addition, however, according to the current National Core Curriculum of Basic Education (NCCBE 2004, 202), the aim of RE is also to help students understand the ethical, cultural and human meaning of religion and provide them with knowledge of the Finnish spiritual tradition and other religions.

The basis of RE has distanced itself from a theological viewpoint of RE over the last decades and it is today firmly rooted in educational science. Since the 1970s RE as a school subject has detached itself from the religious instruction of the Church emphasizing more the centrality of the life questions of children and young people (Kallioniemi & Ubani 2010, 248). The educational framework of the subject is very holistic: the goal of RE is to support the pupils' personal growth and construction of their individual worldviews (Kallioniemi & Ubani 2008, 322). The aim of RE is also to help students understand the ethical, cultural and human meaning of religion and provide knowledge of the Finnish spiritual tradition and other religions (NCCBE 2004, 202).

In the current discussion on RE in Finland, there has been much debate over the role of state schools in providing education according to a specific religious tradition. However, the question of arranging a particular school subject is always a broader societal issue reflecting specific cultural-historical contexts and political-ideological

agenda (Poulter 2013). Around Europe, the role of religion both in education in general and as a part of the public space is an extremely complex political issue (e.g. Habermas 2011). In international research into RE there is a growing awareness of the importance of education in giving future citizens competence concerning their religions and worldviews (Jackson 2011, Kallioniemi & Ubani 2012).

The current nondenominational and segregated model of RE, which was redefined in the reform of Freedom of Religion Act in 2003, emphasizing positive freedom for religion, has been justified by the arguments concerned with recognizing children's right to their own religion and that it helps integration of minorities into Finnish society (e.g. Rissanen 2014). Although the school subject of RE continued to be organized according to the denomination of the pupils, as a consequence of the 2003 legal reform, 'confession' was changed to expression of 'one's own religion' (Basic Education Act, Amendment 2003/454, 13§).

However, these arguments have been challenged as Finland becomes more diverse and the need for common understanding and dialogue between different worldviews increases (Zilliacus 2014). The concept of "my own religion" (singular) in relation to a pupil's identity building has been criticized, as identity is understood to be a fluid and a multilayered entity and educationally "my own religion" vs. "other religions and worldviews" is based on dichotomous thinking, thus it has been criticized by scholars of intercultural education (Andreotti 2011; Alberts 2007). An ongoing national curriculum process (to be implemented in 2016) aims to teach about other religions at an earlier stage in pupils' schooling (NCCBE draft 2016, 94). Nevertheless, the structural question of enabling a dialogue between religions and worldviews will still remain unresolved due to the segregate model used for organizing teaching RE. Lately some private schools especially in urban areas have decided to implement at least to some extent an integrative model of RE. In addition many local municipalities are considering incremental steps for the integration of Religious Education, and some research projects have been initiated to study how this could be done.

3. Religious education and teacher education

In Finland academic teacher education has been in effect since the late 1970's for primary school teachers. All qualified primary school teachers must complete a master's degree in Education. Their studies include educational theories, psychology of learning, subject didactics, teaching practices and conducting a small scale study in the form of master's thesis. Primary school teachers teach RE in classes 1-6 to pupils aged from 7 to 12. The religious education subject didactics course in primary school teacher education is part of the students' multi-disciplinary studies, which is a series of courses concerning all school subjects. These courses include content knowledge and pedagogy of RE in schools (Kallioniemi & Ubani 2012).

Finnish teacher education is grounded on constructivist elements such as the reflective praxis, the interplay of theory and practice and research-based teacher education (see Niemi & Jakku Sihvonen 2002). With regards to religious education,

Finnish teacher education aims to play a role in how student teachers construct their view of RE and how they implement it in their work as primary school teachers (Tirri & Kallioniemi 1999). During their studies the student teachers are encouraged to discover their own teaching philosophy of RE (Tirri & Kallioniemi 1999).

However, with regards to classroom RE a few concerns have arisen on how the religious education views of student teacher can affect teacher education. First, some researchers in education have long questioned the actual effect of teacher education especially when compared to the effects of student teachers prior knowledge (Korthagen 2010; Tirri & Ubani 2013). It has also been discussed whether many of teachers' actions are actually immediate and takes place without reflection and therefore grounded on their unconscious images, feelings, values and needs (Dolk 1997; Eraut 1995).

The previous studies seem to confirm the belief that there are obstacles to the religious education development of class teachers. For instance, various studies have shown that primary school student teachers consider teaching RE to be a challenging, even difficult subject to teach (Kallioniemi 2009). The four main reasons given for this opinion are: (1) personal difficulties or biases in orientation towards the subject, (2) challenges in subject knowledge or competence in RE, (3) didactical challenges, and (4) general negative attitudes in society towards religion and the lack of support in developing RE as a school subject (e.g. Kallioniemi 2009, 107–108; Karttunen 1978; Pyysiäinen 2000; Vanhatalo 2012). One source of the insecurity could be that primary teachers do not have a comparable level of subject knowledge in religion as specialist Religious Education teachers. In addition to the recent discussions introduced above, the media have been accused of creating a general public image of religion as “a postmodern scandal” (Martikainen 2011, 82). This together with the possible negative attitudes confronted in school culture complicates the teaching of the subject and may lead to insecurity in teachers especially in the early stages of their careers.

There are 12 independent teacher education units in different parts of Finland. They used to have a common programme for primary teacher education but since the 1990's, universities have developed independent courses in RE didactics (Kallioniemi & Ubani 2010). In their research, Kallioniemi and Ubani (2010) studied the curriculum content of the course of didactics of religion in every teacher education unit in academic year 2009–2010. Although there were differences in the literature, integration between subjects and credits earned for each course, which varied from two to three and differences in lectures given or contact teaching hours allocated, there were quite small variations in the contents of the respective RE didactics courses (Kallioniemi & Ubani 2010, 262). In general, no geographical/ regional differences or characteristics were found in the curricula. The reasons put forward to explain the small differences there were, are the need to focus on the integral issues due to the small time allocations for courses, an increase in cooperation during the 2000's between the different institutions and the need to define the core of the subject due to the changes in educational policy and school legislation during the 2000's with regards to confessionalism in public education (*ibid.*). On the other hand this also means that courses in different institutions do not take into account local

characteristics pertaining to religion much. It was also noticeable that the societal background and civic role of RE hardly comes up at all in the curricula. This was surprising because the citizenship perspective in RE has lately become visible in the international research on RE (ibid., 261). However, the one concrete difference found in the curricula was in the descriptions of the societal relevance of religious education given by institutions in Helsinki, Turku and Joensuu, which explicitly named issues related to multiculturalism (ibid.) while institutions in other parts of the country did not recognize this aspect in their respective contents.

4 Procedures

Data gathering

The data gathering was based on a survey that was conducted in spring 2012. The student teachers were asked to fill out a three-part questionnaire. Students in 8 primary teacher education institutions were selected for the survey. They were located around Finland. The students were in their first or second years depending on their universities' programmes.

The research material was gathered at the beginning of the lectures on RE didactics. Altogether 538 student primary teachers voluntarily participated in this survey. There were 421 female students and 117 male students. The majority of students (N = 380) were under 24 years old and the rest (N = 151) were over 24 years old. The host institutions were from different parts of Finland. The students were put into the following three groups: *students from Helsinki* (N = 90, 17%), *students from institutions in small cities* (Rauma, Jyväskylä, Hämeenlinna, Rovaniemi and Joensuu, N = 347, 64%) and *students from institutions in large cities* (Oulu and Turku, N = 101, 19%). In the group of students from Helsinki there were 63 female (70%) and 27 male (30%), in the group of students from small cities there were 277 female (80 %) and 70 male (20%) and in the group of students from large cities there were 83 female (82 %) and 18 male (18 %) students.

The research questions, the types of inquiry and the description of items are described in the table below.

TABLE 1.

The research questions

Research question	Type of inquiry	Description of items
(1) What makes RE an important, positive or negative subject?	Open ended questions	“What makes RE an important subject?” “What makes RE an positive subject?” “What makes RE a negative subject?”
(2) How the students perceive RE?	Semantic differential (Likert 1-7)	“important – not important” “positive - negative”
(3) How do students differ in their attitudes towards RE: (a) in different institutions, (b) based on the personal level of significance of religion, and (c) depending on gender?	Semantic differential (Likert 1-7) Background information	“important – not important” “positive - negative” a. Helsinki, large cities, small cities b. Significance of religion c. gender

Table 1 presents the research questions with the type of inquiry and a brief description of the items. The first research question was: (1) What makes RE an important, positive or negative subject? This research question was answered with three open-ended questions (Table 1). The second research question was answered with using the semantic attribution “important - not important” and the summed semantic attribution “positive-negative”. The semantic attribution pairs were used to establish the respondents’ personal feelings towards the subject. This research question was: (2) How the students perceive RE? The use of different data in the relatively similar previous two research questions offered possibilities for triangulation in the analysis of the data. The third research question was: (3) How do students differ in their attitudes towards RE: (a) in different institutions, (b) based on the personal level of significance of religion, and (c) depending on gender? In addition the students were also asked in the questionnaire for their opinions concerning the

significance of religion. This could be answered with one the following choices: almost insignificant (N = 176, 33%), only a little (N = 198, 37%) and a lot (N = 162, 30%).

Methods and analysis

The qualitative data was analysed with inductive content analysis. The data from the first two questions on the issues concerning whether RE is an important and positive subject were analysed together. This decision was made during the analysis when a noticeable similarity in the groups was seen. It was thought that combining the groups could also provide information on the differences in emphasis when describing the issues that make RE a subject which is important and positive. However, the data of the third research question did not fit into the same categories. Therefore it was not analysed in relation to the analyses for the other two data sets.

The analysis of the qualitative open-ended data followed the following procedure. First, answers with similar meanings were grouped. Then these groups were combined into upper-level groups. After this groups were formed into categories. During this stage the frequencies of each meaning were determined. Then the percentage distribution of each meaning was calculated, to provide an overview of the emphases in the data.

The quantitative data was investigated with Osgood's (Osgood & Suci 1957; Kerlinger 1975) semantic differential scale using 15 different attribution pairs. The semantic attribution pairs used in this study were: "important – not important" and the summed attribution pair was "positive – negative" which comprised of three attribution pairs "funny-sad", "close-distant" and "easy-difficult".

5. Results

5. 1. Results from the qualitative analysis

5.1.1. What makes religious education an important subject?

The first open-ended question in the survey was: What makes Religious Education an important subject? In total the student teachers gave 1571 meanings to this topic. The most common meanings are listed below (Table 2).

TABLE 2.

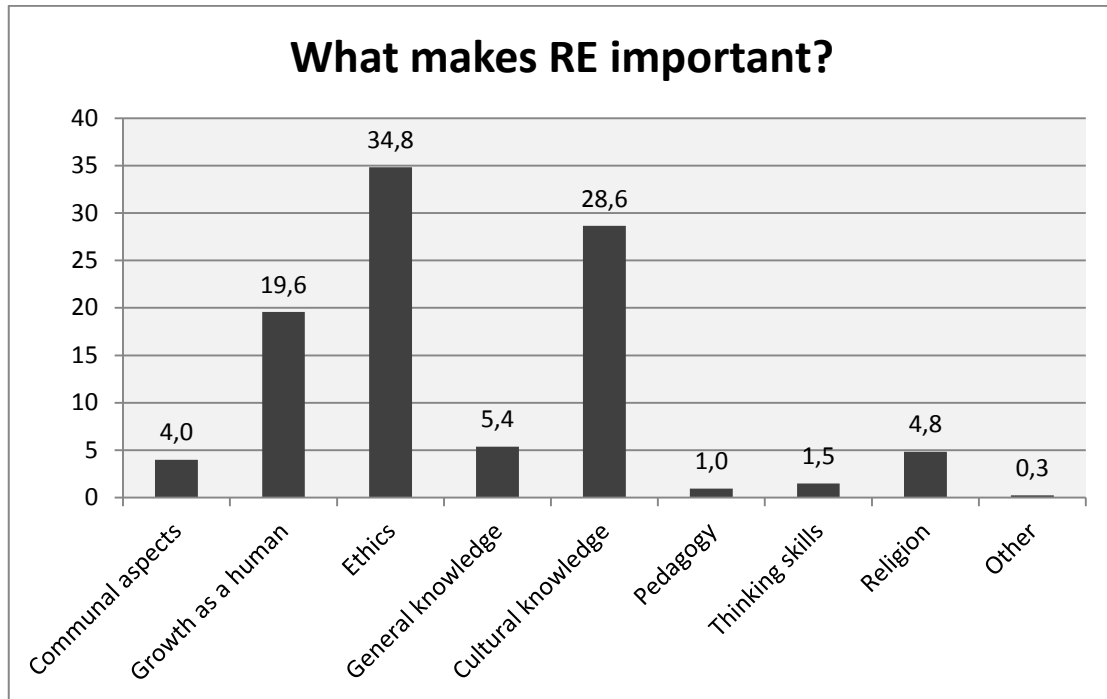
The most common meanings to: "what makes religious education an important subject?"

<i>Meaning</i>	<i>f</i>
Ethics	317
Different religions	79
Teaching into tolerance	66
Cultural knowledge	61
General knowledge	56
World view	51
Moral	44
Own religion	39
Life questions	31
Identity	27

The students emphasised "Ethics" (f = 317) in their evaluation of factors that make RE an important subject. Issues related to ethics were common in the data; in addition to this the students gave "Moral" 44 times along with "teaching for tolerance" (f = 66) which was the third most common meaning. The student teachers mentioned "different religions" 79 times. Outside this table the students also described "World religions" fairly often (f = 22). Other frequent meanings were "cultural knowledge" (f = 61), "general knowledge" (f = 56) and "world view" (f = 51). The rest of the most common meanings were characteristically personal. These were "own religion" (f = 39), "life questions" (f = 31) and "identity" (f = 27).

TABLE 3

What makes RE an important subject.



The content analysis of the descriptions of the issues that makes RE important produced nine categories. Table 3 presents the percentage of meanings that belonged to each of the respective categories. The largest and the most prominent categories combined contained about 85 per cent of the given meanings. The student teachers emphasised "Ethics and values" (34.8%), "Cultural skills" (28.6%) and "Growth as a human" (19.6%) most when describing issues that make religion important.

The other categories were significantly smaller in size. Of these the next largest were "General knowledge" (5.4%), "Religion" (4.8%) and "Communal aspects" (4%). The other categories in the data concerning the issues that make RE important were "Thinking skills" (1.5%) and "Pedagogy" (1.0%).

5.1.2. What makes religious education a positive subject?

The classroom student teachers were asked to name three things that make Religious Education a positive subject. In total they gave 1361 meanings. The most common meanings are listed in Table 4.

TABLE 4.

The most common meanings for: "What makes religious education a positive subject?"

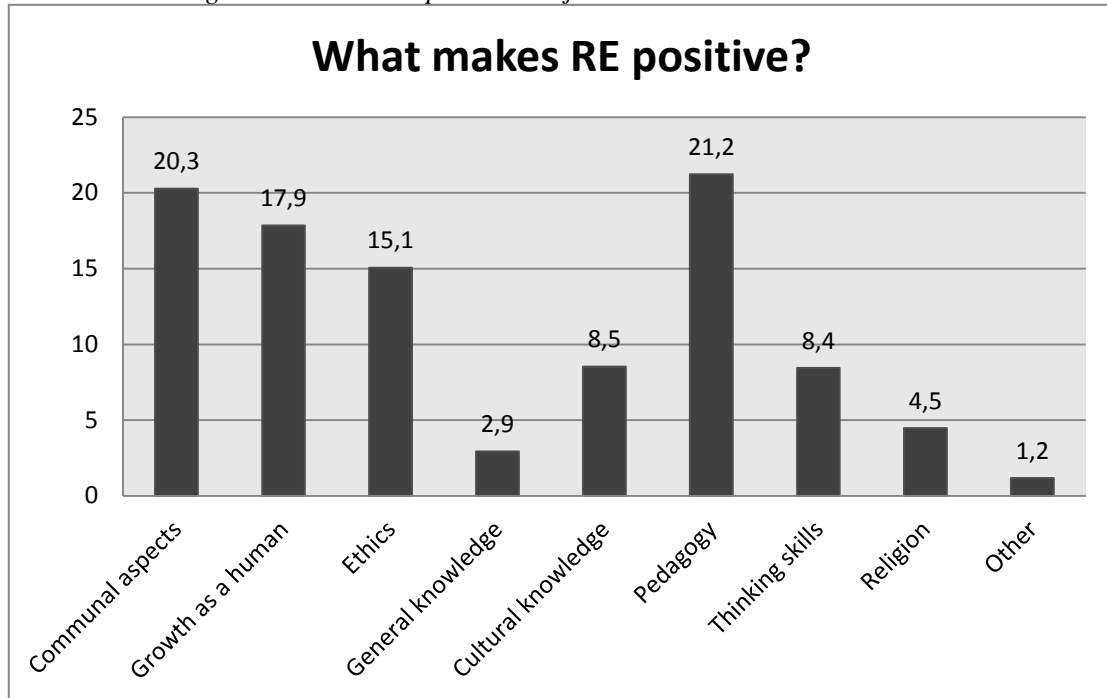
Meaning	f
Discussion	81
Ethics	64
Reflection	55
Versatility	43
Stories	40
Tales	39
Experientialism	26
Tolerance	24
Cultural knowledge	23
Expansion of Worldview	22

The most common meaning in the descriptions of the issues that make religious important was "discussion" (f = 81). The classroom student teachers also frequently mentioned "Ethics" (f = 64) and "reflection" (f = 55). On the other hand "stories" (f = 40) and "tales" (f = 39) refer to similar topics as does "Biblical stories" that was also mentioned 15 times. Therefore different kinds of stories are held in high regard when describing positive religious education. The difference in the Finnish language between "stories" and "tales" is that while the former refers to stories that may also be considered real life stories, the latter are fictional.

The students teachers also considered other things related to pedagogical practice such as the "versatility" of the subject (f = 43) and "experientialism" (f = 26) as issues that contribute to positive religious education. Other relatively common meanings included "tolerance" (f = 24), "cultural knowledge" (f = 23) and "expansion of worldview" (f = 22).

TABLE 5

What makes Religious Education a positive subject?



The same categories were used in the analysis of issues that make religious education a positive subject. These were different for the categories used in the analysis of issues that make religious education important (Table 5). The comparison of the data showed some differences in the views on important and positive aspects. Table 5 shows the percentages for each category. The most common categories emphasised by the student teachers when describing positive religious education were "Pedagogy" (21.2%), "Communal aspects" (20.3%), "Growth as a human" (17.9%) and "Ethics and values" (15.1%). In other words, while "communal aspects" were integral for making the subject positive, they were not emphasised as much when describing the aspects that make the subject important. To some extent also "Ethics and values" were emphasised less as aspects that make RE positive than as aspects that make RE important (15.1%), however it was still considered relatively important in both questions. On the other hand "Pedagogy" was noticeably emphasised more as an issue that makes RE positive (21.2%) than important (1.0%).

The other aspects that make Religious Education positive were "Cultural knowledge" (8.5%) and "Thinking skills" (8.4%). The students emphasised "Religion" (4.5%) and "General knowledge" (2.9%) less.

5.1.3. What makes religious education a negative subject?

The classroom student teachers gave 1244 meanings when they answered the question, "what makes religious education a negative subject?" When compared to other questions the answers showed more parity and thus the frequencies of the most

common meanings remained relatively low. The most common meanings are listed in Table 6.

TABLE 6.

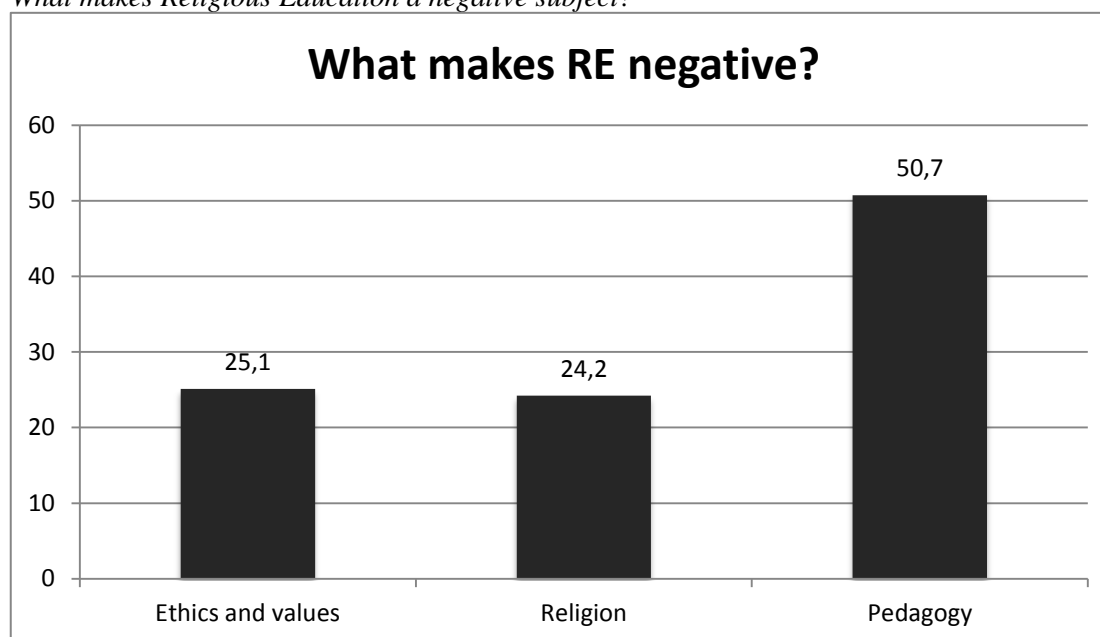
The most common meanings to "what makes religious education a negative subject?"

<i>Meaning</i>	<i>f</i>
Confessionality	42
Bible-centredness	38
Pushing upon	26
Attitudes	25
Boredom	19
Teacher's attitude	16
Full of pathos	13
History	13
Pre-conceptions	11
Own religion	11

The three most common individual meanings given by the classroom student teachers were "confessionality" (f = 42), "Bible-centredness" (f = 38) and "Pushing upon" which along with "Full of pathos" (f = 13) all seemed to refer to a somewhat religiously narrow fundamentalist old-fashioned teaching. In addition many of the most common meanings given by the students focused on attitudes. These were "attitudes" (f = 25), "teacher's attitude" (f = 16) and "Pre-conceptions" (f = 11). In addition, the classroom student teachers emphasised meanings such as "boredom" (f = 19), "history" (f = 13) and "Own religion" (f = 11).

TABLE 7

What makes Religious Education a negative subject?



Three categories were formed from the issues that make religious education negative (Table 7). The most emphasised category by the classroom student teachers was "Pedagogy" (50.7%). This category included meanings that referred to difficulties in teaching, relevance of substance and the problematic nature of the subject.

The other two categories were about equal in their size. The student teachers used meanings that referred to "Ethics and values" (25.1%) and "Religion" (24.2%) to describe the issues that make religious education negative. In general the category "Ethics and values" consisted of meanings that referred to the negative attitudes of the teachers, guardians and students, the teachers professional ethics and conviction, other issues related to conviction along with the secularisation of the society and multiculturalism.

5.2. Comparative quantitative analysis

There were also quantitative questions in the questionnaire; one part of questionnaire was a semantic differential scale. The purpose of this section was to gain more insight into the perceptions of the student teachers on RE. In this section of the survey the students had to use a 7-point scale to estimate how they view religious education. In this article we focus on the scales of RE as an *important - not important* school subject and RE as a *positive - negative* subject.

First we will examine the scale "RE as an important school subject." If we look at the frequencies, the vast majority (76%) of students emphasized RE as an important subject. Their answers were between 1 and 3. Only 12% of the students chose options

between 5 and 7 (not such an important subject). The mean of scale is 2.8 with a standard deviation of 1.4. The female students ($M = 2.8$, $s = 1.4$) estimated RE to be a more important school subject than male students ($M = 3.1$, $s = 1.6$) ($t = 2.15/df = 525/*$). The students' ages did not differentiate their perceptions.

The significance of religion differed results ($F = 107.3/df = 2/***$). Students who estimated that religion was almost insignificant for them ($M = 3.8$, $s = 1.5$) emphasized RE clearly as not such an important school subject than students who estimated that religion had a little significant for them ($M = 2.75$, $s = 1.1$) and students who estimated that religion has a lot of significance for them ($M = 1.88$, $s = 0.9$). The differences were very significant in both cases. The areas where the students were studying also differentiated the results ($F = 11.2$, $df = 2/***$). Students from Helsinki ($M = 2.5$, $s = 1.2$) emphasized RE as a more important school subject than students from little cities ($M = 2.8$, $s = 1.4$) and students from big cities ($M = 3.4$, $s = 1.6$). The differences were significant in both cases.

If we compare the results to Tirri's and Kallioniemi's results in 1999, the student teachers in this study estimated RE to be a more important than a not important subject. The mean in 1999 was 2.3 ($s = 1.2$). The difference between the results in 1999 and 2014 is statistically very significant ($F = 13.0/***$).

Second we studied the scale "RE as an positive - negative school subject." Over 40% of students (43%) chose the positive side of the scales and their estimations were 1 to 3. Only a small minority (14%) of students had estimations between 5 and 7. The mean of scale was 3.4 and the standard deviation was 1.3. Again gender and age did not differentiate the students' perceptions.

The personal significance of religion was connected to differences in the perceptions of positivity-negativity of RE as a subject ($F = 140$, $8/df = 2/***$). The students who estimated that religion was almost insignificant for them ($M = 2.5$, $s = 0.9$) emphasized RE as a negative school subject more than students who estimated that religion had a little bit of significance for them ($M = 3.3$, $s = 1.0$) and students who claimed that religion has a lot of significance for them ($M = 4.4$, $s = 1.2$). The differences were statistically very significant in both cases.

The location of the institution also differentiated perceptions ($F = 5.1/df = 2/**$). Interestingly, the students from large cities (Oulu and Turku) ($M = 3.8$, $s = 1.3$) emphasized RE more as a negative school subject than students from small cities ($M = 3.4$, $s = 1.3$) and students from Helsinki ($M = 3.3$, $s = 1.1$). In Oulu's case this might be interpreted as a protest against the strong influence of the Lutheran Church revivalist movements that are very visible also in school life in the North and cause tensions in RE classes. The differences were statistically almost significant in both cases. This result was very similar to those of Tirri's and Kallioniemi's research in 1999. In 1999 the means of this scale were 3.4, with a standard deviation of 1.2.

The fact that student teachers from institutions in Helsinki and the smaller cities considered the subject in a more positive manner than other students is noticeable. This suggests that Helsinki, although the most secular city in Finland if looked at from Church membership rates, is a multicultural city and a meeting point for different worldviews and lifestyles which might be related to the students' tolerance and

understanding of the necessity for instruction in matters concerning religion. Additionally, the small cities of Rauma, Jyväskylä and Hämeenlinna can be defined as rather traditional 'secular-Lutheran' (Riitaoja, Poulter & Kuusisto 2010) places where hegemonic interpretations of Christianity have not been challenged and thus, religion is considered in rather positive terms.

6. Concluding remarks

In this article the perceptions of religious education of Finnish class student teachers were explored. It seems that most of the students view religious education as an important subject. The issues that make religious education important to them are elements such as the education in ethics and values, the acquisition of cultural skills and the pupils' growth as human beings to which in their opinions the subject contributes. The growing emphasis on ethics and values as a central justification of RE can be recognized from the 1970's onwards in Finnish RE. This clearly has to do with the secularization of Finnish society where replacing the Lutheran doctrine with liberal ethics have been taken as a relevant way to defend the importance of the school subject (Poulter, forthcoming). 'From religion to ethics' as a trend for development of RE has also been recognized internationally: Wright (2004; 2007) states that moving religion and religious truth claims away from the centre of RE and replacing it with liberal ethics illustrates in a bigger picture a post-confessional mentality of wiping religion away from the important debates of society.

In general the classroom student teachers view the subject positively or neither positively or negatively: only about every tenth student teachers were negative about the subject. Pedagogical practice was considered both the solution and problem when evaluating the aspects that make RE either positive or negative. The issues that make religious education positive were connected to pedagogy, communal aspects, growth as a human and ethics and values. These combined to make up about 80 per cent of the data. About half of the issues that make the subject negative according to the classroom student teachers were connected to pedagogy. The other half consisted of both references to ethical issues and religion itself.

There were some results that were connected to the personal significance and the location of the teacher education institution. Especially students from Helsinki and students with a high personal significance of religion emphasized the importance of religious education as a subject. Similarly, student teachers with a higher personal significance for religion had a more positive image of the subject than other students. In addition, the student teachers from Helsinki and from the smaller cities considered the subject in a more positive manner than other students. Furthermore, students from big cities emphasized RE as a more negative subject than students from other cities. This could imply that the lack of recognition of local aspects in teacher education curricula in Finland is not justified by the diversity among students of different institutions and it is possible that this may hinder the development of professionalism in religious education among primary school teachers. It would seem that teacher

education would benefit from tasks where the student teachers are supported in acknowledging their background and position in relation to religion and religious education and would reflect on these issues during their courses.

The students also emphasised issues related to multiculturalism, pluralism, diversity and tolerance as aspects that make religious education an important and positive subject. The questions concerning multiculturalism and pluralism have become more and more relevant in the didactics of religious education over the past decade (Kallioniemi & Ubani 2010). However, it remains a critical question whether primary teachers are equipped with adequate knowledge and skills in their university studies to face the diversity of worldviews in schools and other challenges in classroom practice along with the demands of the content with regards to religions and beliefs. This concern has been raised by student teachers themselves, for instance, in England (McCreery 2006). In the Study of Religion, religion is currently understood as a continuously changing and internally diverse and complex concept, mixing traditional elements with new religious movements and contemporary secular philosophies (Cush 2013, 121). This also means future class teachers with little acquaintance with religion(s) require increasing support in order to deconstruct the conceptions of religion. However, if pedagogical issues such as high-quality teaching material were guaranteed to all teachers, the challenge of academic knowledge would not necessarily play such a decisive role here. It is also important to reflect that the 2003 Freedom of Religion Act did not clarify the problematic issues of RE, as there is still a great deal of uncertainty among teachers about how to teach RE according to one's own religion while at the same time as a non-confessional subject.

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