

READY - Religious Education and Diversity

Sharing experiences of, and approaches to,
teacher education in the context of
"Education and Training 2020" (ET 2020)



READY
RELIGIOUS EDUCATION AND DIVERSITY

Religious Education (RE) in Germany¹

*Legal and organisational framework as well as current
discussions*

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1. Legal Framework

The general conditions for RE in Germany are laid out in the Basic Law. Three Articles are crucial:

- (1) The separation of state and religion, which is determined in Art. 140. This separation follows not a strict type such as in France but allows areas of cooperation, e.g. RE in schools.
- (2) Religious freedom based on Art. 4 of the Basic Law. This guarantees freedom from religion but also freedom for religion. On these grounds space is provided for religious communities and churches in the public sphere including the education system. On the other side, this Article is also fundamental for the right to opt out from confessional RE.
- (3) RE is the only subject in school guaranteed by the Basic Law. Art. 7.3 states:

Religious education is an ordinary subject in public schools [...]. Regardless of the regulatory law of the state, RE will be taught according to the principles of the religious communities. No teacher can be obliged to teach RE against their will.

In practice this means that the government provides the framework and has the overall responsibility for the education system and that the religious communities collaborate in terms of curricula and teacher training as well as schoolbooks (Rothgangel & Ziebertz 2016). Thus RE is seen as a *res mixta*: a joint project of state authorities and religious communities.

2. Organisational Framework

Because RE in Germany is organised by the federal states as well as religious communities, every religious group that is organised in an association and accepted as a religious community by the German State can offer RE in schools. However, a second barrier that has to be taken is a minimum number of pupils who attend the lessons. This number is determined by the federal states and differs between five and eleven.

This means that in practice it is almost impossible for minority groups to have their own denominational RE. For in Germany about 60% of the population belongs either to the Roman-Catholic Church or the Protestant Church in Germany. About 1/3 of the population is without a confession not least in the East of Germany as a consequence of the anti-church policy of the former GDR regime. The next larger group are Muslims with about 5% of the population. Other religious groups, e.g. orthodox Christians, Buddhists, Hindus or Jews are minorities in Germany and make up together the last 5% of the population (Rothgangel & Ziebertz 2016).

2.1. Denominational Teaching

The neutrality of the German State regarding religion requires that the responsibility for RE is handed over to religious groups. The current list of religious groups that offer RE in Germany consists mainly of the Protestant and Catholic Church, increasingly Islamic groups and at very few schools the Jewish community, the Orthodox and New Apostolic Church, Mennonites, Old Catholics and Buddhists. However, the labelling of 'confessional' or 'denominational' refers only to shared sponsorship by the state and religious communities. It does not imply any expectation in terms of the outcome of the course. "The aim of religious education should not be to make students, for example, Protestant or Catholics, but should be truly educational from the beginning" (Schweitzer 2011, p. 117). This image is promoted by initiatives of cooperative religious education based on dialogue between denominations and religions.

2.2. Differently organised RE in Bremen, Berlin, Brandenburg, and Hamburg

Four out of the 16 federal states in Germany have RE organised in different ways than the others. The denominational approach is only established in those federal states where it already existed on January 1, 1949 (date of validation of the Basic Law). The city-state of Bremen has had already established “education in Biblical history based on general Christian principles and not bound to any particular denomination” in 1947 (Rothgangel & Ziebertz 2016, p. 120). The federal states Brandenburg and Berlin also refer to this so-called “Bremen clause” for justifying a voluntary confessional RE under responsibility of the religious communities (Berlin) and the subject of LER: *Lebensgestaltung-Ethik-Religionskunde* (“life choices, ethics, and religious studies), which is obligatory for all students (Brandenburg).

The situation in the city-state of Hamburg is according “to the accounts of those responsible for Religious Education, [that] there are 106 different religious communities in Hamburg now, and 247,000 non-Germans from 185 countries with 100 different languages” (Meyer-Blanck 2014, p. 153). As a consequence, Hamburg looked for a new way to teach non-denominational RE without breaking German law. The programmatically called subject “Religious Education for all” was installed, which is in the sole responsibility of the Protestant Church. In recent years a process has started to involve Islamic groups and the Jewish community more in questions of content. This means that the official form of denominational teaching is preserved with adapting the contents to the demographic situation.

3. Current Discussions

The denominational form of RE is one of the most strongly discussed topics in Germany. For not only are the numbers of pupils who are without any religious affiliations rising, but through immigration also the number of pupils from other faith. It seems that in such a plural society the current organisational structure is not adequate anymore.

For example, there has been a discussion about **Islamic RE** in Germany for 40 years now. The main reason that hampers the implementation of this subject is the organisational structure. The German State on the one hand asks for a hierarchal organised religious group as a partner and Islam on the other hand is rather loosely organised. Different federal states have found different answers to this challenge. After a long process of establishing the framework for Islamic RE, the current status is that 2 federal states have Islamic RE as a proper subject, 7 have some form of Islamic RE, and only 4 have no form of Islamic RE. 3 states have in general non-denominational forms of RE.

Another strongly discussed aspect is the rising number of pupils without any religious affiliation. Therefore, many concepts for a connection of denominational aspects and needs of non-denominational pupils are developed. One, which meets the needs of a plural body of pupils, is for example **cooperative religious education** (*Konfessionell-kooperativer Unterricht*). This concept aims to bring together pupils and teachers of different denominations.

Next to the challenges of increasing plurality, a shift towards economically exploitable results of education affects the discussions in Germany. This trend is fuelled by comparative studies like PISA. One of the consequences following the mediocre performance of German pupils in the comparative study is a new focus from educational professionals on ‘outcomes’ concerning **competences** (Feindt et al. 2009). Regarding RE, especially notable is to teach “capability for pluralism”. This approach to organise the subjects through defining competences not only helps to improve the quality, but also

to communicate to the public the relevance of denominational RE in the public school system. A subject like RE has to justify itself time and time again, for at a first glance it is not contributing to the process of producing effective workers.

Concluding, in Germany it is not only a main task of RE professionals to find answers to arising questions regarding the widened diversity of religious beliefs. It is also relevant to campaign for a perception of humanity that is not limited to economic demands. Rather, more education of the youth involves support for creating one's own identity which involves finding one's own position towards religion.

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¹ This is a shortened version of the text. The long version was first published on www.eftre.net.