



# INSIGHTS & CONCLUSIONS

## AN ATTEMPT AT INTERPRETATION

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## Preliminary remark

These insights and conclusions are a subjective interpretation based on the evaluations available to me so far and the analysis of relevant subject literature. They are intended to contribute both to the internal discussion and to the preparation of working papers on READY.

## Religious literacy – definitions

*Literacy* as such is traditionally meant as the ability to read and write. However, modern interpretations of the term's meaning have been expanded to include the *ability* to use language, numbers, images, computers, and other basic means to understand, communicate, gain useful knowledge, solve problems and use the dominant symbol systems of a culture. Current concepts of literacy are expanding to include skills to access knowledge and the ability to assess complex contexts.

*"A means of identification, understanding, interpretation, creation, and communication in an increasingly digital, text-mediated, information-rich and fast-changing world"*

(UNESCO: [http://www.unesco.org/education/GMR2006/full/chapt6\\_eng.pdf](http://www.unesco.org/education/GMR2006/full/chapt6_eng.pdf))

Applied to the area of religion and religiousness and thus to the context of the READY project, *Religious Literacy* can be defined as

*"The knowledge of, and ability to understand, religion".*

(Wikipedia: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Religious\\_literacy](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Religious_literacy))

*"The basic tenets of the world's faiths. The diversity of expressions and beliefs within traditions that emerge and evolve in relation to differing social/historical contexts. The profound role that religions plays in human social, cultural, and political life in both contemporary and historical contexts."*

(Diane L. Moore, Religion Communicators Council: <http://www.religioncommunicators.org/religious-literacy>)

*"The ability to discern and analyse the fundamental intersections of religion and social/political/cultural life through multiple lenses in the way of understanding of the history, central texts, beliefs, practices and contemporary manifestations of several of the world's religious traditions as they arose out of and continue to be shaped by particular social, historical and cultural contexts; and the ability to discern and explore the religious dimensions of political, social and cultural expressions across time and place"*

(Harvard Divinity School: <https://rlp.hds.harvard.edu/definition-religious-literacy>)

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## Religious literacy

1. Teaching and learning about religion take place in many contexts inside and outside organisational institutions. The importance of being religiously literate is increasing as globalisation has created greater links and migration between societies of different faiths and cultures.
2. A reason-based analysis of the phenomenon religion must examine how religion is perceived and interpreted in a particular social context. What is the social relevance of religion and what does it even mean to be religious? Is religion understood primarily as a human phenomenon or as a system of meaning and norms? As an indispensable contribution to the formation of identity and the search for an ideological/spiritual home? As an examination of the fundamental questions of human life and a contribution to democratic thinking and action? In other words: Knowledge generation, attitude development and/or formation of faith? Realistically seen, however, there are always and everywhere different and mixed approaches and forms of understanding of religion in society.
3. Equally important is the question whether the different areas in which religion is represented in a society are considered or whether religion only refers to world religions or locally influential religious communities.
4. We must clarify whether educational concepts leading to religious literacy aim at a reason-based exploration of religion, its relevance and role in society, and whether societal phenomena are open to both religious and non-religious interpretations. Do they include considerations of what and who is trusted in society or which 'hidden religions' exist?
5. Religious literacy is understood by many authors as religious competence. The development of competence as a subject-related skill includes both subject-related knowledge and experience with the respective subject of the targeted competence.
6. Any differences in the recognisable and experienceable from the original 'before' picture will only become comprehensible if you are not only familiar with the existing image but also with the original. In other words, if you don't know the original, you cannot recognise the differences. In our context, this means that one can only interpret and classify every-day religious phenomena (= experience) that surround us if one knows their origin in writing and form (= knowledge).

In this context, we might think of currently much-discussed topics such as 'headscarves', 'honour killings', 'fundamentalism', 'martyrs', etc. Do they have anything to do with religion or not? To be able to classify these phenomena correctly it is necessary to know which actions can be justified religiously and which cannot - considering the necessary criticism of religion in each case. Religious education must therefore aim at a corresponding "being able to relate to these differences".

7. Do teachers who see religious literacy as a goal of their teaching focus on getting their students to critically reflect on the content (teaching), symbolism or rituals of religions? To do so it is important to be able to name and reflect one's own positions which are again based on experiences which must also be named and reflected upon. Religions are most likely not perceived as a homogeneous block, but rather as intra-diverse and plural.

## Religious literacy through education

1. Religious education is a process that evolves from the understanding of education on the one hand and what it means to be religious on the other. Both the concept of education and the status of religion in society differ from country to country.
2. Philosophies of religious education differ within countries as well as between them. There are no monolithic accounts of religious education in any one country. Rather there are given themes which dominate in each country.
3. Nature and purpose of religious education/RE are inseparably linked in each country to the appropriate relations between religion and school life, which in turn are defined by the respective relationships between church and state. For each country, understanding the relationship between church and state is the key to understanding religious education. In some cases, the differences between countries are so great in this respect that, even if it were desirable, the transfer of concepts and practices between countries would not seem practicable.
4. On these grounds, we must reflect who is responsible for religious education as such: Parents (religion as a private affair), religious communities and churches, or state and church together? In the latter case, do they both stand for the necessity and added value of religious education?
5. This leads to the question of how religious education is embedded in the respective overall understanding of education. Is it a kind of special education or part of general education?
6. Are inter-religious education and inter-religious learning included in the respective state curricula independent of (the form of) RE? If so, do they aim to develop in pupils a critical knowledge, understanding and awareness of religious and non-theistic belief systems and how these systems relate to our shared human experience?
7. Do these curricula foster the cognitive ability to recognise the common existence of positive and negative characteristics within a religion so that people do not prematurely experience unknown situations as uncontrollable and threatening? Or do they only process these situations in an 'either-or', or 'black-and-white' way of thinking? ('ambiguity tolerance', cf. Ammicht-Quinn).

## Concepts of RE as a school subject

1. RE exists in many forms: as multi-religious learning, as in England, Scotland, Sweden and parts of Germany; as purely ecclesiastical as in France or the US; or as confessionally separated as in Austria and certain parts of Germany. Conceptually seen it can be a subject that introduces into faith or leads to the appropriation of a certain faith; or one that principally informs about faith and the different religions.
2. In any case, different concepts of RE and theology meet and provoke discussions as forms of RE are derived from the development of schools and society as well as from regional conditions and demands/necessities ('interconnected contextuality').
3. Comparing concepts and forms of RE must consider what role religion plays in a country's overall concept of education and in school policy. Is RE a subject of its own or included in other subjects? If so, which subjects can be identified?
4. What is the theoretical rationale for the respective RE? Is it conceived and understood as a safe space to discuss and develop personal ways to one's identity formation or even faith-building? Or are all the participants exposed to each other's opinions of dealing with religion as such?
5. What is the objective of the respective concept? Is it the exchange about religious issues? The accompaniment of the pupils' existential search movements in the sense of orientation guidance? To foster decision-making autonomy through dialogic arguing? To communicate peacefully with each other and cooperate constructively without losing one's own point of view while listening to others? In the actual practice, however, there are various mixed forms throughout the project partner countries.
6. Of great importance are the questions of the confessionality of teaching and of religion teachers, the didactic access to the confessional and religious composition of the learning groups, the possibilities of confessional and religious cooperation as well as feasible scenarios for an RE of the future.
7. The current and possible future forms of denominational RE have played a decisive role in determining how the fundamental future viability of RE as such can be justified as an independent part of education. The crucial question is how "today's people can live with religion and faith in an enlightened way" and how they can exchange ideas and communicate with others in the face of religious, cultural and social diversity.
8. Various position papers from German-speaking countries (e.g. Germany 2014 & 2016) and conferences (e.g. Austria 2017) argue that the binding task of RE is to create the opportunity to understand and identify with one's traditions, counteract fundamentalist tendencies in an enlightened way and, finally, give people action orientation in a religiously pluralistic world.

### ***Separative RE (denominational/confessional RE)***

- Denominational RE has become a solitary case. Nationwide this form exists only in Austria and parts of Germany. Although here RE is no longer seen as a proclamation of faith, it still serves as a place of learning where pupils are enabled to think and behave responsibly regarding (a specific) religion and faith.
- In separative approaches pupils are taught according to their own or their parents' religious orientation or affiliation. Thus, teaching and learning takes place in separate groups under the responsibility of the respective religious communities and in cooperation with schools and educational institutions.
- At this point, the Catholic position is even more rigid than the Protestant insofar as it is based on a *triad*: the confessional unity of teachers, pupils and RE.
- In this model, teachers representing a religious community are given the authority to teach not only their own religion/denomination but also *about* other religions/denominations.
- At the same time, studies show that although there is still a formal affiliation to a denomination (usually through baptism) - albeit a markedly declining one – people very often have no other binding relationship to it. Here basic knowledge is demanded of something that cannot be associated with anything personally experienced.
- The declining number of Catholic and Protestant pupils in in many regions of Germany and Austria, however, makes the parallel establishment of Catholic and Protestant RE more difficult. In the debate on alternative, mostly non-confessional concepts of RE - as demanded above all in view of the religious and ideological situation in these countries -, the local churches are trying to reconsider and justify anew the principle of confessionality. Theologians and pedagogues argue that pupils must develop 'communicative identity', which only arises if they have first acquired a sound knowledge base of their own denomination.
- At the same time, there is also an increasing number of religious communities offering RE in schools (with all the associated difficulties of creating a manageable timetable). For this reason, experience has been gained over the past few years with an expanded cooperation of denominations – above all Catholic and Protestant, which also provides for the establishment of mixed denominational learning groups in RE. In view of these developments, there is broad agreement to enhance the understanding of denominational RE.
- Within the traditional confessional framework, RE in Germany and rudimentarily also in Austria has been developed into a confessional cooperative form, which is either designed by RE teachers of different confessions (often in form of team teaching) or by a teacher of one confession who is officially authorized to teach all Christian students of a class.

- While there seems to be no discussion in England, Scotland and Sweden about denominational education, experts in Austria, for example, are asking whether the confessional separation of pupils can and should be maintained in the present form in view of the rapidly increasing religious, cultural and social plurality and diversity. The existing models of confessional, cooperative and dialogue-based religious education are the first steps in this direction.
- Whereas in Austria there is only confessional RE, we meanwhile find three main types of RE in Germany:

#### Confessional RE

Pupils basically see the world and their own life from the perspective of a denomination. This is teaching *from* religion - not teaching of faith (teaching in) and no mere information about religion (teaching about) either.

#### Confessional-cooperative RE

Based on an insider perspective, it strongly considers the phenomena of plurality and de-confessionalisation. It takes place in mixed denominational learning groups, but is not interreligious. Confessional-cooperative RE still sees teachers as authentic faith witnesses who confront pupils with their perspective and thus may bring about a change of perspectives.

#### Religious learning in the classroom

Critics of the first two forms insist that they do not meet the challenges of secularisation and pluralisation. The pupils remain incapable of interfaith dialogue. They should therefore be informed about religions (teaching about). All religions are on an equal footing, authentic experiences are obtained through invited guests or the remainder of the religious experience and practice the pupils bring with them.

#### **Integrative RE (RE for all)**

- In most of the project partner countries (e.g. England, Scotland, Sweden, partly Germany) integrative RE is included in school curricula as an individual school subject. Here RE is conceived as the study of different religions from a non-religious point of view. However, in these cases the organisational frameworks for this conception of RE must be considered as well. Which external factors (legal and school organisational) shape the subject?
- Depending on the underlying conception this form varies from country to country (e.g. England and Sweden) as different national or regional contexts allow a variety of interpretations of an RE for all.
- This raises the question what the reference discipline for the underlying teacher training concepts should be: Theology or the study of religions?

- The concept of RE for all produces both fears and opportunities for those affected as well as for RE stakeholders. Some fear that one's own truth/identity will be watered down, which immediately raises the issue of what constitutes one's own identity, e. g. when there is no affiliation to a religion/faith?
- This has become relevant above all in the context of the current local debates on the return to traditional values, which have allegedly been buried in recent years - Austria, Germany: the idea of a supposedly German/Austrian 'guiding culture' as a counter-narrative to multiculturalism; England: British values, or e.g. also 'Australian values'; each as a phrase that on the one hand addresses a kind of national unity, but on the other also accelerates exclusion or assimilation.
- RE for all seen as a chance provides manifold possibilities of authentic encounters whereby difference becomes an opportunity for individuation. Erikson or Mead, e.g., understand identity as a permanent dialogical and social process from which several different identities can result. Therefore, such encounters require a reflective accompaniment.
- As shown earlier, recent debates and position papers emphasise the importance of religious beliefs, practices and group identification for the formation of one's identity. Critics do not dispute the impact of distinctive characteristics of religious traditions (beliefs, practices, ways-of-being and ways-of-seeing the world) on people's lives, worldviews, self-concepts and self-representation. Instead, they argue that some concepts of religious identity are more sensitive and sophisticated than others in accounting for the complexity of identity formation as an on-going social process in a plural or postmodern context.
- The perception of the other person on a personal level can lead to a change in perception, reflection and one's own behaviour - both among teachers and learners. This results in a specific didactic principle: Respect through presence. It is related to the phenomenon of the *Other* as identified in cultural theory and migration pedagogy: When the others are not present, they are often made stranger than they are. This is accompanied by assessments such as dangerousness, foreignness, unpredictability, etc. Joint learning can counteract this imbalance.
- Critics of a 'teaching about' claim that the phenomenon of religion is not explained by simply talking about it. Religion must be experienced at least in phases in order to be able to understand and judge it at all. Experience is always understood in a double sense as active and passive at the same time. "The active side of experience is trial and error - one gains experience. The passive side is suffering, accepting" (Dewey 1916). Just as music cannot be understood without listening to authentic examples or making music yourself; or mathematics without the constant application of what has been learned to various concrete mathematical tasks.

- This does not in any way refer to a kind of artificial religiousness but rather to the instructional arrangement of the encounter with lived religiosity. However, experience always remains something highly subjective.

## Didactics of studying religion(s)

1. The question of RE concepts requires the inclusion of didactics of religion(s). It is necessary to examine which didactics underlie some concept and how special didactics of a multireligious RE can be substantiated both theologically and from the position of educational theory.
2. This takes us to the question how theological issues (big ideas) of a religious tradition are developed didactically. How much learning about the self and the other is a prerequisite for learning from the other – if any at all? How can religion as a human phenomenon be explained to make pupils understand that it is not a 'one size fits all' idea but may be meaningful for one person and not at all for another – according to the motto "religion makes me think"?
3. Does a concept focus on learning about or from religion? The latter – also in an integrative approach – in the sense of giving an informed and considered response to religious, moral or social issues?
4. Is the expertise of the study of religions and its didactics recognisably transferred to the course books being used in class?
5. What are the prerequisites for interreligious learning? What dynamics might become visible? Which overlapping situations/critical incidents are expected? How are future teachers prepared didactically for dealing with diversity?

## Practice

1. Lessons in different countries often look similar. At the same time, student teachers, teachers and teacher educators' understandings of their role, and of the nature and purpose of the subject, differ. A range of philosophies of religious education underpin apparently similar practices.
2. We ask many of the same questions, expressing similar interests, but we attempt to answer them in different ways, often grounded in distinct disciplines, emerging from specific historical contexts, and reflecting a range of contemporary concerns.

## RE teachers

1. Teachers and who they teach are significant push and pull factors influencing the philosophies and practices of religious education in each country. Studies claim that the nature of teaching seems inherently linked to teacher value orientations as nearly every aspect of teaching, from the character of relationships with pupils to decisions about how to organise the classroom, involves issues of moral education. A natural next step would be to understand whether and how particular value orientations or religious commitments are correlated with pedagogical decisions.
2. However, there are potential limitations in the scope and manner - and whether it should happen at all - of how teachers bring their faith into their work. May or should religion and specific value orientations play a role in conveying knowledge and skills? Our observations have shown that personal religious backgrounds and attitudes - if at all - only play a role within the denominational RE, and even there usually not in form of preaching faith or attempts at conversion.
3. The respective concept of RE determines the role and self-conception of religion teachers. Where denominational differentiation prevails, teachers normally see themselves as witnesses of their faith and authentic representatives of their religion. In an RE for all, this seems to be omitted in the observed lesson. What becomes apparent, however, is a very individual view of one's own role as an RE teacher: as a *moderator*, who facilitates and moderates the pupils' initiatives to get into interfaith conversations on their own; as a *mediator*, who wants to conciliate conflicting views and understanding; or as an *encourager* to reflect and discuss controversial views – or all three roles at the same time.
4. In conversations with teachers of an RE for all, they sometimes expressed their concern about the extent to which theoretical knowledge about a religion that is conveyed corresponds (and can do) to the pupils' understanding of faith and their religious practice. This confirms the recognition that learned religion or conviction is not to be automatically equated with the diversity of the lived religion or conviction.
5. If we assume that a coherent field of knowledge is the basis for being regarded as a professional teacher, this uncertainty undermines the aspiration of non-confessional or non-religious teachers who do not have sufficient knowledge of other denominations or religions to be professional.
6. In a report on education policy (2008), the OECD recommends increasing diversity among teachers in order to reflect social diversity. In the context of RE, this would mean depicting the existing religious diversity through teachers of different denominations, or in the longer term, of different religions.

## RE teacher training

1. The training and further education of religion teachers depends on the overall concept of RE in a country. Thus, we find in the project countries, from a religious point of view, mostly heterogeneous groups of students with sometimes even pronounced atheistic/agnostic beliefs. Only in the rarest of cases are students still confessionally largely homogeneous (as is the case in Austria, for example). Therefore, these teachers later often feel that they are not sufficiently prepared to teach pupils from other religious or cultural backgrounds.
2. To meet the resulting challenges, education systems must provide teachers with relevant interreligious/intercultural competences. This means promoting their knowledge and understanding of the world, religions and cultures. It is therefore necessary to develop and deepen appropriate communication skills for diversity in order to be empathic and reflexive about beliefs and cultural differences. These interreligious/intercultural competences are also a prerequisite for responding to and managing the different habitats of school and classroom.
3. Where there is a common education for teachers of religion - irrespective of their religious (non)association or conviction - they can recognise their own prejudices, question communication patterns and - if necessary - deconstruct existing 'truths' about others. In Austria, the interdisciplinary module "Confessional Cooperation", with team-teaching of the respective theologians, was implemented in teacher education already a while ago.
4. Most countries require that students studying to become teachers require a compulsory school internship. There they are confronted with pupils who are characterised by religious, cultural and social diversity, especially in areas with a high number of pupils with migration and/or minority background.
5. These placements can improve the interreligious and intercultural sensitivity of teachers. Multi-cultural practical experience can help teachers to change their attitudes and perceptions of diversity and diversity as well as their knowledge of ethnicity, power and inequality in education.
6. In denominationally separated religious education, such placements should also include observation and practice in denominationally different classes than one's own.
7. Teacher trainers must take plurality and diversity into account in their diverse professional roles. They can impart targeted knowledge to teachers, stimulate critical reflection discussions and prepare them for communication and interaction with pupils from different religious, cultural and social backgrounds.
8. All these challenges underline the need to adapt and ensure the content and quality of initial vocational training and continuous further training of teacher educators and practitioners (CPD) in this respect. In Vienna, for example, teachers are increasingly being given the opportunity to attend seminars on current interreligious, intercultural and social topics that arise from the

different backgrounds of the pupils. In these seminars, a topic is presented and discussed from at least three different religious perspectives. Teachers are taught to reflect on the subject both in terms of their own religion and the relevance of the subject for their respective confessional teaching (change of perspective) - according to the motto "learning from each other, about one another and with one another".

## RE and diversity

1. Diversity in culture and religion arises when people interact on the basis of their values and beliefs, which characterise them as national, ethnic or social groups and orientate their behaviour and thus determine further action. This diversity shapes morals, laws, customs, habits, behaviours and the perception of the world.
2. Diversity is a strength when it leads to the *acceptance* of diversity in a community. It becomes a weakness when it contributes to fragmentation into individual identities and social tension - in our case, it refers to class and school as a common place to live and learn.
3. Plurality and diversity of social conditions in Europe require a new and critical examination of the contribution of RE to coping with these phenomena.
4. In everyday school life, pupils and teachers bring their 'characteristics' into the classroom: In addition to interest, learning profiles, affect and willingness, also religious and cultural attitudes, values, beliefs, hopes, fears and expectations. But how do we deal with this diversity in public education and especially in RE?
5. If one's own belief and value system and that of the others are not sufficiently reflected upon, teachers could perceive those who do not seem to correspond to their own ideas as strange, problematic, inappropriate - simply as the 'others' who do not belong on an equal footing. The perspective of the other person is decisive for an open dialogue and thus for multi-religious coexistence.
6. The question of teacher education for religiously and culturally diverse classrooms must be based on the recognition that diversity is a benefit for educators and schools and that efforts should be made to make the best use of this resource. This perspective contradicts the view that diversity is a problem to be avoided or, if this is not possible, 'solved'. It is not about thinking within limits but about possibilities.
7. RE in European immigration societies must lead to one's self-interpretation in the horizon of others. The issue of what needs to be taught and practised is often ideologically determined but must aim at forming open and reflective personalities, who can change perspectives and think outside their own belief box. They should be able to find common features, which in turn can become relevant distinguishing features as well.

8. In some forms of RE, however, pupils learn that religious affiliation is something that separates them. Considering the already widespread speechlessness between people of different religions and social milieus, it would be fatal if RE merely depicted the existing religious distribution within a society. The separation of learners and teachers along confessional and religious borders - and then possibly also unmixed socially - is hardly conducive to a future-oriented dialogue. Instead, we need heterogeneous groups in which transversal learning is possible.
9. Religious and interreligious education are two aspects of a learning process. It is best achieved through encounter, relationship and collaboration in the classroom. In a religiously mixed class there are religious and doubting, convinced and questioning people of different denominations and religions. All of them - not least by looking at the example of a heterogeneous teaching staff - would have the chance to deal constructively with difference and diversity. They experience that there are differences not only between denominations and religions, but also within (intra-religious heterogeneity).
10. Such (inter-)religious education presupposes that every human being is multidimensional and has and lives a multitude of affiliations. It means to say goodbye to the idea of 'pure' religious or cultural identities and to thematise different forms of life.