

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

# READY – INSIGHTS AND ANALYSIS OF ASPECTS OF RELIGIOUS EDUCATION IN EUROPEAN CONTEXTS

Intellectual Output 5 by  
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## 1 Introduction

This document constitutes one of the intellectual outputs (IO5) of the Erasmus+ project *Religious Education and Diversity* (READY): Sharing experiences of and approaches to teacher education in the context of "Education and Training 2020." This paper summarizes, structures and analysis the READY material. It deals with student teachers' and teacher trainers' reflections on study visits, on student teachers' lesson planning and teaching, reflection papers, the produced DVDs and several other papers that are available on the READY website. See: <http://www.readyproject.eu/>

The READY project team come from six European institutions:  
Kirchliche Pädagogische Hochschule, Wien-Krems, Austria  
University College London, England  
Staatliches Seminar für Didaktik und Lehrerbildung (Gymnasium),  
Germany  
Comenius Institut, Germany  
University of Aberdeen, Scotland  
Karlstad University, Sweden

The primary intended audience for this document are teacher educators "training" religious education teachers. It may also be of interest to practising religious education teachers,

student teachers, pupils, parents, and others interested in or responsible for lesson plans and materials for teaching about religion and diversity.

## 2 Study visits: Aim, methods, and principles

Central to the READY project are the study visits done by both student teachers and teacher trainers on the READY team. Study visits by the team build on the study visit guidelines (IO2) and are based on ethnographic methods such as participating in observations and interviews, with the aim of learning about the context and the people working in it, trying to understand their values, needs, motivation, and vocabulary – all important parts of conducting ethnographic work (cf., Mills & Morton, 2013).

Underlying scientific concepts for the study visits are, for example, critical incident analysis and phenomenographic research (For phenomenographic research, see f.ex. Marton & Booth, 1997). Key questions to be considered during the visits and lesson observations have been:

- What models of RE do we find in the countries visited?
- How far do they promote and facilitate interreligious learning and dialogue?
- What quality criteria are applied?
- How do they appreciate religious, cultural and ethnic diversity and its richness?
- What recommendations can we formulate as a consequence?

Reflections of study visits and learning events are documented by student teachers and teacher trainers located in Münster, Tübingen: Wien, Karlstad, Aberdeen, and London.

The documents used for analysis can be found at the web portal for the READY project at <http://www.readyproject.eu/>

The reflections after study visits in different national contexts have given rise to many topics for discussion, and apart from having been related to religious education, there are various reflections on the organization and culture of the visited schools – that is, how pupils and teachers interact with each other as well as the context of the school. Some examples will be given below from different groups of student teachers and from teacher educators from different groups in the READY team. These analysis starts with the text below.

Thereafter the document covers themes that have been important in the work of the READY-team. The texts ends with a list of references, which hopefully can lead readers to more interesting texts in the field of religious education and diversity.

## 3 Reflections on the overarching school culture

After school visits in different national contexts, there were often reflections about the overarching school culture. The following observation was made after a study visit in a German school:

The colleagues from Scotland are amazed at how easy going and uncomplicated things are: No entrance controls, the teachers casually clothed, the pupils eat sandwiches during the breaks in the classroom.

For the Swedish educators, the eating of food bags gave a strange and stressful impression, because lunch is served to all students in school at lunchtime in Sweden. Study visits were also done for RE lessons in what are called “free schools” in Sweden, which are schools run by private school owners or companies, but state funded. Yet, the state still decides on the curriculum in free schools, and these schools have to follow the Swedish national curriculum. This organization of schooling is much debated in Sweden and was also discussed within the READY team. The educational reforms of the 1990s that gave rise to free schools on an educational market have come under question, especially since 2011, when the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) published the 2009 Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA). This showed that Swedish students had dropped to 19th place out of 57 countries for literacy, to 24th in mathematics, and to 28th in science. The other problem is that there are unintended side effects that many think damage society, such as increased segregation (The Swedish National Agency for Education, 2012, 2018; Östh, Andersson & Malmberg, 2012). One of the READY educators from abroad made the following reflection after visiting a Swedish free school:

Swedish private school, however 100% funding by the state. Amazing as in all Scandinavian schools I have had the privilege to visit: an impressive tranquility and calmness in the whole school building, in the staff room as well as in the hallways and classrooms. A large number of rooms for group work, a cafeteria, inviting recreation areas.

This reflection is interesting because it easily can be contradicted; Sweden has gotten criticism from OECD inspections for not maintaining order and discipline in school (OECD, 2015). Thus, one can conclude from our work in the READY team that not all schools can or have the possibility to open for study visits, which is understandable because the environment for both students and teachers is already difficult. One challenge has been to create opportunities for study visits in different environments, which might suggest that our results do not always show the most versatile image of education. However, another field note on the school culture, this time from England, refers to a rather affluent school, generously receiving visitors, and the reflections from a German colleague:

Entering a British school for the first time, I was surprised we had to ring the doorbell. The door opens and we enter a hallway similar to a hotel lobby. A receptionist, amiable and binding at the same time, welcomes us, asks up to sign the guest book: “time in,” “time out,” address, visitor badge ... “Please have a seat! (gesturing to a comfortable lounge corner with red leather sofas) A colleague will be with you right away ...”

Also the terms visible and the organization of materials was studied and reflected upon. One team member made the following comment from visiting a Scottish school:

What struck us in particular was that in all classrooms were quite a number of posters and quotations inviting reflection and discussion and drawing attention to the structure and organization of learning processes:

The use of computers was obviously a difference between German and Scottish schools as the team reflected on the use of blended learning in a course concerning mindfulness:

The daily use of digital media seems to be much more a matter of course than in our (German) institution. So we were no longer amazed by the fact that even the mindfulness program is conceptualized as a course alternating between E-learning and practicing mindfulness in real-life situations and group settings. This kind of blended learning enables persons from very different professional backgrounds to participate in the program.

Thus, reflections after study visits in the READY team covers many different aspects such as school ethos or school culture, and overarching educational issues such as school organization, school ownership, and school governance. Issues on the macro level are important to be aware of because the macro level sets the agenda or framework for pupils, teachers, and administration in schools. A frame factor perspective (Lundgren, 1972) can be used in an analysis of school and education as well as perspectives of schools as an institution, an organization, a movement, or a seminar (Persson, 2014, 499–514). Different perspectives show different dynamics of social interaction in school and can therefore be used when analyzing variations between and within schools as the organization and place of RE in schools.

## 4 Reflections on the organization of RE in different national contexts

There is no overarching policy on religious education (RE) in the European school system, but three basic models are found, namely: 1) Disallowing religious education within the formal curriculum in schools operated by the state (as in France); 2) Providing nondenominational teaching about religions (England, Scotland and Sweden); and 3) Providing denominational teaching of religion for prevailing religion(s) within the country (see for example, Davis & Miroshnikova, 2013; Rothgangel, Schlag & Schweitzer, 2014).

In the discussions within the READY team, we have dealt with the issue of a confessional or a denominational approach to RE, such as teaching *into* a religion (Germany and Austria), as well as of a nondenominational teaching *about* religions (England, Scotland and Sweden). In the discussions we have experienced how language and assumptions built into our way of speaking and thinking about certain concepts have played a role. One of the teacher educators stated the following about the discussions on confessional/nonconfessional RE:

The Scandinavian and British colleagues have, again and again, difficulties understanding what might mean denominational or confessional religious education in the German context. For them it is the same as catechetical or even missionary [education]. One of the German colleagues quotes an official document of the Evangelical Church in Germany (EKD), saying that religious education in a protestant perspective invites everybody to RE lessons and is based on educational arguments. It is considered to be a “free service offered by

the church to a free school.” Perplexed faces follow. One of the Swedish colleagues asks cautiously, “What kind of service do you mean?”

Another team member reflected on this issue as follows:

Because of the contested character of “confessional” (in some contexts seen as near to indoctrination), the term “positionality” is increasingly used to express the role of the teacher. The role of religious communities in organizing RE in public schools brings also up the issue of who should be responsible for public education. Is it solely the state, or is public education also an issue of the civil society? And how is the neutrality/impartiality of the state concerning religion connected to value-based subjects in the public school?

The issue of who is responsible for organizing RE in schools also comes up in discussions when a Swedish colleagues asked the question, “What citizens do the state want to shape with its education?” A German colleague replied that this is not an issue because it is not relevant in a German context.

On the other hand, reflections on the sameness of RE, notwithstanding the different approaches of learning *into* a religious tradition, learning *about* religious traditions and worldviews, and learning *from* religious traditions and worldviews (Grimmit, 1987; cf., Fancourt) was frequently observed and discussed as in the following field note:

The READY team visited a Protestant religious education class taught in a Catholic school in Germany. The lesson was moderated by a young female teaching colleague, with 16 pupils of an upper secondary course sitting in table groups. “They are very polite, interested and highly motivated to compare the anthropology of Hobbes with the anthropology of Rousseau. The lesson is nicely arranged and well structured, the climate for discussion open and pleasant.”

The commentary of the colleagues from Britain to a German colleague after this school visit made the German colleague reflect as follows:

The British colleague: “Teaching is very similar to teaching at home.” Then I ask myself (aware that it is a superficial impression of a single lesson): Why then, is protestant religious education in a Catholic school separated in confessional tracks? (In Britain they teach RE for the whole class without separating them.)

Not only this time, but several times, the teachers/educators and students from various national contexts stated that “this could also have been a lesson in my country.” It might be, as stated in earlier work by Peter Schreiner (one of the READY team members) that “comparative research among religion teachers in different countries shows that there is a convergence in the use of methods in the teaching. It (to talk about differences) might be more

relevant in theory than in practice” (Schreiner, 2011, 165). Thus, the gap between theory and practice and the different approaches in RE have been discussed and reflected upon intensively in the READY team. This can be related to some valuable contributions on RE and learning, including the distinctions between learning *about* religion and *from* religion (Grimmit, 1987; Teece, 2008, 2010; Hella & Wright, 2008) in denominational contexts where each author argues for a different pedagogical strategy (in other words, how learning in RE should be done) and from different theoretical perspectives. Thus, even though RE can be taught in nondenominational classrooms, there are several approaches and nuances in RE that can and should be distinguished. Another way could be to discuss RE approaches as *distancing*, *dynamic* or *expansive*, as Geir Afdahl (2014).

## 5 The RE curriculum in the READY team countries

As mentioned above, there are different forms or approaches to RE and ethics in different European countries, together with corresponding forms of teacher training (see e.g., Rothgangel, Schlag, & Schweitzer, 2014; Schreiner, 2014, 161-177).

Schools and performed education are agents of the dominant society and as such, reflect the underlying cultural patterns of that society formulated in its curriculum, either on a national level as in Austria, England, Scotland and Sweden or on a regional level as in Germany. Curricula generally focus on the selection and organization of specific knowledge, skills, and manners to fit particular needs of the student and the unique operational structure of the school. This area of research is studied within curriculum theory. Questions related to the curriculum are discussed by for example Scott (2007) who indicates following issues when studying curriculum theory:

- What items of knowledge should be included in a curriculum and what items excluded?
- What reasons can be given for including some items of knowledge and excluding others?
- How should those items of knowledge be arranged in the curriculum?
- What is the relationship between items of knowledge within a curriculum and skills and depositions that are taught as part of the curriculum?
- What is the relationship between disciplinary or academic knowledge and pedagogical knowledge?
- What types of arrangements in schools are suitable for delivery of the curriculum?
- What would be the strengths of insulations between different types of children, teachers, and learners; teachers and educational managers; different types of knowledge; different items of domain-specific knowledge; different types of skills;; different educational programs; different teaching episodes; different parts of the policy cycle; and different organizational units?

Questions such as these above have been at the center of the READY project, especially in relation to work on RE and diversity. Formulated in another way, the overarching issues at stake can be formulated in a couple of questions:

“Should religion be taught as part of the compulsory curriculum in state-maintained schools?” and, “If so, what should the status, content, and purpose of that education be?”

One of the insights gained from the READY project is that we as teacher educators, and in particular student teachers, have a considerably deepened knowledge and understanding of the multifaceted and complex subject constructions of RE and ethics that exist between countries, as well as between classrooms.<sup>1</sup>

While the right to religious freedom for all is clearly established in all READY members’ nations’ constitutions, there are different, at times conflicting, curriculum ideologies (Scott 2008, 142–146). Different views exist on ontological issues, such as, “What counts as knowledge in RE and ethics education,” and there are disagreements about the nature of religion, thus, “What *is* religion?” And “How does the concept of religion relate to the concept of culture?” Other basic ontological issues are related to what is said to exist and how to view religious truth claims. Furthermore, into what categories, if any, can we sort existing ‘things’ in religions and what features are claimed to be essential to these ‘things’?

Epistemological issues also come to the fore when analyzing RE in different nations, namely questions such as, “How is this knowledge on religion(s) to be acquired,” which is a basic curriculum issue. Because Christianity is one of the cultural and ethical cornerstones of Europe, and also, while there is no overarching policy of RE in the European Union (EU) curricula, and approaches vary, as mentioned above, there are documents from the Council of Europe pointing to a view of RE as a form of education also included in aspects of “intercultural education”.<sup>2</sup> In this white paper, the following is stated:

An appreciation of our diverse cultural background should include knowledge and understanding of the major world religions and non-religious convictions and their role in society. Another important aim is to instill in young people an appreciation of the social and cultural diversity of Europe, encompassing its recent immigrant communities as well as those whose European roots extend through centuries  
(*White Paper on Intercultural Education*, p. 44)

Also, in the document *Signposts–Policy and practice for teaching about religions and non-religious world views in intercultural education* by Robert Jackson and Council of Europe (2014) it is stated that it “does not promote any particular religious or non-religious viewpoint, but aims to promote dialogue, learning from one another, deepening understanding of one’s own and others’ background and traditions, tolerance of different beliefs held by others in society, civility and respect for human dignity. [...] However, it also acknowledges scholarly opinion which recognises that, whatever the system nationally or regionally, issues relating to diversity, secularisation and globalization have to be worked through in developing contemporary studies of religions and world views in schools.”

<http://www.readyproject.eu/uploads/files/1518373217SignpostsPolicy.pdf>

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<sup>1</sup> Different RE and RE teacher education profiles can be studied at the READY overview of RE and RE teacher education at <https://twinspace.etwinning.net/files/collabspace/1/21/621/19621/files/b31010521.pdf>

See also: [https://www.bistum-hildesheim.de/fileadmin/dateien/PDFs/Schule\\_intern\\_Service/Publikationen\\_und\\_weitere\\_Schriften/Religion\\_Unterrichten\\_1\\_2018.pdf](https://www.bistum-hildesheim.de/fileadmin/dateien/PDFs/Schule_intern_Service/Publikationen_und_weitere_Schriften/Religion_Unterrichten_1_2018.pdf) (By Peter Schreiner).

<sup>2</sup> See *White Paper on Intercultural Education* with the sub-title “Living Together As Equals in Dignity” (2008). [https://www.coe.int/t/dg4/intercultural/whitepaper\\_interculturaldialogue\\_2\\_EN.asp](https://www.coe.int/t/dg4/intercultural/whitepaper_interculturaldialogue_2_EN.asp)

Furthermore, *The Toledo Guiding Principles* (2007) offers guidance on preparing curricula for teaching about religions and beliefs, <https://www.osce.org/odihr/29154?download=true>. In the *Toledo Guiding Principles* it is stated as their first conclusion that:

Knowledge about religions and beliefs can reinforce appreciation of the importance of respect for everyone's right to freedom of religion or belief, foster democratic citizenship, promote understanding of societal diversity and, at the same time, enhance social cohesion.

The assumptions stated above in relation to knowledge about religions has to be further researched and critically discussed, because we really do not know from empirical research whether this is the case or not (cf., Kittelmann Flensner, 2015). The aforementioned policy documents have been discussed in the READY team, which have been quite challenging because students have taken part who are in the middle of their training and for whom the policies of the European Council may not be completely in line with their actual education. However, it should also be noted that these policy recommendations can be incorporated more or less in all RE approaches mentioned above.

## 6 The RE curricula in Austria, England, Germany, Scotland and Sweden and their different curriculum codes

When structuring and analyzing the different curricula in the READY project, one can rather easily find that these curricula relate to different curriculum codes (Lundgren, 1979; Linde 2012, 38–44). The Swedish educationalist Ulf P. Lundgren (1979/1995) developed the concept of curriculum or educational codes during the 1980s and worked out four different codes that had been prominent during different times in the Western world, namely: 1) A classical code that aims to educate human beings in a classical ideal; 2) A realistic curriculum code with the aim of educating into a scientific understanding of the world; 3) A moral curriculum code aiming at instilling a certain morality and faithfulness to the citizens; and 4) A rational or utilitarian curriculum code where utility thinking is at the center.

Later Tomas Englund, also a profiled Swedish educationalist, developed the civic curriculum code, which he divided into three education concepts - *the patriarchal*, *the scientific rational*, and *the democratic* (1986, 2005). It is important to underline that the concept of curriculum does not refer only to the physical documents of curriculum but is understood as the educational process of a particular society with its goals, content, and methodology (Lundgren, 1979: 20). Another way of classifying current curricula can be into four broader perspectives that are often mentioned: the scientific rationalist, the social efficient, the humanistic, and the social reconstructionist curricula (Wahlström, 2015: 33–50). Sometimes also a fifth way of curriculum construction is discussed today, viz. *the postmodern curriculum* (cf. Slattery, 2012). It is worth underlining that there often are conflicting curriculum ideologies in the same curriculum, because these are formed in a political reality with many actors such as subject experts, representatives of civil society such churches and NGOs, and politicians who want to have a voice. Such negotiations are often complex and result in sometimes even contradictory steering documents (Pinar, 2012).

These curriculum issues have been separated out from the different curricula and can be found on the READY portal.

One example is given below from RE in an English school that the READY team visited. The school was, according to the GCSE exam results, successful in their RE teaching (aside from the British curriculum). This school constructed the following local curriculum:

The aim of our rich and varied curriculum is to enable students to be religiously literate as well as accomplished critical and philosophical thinkers. We encourage all students, whatever their faith stance, to understand the impact of religious belief and to reflect carefully on their own values and beliefs. Varied teaching approaches engage and involve those with religious beliefs and other worldviews. Lessons frequently involve discussion and evaluation of the basis, nature and implications of religious belief and prepare students for the spiritual and moral challenges of the future.

#### *Enrichment and Extra-Curricular Activities*

At Key Stage 3 and 4 students have the opportunity to visit Westminster Abbey and other places of worship, as well as to speak to visitors from religious and other believers. In Year 9 there is a Faith Forum activity in which students spend a day encountering and learning from representatives of the six major world faiths.

At A-level students participate in a variety of revision conferences and in a department-led revision residential towards the end of Year 13. The department plays a major role in debating in the school, where many topics are directly relevant to the RE curriculum.

#### *Key Stage 3*

##### *Year 7*

- |        |                                                                |
|--------|----------------------------------------------------------------|
| Term 1 | Introduction to world religions: Christianity, Judaism & Islam |
| Term 2 | Enquiry: Who is Jesus?                                         |
| Term 3 | Enquiry: What is truth?                                        |

##### *Year 8*

- |        |                                                                         |
|--------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Term 1 | Introduction to world religions: Buddhism, Hinduism, & Sikhism          |
| Term 2 | Enquiry: How do we know? Arguments for God's existence; problem of evil |
| Term 3 | Humanism and atheism                                                    |

##### *Year 9*

- |        |                                                       |
|--------|-------------------------------------------------------|
| Term 1 | Christian ethics: Love & forgiveness                  |
| Term 2 | Christianity: Three major traditions around the world |
| Term 3 | Inter-faith dialogue                                  |

#### *Key Stage 4*

AQA Religious Studies GCSE Specification B: Units 2 & 3

Christian and other religious perspectives on contemporary moral issues

- Year 10* Animal rights; Prejudice & discrimination; War & peace; Drug abuse; Crime & punishment
- Year 11* Matters of death (euthanasia, care of the elderly, etc.); Abortion; Matters of life (fertility, genetics, etc.)

*A-level (Key Stage 5)*

Ed excel Religious Studies 1 & 2

Philosophy of Religion & Religious Ethics

- Year 12 (AS)* Arguments for God's existence (Design & Cosmological); Miracles; Problem of evil; Religion & morality; Utilitarianism; Situation Ethics; War & peace; Sexual ethics; Mind-body problem
- Year 13 (A2)* Arguments for God's existence (Ontological & experience); Religious language; Life after death; Religion & morality (cont.); Deontology, Natural moral law & virtue ethics; Meta-ethics.

The curriculum above is collected from a school in England and gives an example of a curriculum and the chosen content in a nondenominational school. When discussing RE in Europe, three very general models are usually referred to, namely teaching “into,” “about,” and “from” RE (Grimmit, 1987; cf., Teece, 2008, 2010).

There are also other ways of analyzing RE curricula and the content chosen for teaching and learning. Ulf, P. Lundgren defines five codes for selection of content, namely a *classical code*, a *realistic code*, a *moral code*, an *academic rational code*, and an *aristocratic code* of education (in Linde, 2012, 39–42). The analysis shows that even if the curricula are all within the field of religious education or religious and moral education, they differ significantly in the construction of content, in part depending on the relation to religious denominations, but also in relation to the specific curriculum tradition in which they are embedded. The Austrian curriculum for Christian Catholic education for primary school, as one example, emphasizes personal fulfillment through Christian Catholic faith and constructs a monoreligious space for a predominantly monoreligious literacy, while the aim of the Scottish curriculum is to a significant part the development of students' religious and moral literacy through a social reconstructionist curriculum. The current Swedish curriculum stands out as being academic rationalistic, with the aim of developing knowledge about religions and other outlooks on life through analyses and reflections, in order to understand the world on a scientific basis. Therefore, discussions on RE in Europe needs to be understood based on its many nuances and variants.

## 7 Reflections on the classroom culture: Similarities and differences

A Swedish student teachers' comment is presented here for example, on British schools: "One thing that surprised us during this school visit was the school's way of disciplining the pupils both encourage good behavior and punish bad behavior." Another student commented: "Stunned at the discipline. The morning assembly that we saw really set the tone of how the pupils were trained into doing as the teachers wanted. The pupils and classes were compared to each other in many ways, and behavior seemed to be the key aspect to rank them. We got some explanation from the RE head teacher: The school had a tough past, and lots of pupils struggled with socioeconomic challenges."

Other reflections concerned the teaching methods and the effectiveness in the classroom in English schools, reflected upon as follows:

It was a good experience to see how fast the children can make reflections about the RE subjects. It made me think that we might give students too much time in the discussions in lessons. Being clear to the students about time limits to think about a subject might make the students think faster. It could help the students in the future to be fast thinkers and show good behavior.

Some of the reflections point paradoxically to the fact that even if the curricula are based on different understandings of the subject in the different national contexts, the actual teaching often seems surprisingly alike. We could of course sometimes observe the differences when teaching into a religion in a classroom where denominational RE took place, but much of the content and discussions were quite alike. Also, we often very quickly agreed on good and less-good practice. Here follows a quote from one of the members of the READY team:

Over and over again I was surprised, also in the wider context of the entire READY project, how quickly experienced colleagues from different European countries, with very different concepts of religious education and very diverse forms of teacher education, would agree on what is didactically desirable and what is not. Is there beyond all theories and concepts something like a deep structure, some kind of common grammar of teaching RE that might help us all to see regional debates and controversies in a new and also more relaxed perspective?

Also in the lessons presented on the DVD:s, for example the lessons on "Educating for Diversity: Exploring Religious Education in Austria", the reflections from colleagues were that this could have been a lesson in several other countries of the READY-project as well. (The DVD:s, see: <http://www.readyproject.eu/resources/lesson-plans-and-more>) This DVD contains two videos, one with the title "*That has really touched me*" - *Between Theory and Authentic Encounters* and the other "*See you in Heaven*" - *Religion and the Hereafter*. The first video contains students' encounter with a couple that has fled Iran as refugees, followed by the students work on migration in Austria today. The other video shows work and discussions on different faith traditions views on life henceforth. These DVD:s

shows relevant and important content in RE in today's Europe. As "learning and thinking [...] always [is] situated in a cultural setting and always dependent upon the utilization of cultural resources (Bruner, 1996,4), the discussions in classrooms might not be *exactly* the same, but connects to discourses on religion(s), secularization, islamophobia, terrorism and "the Other".

Well, is there a "common grammar" of teaching RE? Maybe it is so that young people in Europe are very much alike, being influenced by society and media, where the flow of knowledge, values, and attitudes do not recognize any borders. Thus, a European kid or youth is very much alike, no matter where he or she lives and goes to school. This, of course, influences classrooms where teachers must interact with their young students, make the RE subject relevant, and try to answer their questions about religion, worldviews, ethics, and existential issues. Thus, classroom discussions in RE can be quite alike due to challenging issues in Europe and the world, even though the subject is framed as denominational or non-denominational.

## 8 Reflections on teaching methods in RE

Teaching methods in RE have been central to observing and discussing during and after study visits to schools. Teaching methods are sometimes classified into four categories based on two major designs: A teacher-centered approach versus a student-centered approach, and high-tech material use versus low-tech material use. "Direct instruction" is the general term that refers to the traditional teaching strategy that relies on explicit teaching through lectures and teacher-led demonstrations. In this approach the teacher is seen as having the formal authority and in a position of power in the classroom. In a student-centered approach, the teachers are still authority figures, but teachers and students play an equally active role in the learning process. Within this approach, the teacher's primary role is to coach and facilitate student learning and overall comprehension of material, and to measure student learning through both formal and informal forms of assessment such as group projects, student portfolios, and class participation. In a student-centered classroom, teaching and assessment are connected because student learning is continuously measured during teacher instruction (see, e.g., Henson, 2012; see also *Teaching Methods*: <https://teach.com/what/teachers-know/teaching-methods/>).

Moreover, the use of material can be analyzed within these different models of teaching in the categories of both high-tech and low-tech material use. The above-mentioned teaching methods can further be complemented with, among others, models of flipped classrooms or inquiry-based learning (see, e.g., *Teaching Methods*: <https://teach.com/what/teachers-know/teaching-methods/>).

Below, a longer quote follows in which colleagues from Germany and Scotland reflect on the classroom setting, the teaching methods, and the content of an RE lesson during a study visit in an upper secondary school in Sweden:

Noteworthy is the splitting of the teaching into two long blocks of three hours, from 9 am to noon and from 1 pm to 4 pm. We can visit the afternoon class of a graduation course of 17- to 18-year-old young people. The pupils greet in a very friendly way, show a lot of interest, are researching about different religious communities, and discuss along a given list of criteria – if the different faith groups should be considered "sects" or "cults."

The pupils take the use of laptops for granted. As far as an observer can tell, they seem to stick to the assignment, and they don't let themselves get distracted. Nevertheless, the group of visitors wonders if an assignment like this couldn't be dealt with in a lower class at a German grammar school. Mental underload, not challenging enough? But in a discussion with the visitor group the pupils show a very intensive and sophisticated interest in in different ways of teaching religious education. They forget about the break they had agreed on and question us in very good English, why we separate the class in Germany and Austria according to the confessions of the parents and pupils. They argue, especially in the field of religion, it should be important to become aware of differences, to learn different perspectives and to practice respectful living together. Our argument – learning in denominational groups might allow a deeper understanding of one's own tradition, in which one has been brought up – doesn't seem to be plausible. Religious education might be an interesting subject, but the pupils show a surprising distance from it: "I am Swedish, I am not religious."

The Scottish colleagues note the familiar and confidential relationship between teacher and pupils. The private telephone number of the teacher is written on the blackboard, obviously unimaginable in Scottish schools.

The teaching method mentioned in the quote above points to a student-centered approach in teaching because the pupils themselves research communities and have to categorize the communities in either a "sect" or a "cult." The use of the students' own laptops are a natural work tool, which seems to surprise some of the READY team members. However, critical points are raised in relation to the difficulty of the task given to the students and if it was challenging enough for the students at this age (upper secondary school). Moreover, the reflections from the students on the RE subject are interesting because they state that because they are Swedish, they are not religious. Even so, the students articulate that they find the RE subject interesting and important because you have to learn to be respectful to others. This is also in line with the aims stated in the Sweden curriculum. It states in its overarching part that one goal of education is that students should be able to "interact with other people based on respect for differences in living conditions, culture, language, religion and history" (Lgy, 2011, 10).

Also, in the Swedish curriculum for upper secondary school there is written about the purpose of RE:

Teaching will lead students to develop knowledge about how people's moral approach can be motivated based on religions and life views. They will be given the opportunity to reflect on and analyze people's values and beliefs, thereby developing respect and understanding of different ways of thinking and living. Teaching will also enable students to analyze and evaluate how religion can

relate to ethnicity, sex, sexuality, and socioeconomic background (my own translation).

One could imagine that the lesson discussed above was based on, among other things, this educational aim when the teacher formulated the task.

Another study visit in a state-funded Church of England school on a representative site in the vicinity of Westminster Cathedral resulted in the following field note during teaching RE in a Year 8 class:

Before they (the students, Grade 8) were allowed into the classroom, the girls in their grey and light blue uniforms, hailing from very diverse backgrounds, as was obvious from their complexion and the occasional head scarf, patiently queued in front of the door and ogled us curiously – four guests interested in what they were doing in their RE class.

Inside the classroom, one of the walls was papered with products of earlier lessons – student-made posters on Hinduism, Buddhism, Sikhism. Today's lesson was reserved for recapitulation before the upcoming exams. The smart board already showed the assignment for the first part of the lesson:

Explain one thing you learned in Monday's lesson.

[Observer's notes: nice and effective, although a little random and unstructured]

Who said the most useful thing?

[Praise for students who contribute a lot, but what about those who are not mentioned? Is it really important to remember who said what?]

How did you learn best?

[Raises awareness for own learning strategies]

What do you want to learn today?

[One more strategic question, but will there be enough room for this kind of choice?]

The team member writing the field note is in dialogue with him/herself and comments on critical issues in the lesson. Some more reflections from the lesson above were added:

On one hand, this is really great awareness raising (especially on learning strategies) and a student-centered approach. On the other hand, the girls were not given much chance to stray from their task and work on a self-chosen topic as indicated in Question 4. But all of them set to work at once and cooperated nicely with their partner. Teacher guidance was friendly, professional, and strict.

However, RE teaching can also be like the situation below. This is a field note from another English school, too, where the lesson is described as “slightly intimidating and oppressive.”

...there are no more blackboards in the classrooms; instead there are smartboards, on which the topics, the learning objectives and the schedule of the lesson are on display. In the beginning of this lesson, the teacher handed out a script about Sikhism to the pupils and gave them the task of working through them in detail and answering all questions. During the work they had to be absolutely quiet. The mood that prevailed during this lesson appeared to us slightly intimidating and oppressive. Whenever someone whispered or even moved, a strict "shush!" came from the teacher's desk. When discussing the results, almost all answers were given by the teacher as if she would not expect the students to phrase proper sentences. During the entire lesson the students worked independently; there were no questions to the teacher. Neither did the teacher walk through the ranks to motivate the students or to check if everyone could do their job. During the last 10 minutes, the learning results were checked. It was interesting to see that the students know very much, despite this rather severe working atmosphere.

This field note ends and summarizes that the students knew very much, in spite of the negative classroom climate as perceived by the READY team member. There are many questions to be asked in relation to study visits. In this case we would have liked to know how much the students knew when beginning their studies on Sikhism, because it is not an unknown tradition in England. Therefore, we ask for caution when reading our reflections.

Taken together, regarding the study visits in classrooms that have been done by the READY team members, each of them has been fruitful and generated much discussion, reflection, and learning about RE in different national contexts as well as in different classrooms. It is worth underlining that education is constructed within a specific context and is always situated within a particular intellectual and curriculum tradition. Therefore, we argue in the READY team that study visits are most important in order to reach new insights and become critical and reflective about your own understandings. We hope for intensified work in teacher education and further education for teachers, to be able to connect and visit schools, both nationally and internationally, not the least in the subject of RE as it has become, as argued by some, a "real battlefield" (Schweitzer, 2014, 81).

This battlefield concerns questions such as: Does religion belong to the educational field at all? And if then religion belongs to education, where should it take place? Should religious education take place in compulsory education or where? And if in compulsory education, should religion be embedded as a dimension of all subjects or as a subject of its own? (cf., Schweitzer, 2014, 81–93). These are issues that will be further dealt with in the discussion of this report (IO5).

## 9 Neutrality and national values: Complexities in theory and practice

Even though Europe organizes its religious education in the above-mentioned overarching models, we have found that it is much more complicated than that, because the curriculum is always embedded in its nation's historical, economic, political, and cultural contexts, as argued by Michael W. Apple (1993,1)

Education is deeply implicated in the politics of culture. The curriculum is never simply a neutral assemblage of knowledge, somehow appearing in the texts and classrooms of a nation. It is always part of a selective tradition, someone's selection, some group's vision of legitimate knowledge. It is produced out of the cultural, political, and economic conflicts, tensions, and compromises that organize and disorganize a people (1993, p. 1).

Thus, no curriculum is neutral even if it might be stated so sometimes. How politicians, subject experts, teachers, and people constructing the curriculum view the world, and how they/we orient ourselves, determines what teachers choose to include in a curriculum. Our worldview, not necessarily religious, provides meaning, and it guides and directs the thoughts and actions. In some curricula, fundamental values are explicitly written into the curriculum in a special overarching framework, for example as in the Swedish curriculum. In the Swedish curriculum (Lgr 11 and Lgy 11), the fundamental values are formulated as follows:

The national school system is based on *democratic foundations*. The Education Act (2010:800) stipulates that education in the school system aims at pupils acquiring and developing knowledge and values. It should promote the development and learning of all pupils, and a lifelong desire to learn. *Education should impart and establish respect for human rights and the fundamental democratic values on which Swedish society is based*. Each and every person working in the school should encourage respect for the intrinsic value of each person and the environment we all share. *The inviolability of human life, individual freedom and integrity, the equal value of all people, equality between women and men, and solidarity with the weak and vulnerable are the values that the school should represent and impart*. In accordance with the ethics *borne by Christian tradition and Western humanism*, this is achieved by fostering in the individual a sense of justice, generosity of spirit, tolerance, and responsibility. **Teaching in the school should be nondenominational**. The task of the school is to encourage all pupils to discover their own uniqueness as individuals and thereby be able to participate in the life of society by giving of their best in responsible freedom (bold letters made by the author).

When this passage in the curriculum once was read out loud at one of our meetings, one of the READY partners commented, somewhat surprised, “Then you have democracy as your religion!” The Swedish delegates could only agree.

Moreover, “national values” have also been discussed in schools we have visited. This was, for example, the case with “British values” debate, which the READY team came across when visiting a London school. New Teachers’ Standards in 2012 in England required all teachers “not to undermine fundamental British values”.<sup>3</sup> British values are, according to Ofsted<sup>4</sup>: democracy; the rule of law; individual liberty; mutual respect for and tolerance of those with different faiths and beliefs and for those without faith. It was mentioned that Ofsted will assess “British values,” both through the curriculum and through SMSC (spiritual, moral, social and cultural development) and what this meant for education and specifically for RE in Britain. (See, for example, <https://www.youngcitizens.org/british-values> and Lander, 2016).

The Scottish curriculum raised questions to some of the student teachers. This curriculum in RME is considered neutral, but the law requires religious observance, such as assemblies, in schools. Here follows a comment from a non-Scottish student teacher in the READY team, a bit confused about the state of affairs:

Another topic that I found really interesting was the assemblies. I didn’t know before that you still have on the one hand neutrality, RMPS, then on the other hand the worship in some schools and others trying to open that up to do something differently. And the idea of philosophy for children I think is very interesting for the assemblies, but I still didn’t really understand how you can do it with a whole school, or wasn’t that the idea of this concept of assembly?

However, since a change in government guidelines in 2005 in Scotland, assemblies should be aimed at children of all faiths and none.

## 10 The RE classroom as a safe space?

The concept of “safe space,” which currently seems to be a concept quite often referred to in educational and RE discussions, has also been raised in the READY meetings. What then does “safe space” imply? It is a concept mentioned in the *Signpost* document, for instance, with the recommendation of creating a safe space for moderated student-to-student dialogue in the RE classroom. The possibility of creating such a safe space in the RE classroom was discussed among the student teachers in the team. Then one student asked, “How could you create this safe environment,” and another student answered:

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<sup>3</sup> *Teachers’ Standards Guidance for school leaders, school staff and governing bodies*. July 2011 (introduction updated June 2013). [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/665520/Teachers\\_Standards.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/665520/Teachers_Standards.pdf) [Retrieved 180507].

<sup>4</sup> Ofsted is the Office for Standards in Education, Children’s Services and Skills. Ofsted inspects and regulates services that care for children and young people, and services providing education and skills for learners of all ages. <https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/ofsted/about> [Retrieved 180707]

Establish it quite early on, you know, kind of creating an environment of trust and respect for those that you not only value, but you want to hear their opinion, and also that you want them surely to show some way of justifying their position, as well. You want them to explain why they feel that way, and maybe reflect on why they feel a certain way.

However, the concept of safe space is contested in education. Completely safe space, as a positive condition for education, is problematic and warrants careful consideration according to, among others, Stengel (2010), and she argues that “the call for safe space establishes fear as the affect present” (2010, 525). It might also be so that what we count as “safe” is “an imaginary construction reliant on ritualized forms of control,” as argued by Stengel and Weems (2010, 505). Now, field notes indicate that the READY team have experienced safe spaces in many RE classrooms we visited. Here is one field note from a study visit in a Catholic private school in Germany:

Noble old building in a big park, exceptionally well equipped with media. Aside of “normal” classes there are laptop classes, in which textbooks, copied worksheets, and exercise books are not used anymore, in each class room technical equipment based on Apple TV. Protestant religious education is taught in this catholic school. Moderated by a young female teaching colleague, 16 pupils of an upper secondary course are sitting in table groups, are very polite, interested, and highly motivated to compare the anthropology of Hobbes with the anthropology of Rousseau. The lesson is nicely arranged and well structured, the climate for discussion open and pleasant.

During study visits in RE classrooms, we have often been met by an atmosphere of trust and respect. Some prefer to use the concept of safe space, while others think the use of the word “safe” give rise to thinking about “spaces of fear” in other places in school. Then the concept of “brave space” can be of help. Also Hanna Arendt is of inspiration as she argues that education should be a “place of appearance.” With this concept she argues that we need to promote a way of political thinking against one that is monistic and all-absorbing (Arendt, 2013). Only when becoming visible to others do we perform in identity, and this is not “safe” but is rather a challenge, which also education always should be, as argued by the educational theorist Gert Biesta. He has also advanced for asking for the purposes of education (2010, 2013) and proposes three domains—or functions—of education: qualification, socialization, and subjectification. Biesta believes that all three domains are important for education, but is especially concerned with the function of subjectification. Biesta defines ‘education worthy of the name’ as ‘education that is not only interested in qualification and socialization but also in subjectification’ (2013, 139). It is, after all, the process of subjectification that brings something radically new into the world, something that cannot be foreseen; nurturing the risk and weakness inherent in education is what can allow for this radical newness. These discussions on the purpose of education and religious education connects to discussions in the READY-team, as well as to the key lecture by Prof. Siebren Miedema in Vienna in April, 2018, with the title “Does

Europe need religious education? Living and learning in ethnically, culturally and religiously diverse Europe”.<sup>5</sup>

## 11 Religious literacy

The concept of literacy has gained an increasingly prominent place in educational research, and currently we meet different combinations such as numerical literacy, aesthetic literacy, linguistic literacy, visual literacy, and computer literacy in the literature. The terms “literacy” and “critical literacy” encompass interdisciplinary research traditions in education where different theoretical and methodological approaches come into use.

In education, all content area curricula mobilize literacy models, or theories of how students should read, write, speak, think, and listen in a given subject; these models, in turn, are bound up with educators’ views on the subject. Such models in RE can be termed “religious literacy,” which is a concept that has come into use since the 1990s.

One of the first researchers to use the concept was Andrew Wright, who defined religious literacy as “the ability, and inability, to reflect, communicate and act in an informed, intelligent and sensitive manner towards the phenomenon on religion” (1993, 47). Wright later introduced the concepts of “spiritual literacy,” “religious and theological literacy,” and “critical spiritual literacy” (Wright 1993, 2000, 2004, 2010).

Another definition is employed by Diane L. Moore, who runs the Religious Literacy Project at Harvard Divinity School. Her definition has also been adopted by the American Academy of Religion to help educators understand what is required for a basic understanding of religion and its roles in human experience. Moore’s definition is:

Religious literacy entails the ability to discern and analyze the fundamental intersections of religion and social/political/cultural life through multiple lenses. Specifically, a religiously literate person will possess 1) a basic understanding of the history, central texts (where applicable), 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 2) the ability to discern and explore the religious dimensions of political, social and cultural expressions across time and place<sup>6</sup> (cf. Moore, 2007, 56-57).

In the RE curriculum of a school in London visited by READY partners it is stated in the curriculum that RE is “to enable students to be *religiously literate* as well as accomplished critical and philosophical thinkers.” Religious literacy might be a useful concept for religious education because it can take a place beside all other literacies in education and in that way defend a place in the educational space.

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<sup>5</sup> See: <http://www.readyproject.eu/uploads/files/1524313873MiedamaVortrag.pdf> and 2. <http://www.readyproject.eu/uploads/files/1524313921MiedemaVortrag.pptx>. Cf. S. Miedema in H –G Heimbrock (2017, 127-138).

<sup>6</sup> <https://rlp.hds.harvard.edu/definition-religious-literacy> [Retrieved 180815].

## 12 Truth claims in RE education

In an article on religious education, the English theologian Andrew Wright proposes that searching for ultimate truth is “the key driver of critical religious education” (2003, 279). Furthermore, he believes that such an “enquiry constitutes a *Wissenschaft*, a striving for wisdom, understanding and truth on the basis of reasoned, ordered and disciplined thought” (2003, 280). Wright is one of one of the representatives who argues that RE should be about “truth claims,” even so in a nondenominational RE education. Therefore, Wright’s argumentation has been discussed and also challenged (Franck, 2015). Also in the READY team this issue was dealt with, giving rise to the following field note from one of the other members:

The READY project group has been working intensively on organizational and strategic issues when a colleague, a protestant theologian, suggests not to forget discussing content. His impression is that Swedes make do with the description and comparison of religious phenomena. The pupils also exchange opinions and valuations, but basically the question of truth and the existential reference, which is necessary for the understanding of religions, is excluded. The colleague uses the term, “truth claim,” and we notice in the body language of our Swedish colleagues but also of our colleagues from London and Scotland that they react with spontaneous rejection. No, a truth claim should not have a place in schools. Obviously the colleagues understand the expression “truth claim” in the sense of a claim of absoluteness und connect it with the idea of imposing other persons one’s own concept of truth. [...] Another colleague explains very competently and in details that exactly this is not meant by Jürgen Habermas, who also uses the term “truth claim.” The name and philosophical approach of Habermas triggers positive connotations for the colleagues coming from Scandinavia and Great Britain but nevertheless, they refuse to use the expression “truth claim.” The debate is intensive and committed and is flaring up again in the evening.

Discussing, arguing, learning, and listening to each other with mutual interest and respect has been a distinctive feature of the READY project. The issue of “truth claims” is just one example of sensitive concepts in RE that is important to scrutinize from different positions.

## 13 Should we as teachers tell the students our own religious positioning?

The question formulated as in the title above, “Should teachers tell the students their own religious positioning?” has been discussed with great commitment within the READY project. Below follows a reflection after a study visit and meeting of a colleague on this issue:

The female teacher of the class just described explains in an after-lesson talk that, although having a very good relationship with the pupils, she would never let them know her own religious convictions.

For educational reasons the pupils should not be influenced by this. After school, of course, but not in the role of a religious education teacher. The challenge is to get discussions going, to moderate them, to help everybody to find his voice, to exchange views, but not to confront young people with one's own opinions and convictions. Oh, it's like that in Sweden, I conclude. At supper I meet a Swedish RE teacher who tells me the opposite: "If pupils want to know it, I, of course, explain to them very openly and also in detail my own point of view but I don't expect them to take over my way of seeing things.

The issue on RE teachers' own positioning is debated, especially in nondenominational RE, as it is often heard that the teacher has to be "neutral" (cf., Cooling, 2002, 44–55). Yet, in response to "the collapse of the neutrality strategy," the strategy for RE teachers might be not to be "anti-religionist" as argued by John Hull (from Cooling, 2002, 49). Cooling, in contrast, argues for committed teachers, which means that all teachers should have a metanarrative which defines their own nature and importance of religion for themselves (2002, 54–55).

## 14 Diversity in schools and in the RE classroom

Diversity and plurality are leading themes for exploration in the classrooms of the READY project. Diversity and plurality are, as is well known, controversial and ambiguous concepts. Much has been written about the subjects, (see, e.g., UNESCO World Report, 2009), not the least in relation to religion and RE (See, e.g., Arweck, 2017; Everington, 2000; Franken, 2017; Jackson, 2011, 2013; Knauth, 2008; Skeie, 1995, 2002; Stathopoulou & Willert, 2015; Wardekker & Miedema, 2001; Zilliacus, 2013). As Skeie states (2002, 47) diversity has always been a characteristic of institutionalized education, because teachers have to organize teaching for a group of children, or a class. Thus childrens' differences in relation to, among other differences, socioeconomic background, gender, age, culture, religion, language, and abilities have challenged and been an obstacle in teaching and learning. In RE, diversity and plurality is much discussed as perhaps no other subject in school is more open towards the traditional plurality of society (Skeie, 2002, 56), and this is shown in the aims suggested for RE in different countries (Skeie, 2002, 56). Many of these aims can be recognized in the following three aims of RE:

- 1 The purpose of religious education is to promote understanding of and respect for people whose cultures and beliefs are different from one's own and to promote a positive attitude towards living in a plural society.
- 2 The purpose of religious education is to enable pupils to gain knowledge and understanding of religion(s).
- 3 The purpose of religious education is to promote personal, moral and spiritual development of pupils (Skeie, 2002; see also Everington 2000, 185–186).

According to Everington (2000), all three aims might be "mission impossible" to reach in RE, but each of them contains an important aspect of modern plurality; plurality of cultures,

plurality of views on what is knowledge, and plurality of individual identities, as argued by Skeie (2002, 57).

Some of these aspects on diversity are certainly coming through in the reflections from student teachers and teachers' trainers in the READY team. The following comment was made by a Swedish student teacher after a school visit to an English school. It relates to differences between schools. The student teacher states:

For me it was new knowledge that the British [English] schools are so diverse from each other; nonfaith schools, different faith schools, girls' schools, boys' schools, mixed schools, etc.

Another view of diversity comes through after a lecture for student teachers in teacher education in Aberdeen. One teacher trainer reflects:

The diversity of the audience was interesting. The lecture again addressed student teachers of all subjects and types of school. And we were able to get an impression of the diversity in the schools, regarding the pupils, the staff, and the network, which Scottish schools are supposed to be embedded in. The students became sensitized to possible mental problems of their pupils and existing support facilities, for example.

The above quotes relate to diversity in relation to organization of schools and diversity of student teachers in teacher education, but there are also interesting comments of diversity in relation to the subject of RE. The following comment was made by a German student teacher concerning a comment on religious and moral education (RME) in Scotland, which is explained as open and creating an interest in each other's viewpoints:

One pupil positively highlighted the open discussions RME offered for a large variety of topics. She explained that in Scottish culture there was a general interest for each other's opinion and that the Scottish wouldn't have difficulties accepting diverse convictions and standpoints. Furthermore, she said for her it was this openness of RME that made her choose this subject as a major.

Another German student teacher was impressed by the diversity in RME and "that it seems to work in the Scottish school," She comments:

I was especially impressed by one of the students we were talking to, from the first school we went to, and she told us that in the classroom actually there are so many different ideas in pupils' heads, and they have the chance to share them, and this is what I thought was impressive to me and something I would want to take home, as well – something I think we learn as well in Germany in our teachers' education, but actually here ... this student told me that it works.

However, there are also critical voices after school visits in Scotland on education in the RME subject. One of the teacher trainers reflects on whether it is the case that the RME education

eliminates diversity instead of bringing it into the classroom. This reflection is the overtaken by reflections on the private school and the amount of the school fee, which shows another kind of diversity.

... Diversity as far as the pupils are concerned, I didn't see a lot of differences, at least in terms of religion. So actually I would ask if this system of doing RE allows open diversity and brings it into the classroom or if it tries to eliminate diversity. That's important to me, and I am thinking about it, and then obviously we saw two different schools, one in the countryside, one private school, with a fee of 12,000 pounds a year. So there are different types of schools.

The RME subject in Scotland turned out to be very interesting, especially for the German student teachers as the own religious positionings from the students themselves don't play an especially big role. This is of course a significant difference from Germany where students are in most cases placed in different classroom according to their own/family faith tradition. One German student teacher comments on "the students not talking about their own religion" as follows:

I also found it very interesting to see the two different types of schools, the private and the countryside one, and I was surprised that the pupils don't really know about their own religion and the religion of their classmates, that you talk about religion but you don't talk about your own ... what you practice in religion. I just had that impression at the first school that on the one hand it is open, you can say what you think, but I think it's also ... that the practice of religion doesn't play a big role in class.

Teacher trainers (not being Scottish) commented on insights about the Scottish curriculum and about the great knowledge that Scottish student teachers and colleagues seem to have on aims and objectives in education as follows:

Religion and diversity? Dealing with diversity well is one of the declared goals of Scottish education on all levels of schooling, and this is highlighted in all official documents. The academic background future RME teachers bring along seems very diverse. And a high degree of diversity is enhanced by a very open curriculum, focusing on the personal development of pupils and students. It would be interesting to compare the freedom given by such a competency-based framework with the reality and necessity of being graded and passing tests.

We were surprised by the clarity in which all students and colleagues explained their educational system to us. It seemed everybody knew what the goals and objectives were and why it was decided to proceed in this way and not in another.

Lastly in this section, a short-but-telling quote from one of the student teachers:

The week was highly informative, and we were surprised by the significant differences in approaches between the English and Austrian teaching of RE.

From the quotes above we can see that discussions on diversity are played out in many different ways after school visits in the READY team, much depending on the context. It is not only diversity in relation to the students in the RE classrooms that gives rise to discussions, but also diversity in relation to the organization of different schools (urban/rural, public/private), diversity in RE teaching approaches and diversity when organizing RE education on a macro level, as well as the diverse audience in teacher education in relation to subject focus and topics chosen.

Taken together, diversity and plurality are nothing new and can have many connotations within education, depending on the context. Diversity is not to be “solved,” but to learn to live with and critically explore. However, as also Skeie states in his article, and I quote:

Like many other social institutions schools are trying to control religious and other types of difference in order to function as a system. But if schools are going to mean something for the future of children and young people apart from introducing them to a modern institution as such, they have to include the plural context in their own self-understanding and practice. Only by making plurality part of both the content and the process of learning is it fully appreciated. This goes also for the religious dimensions of plurality. Part of this challenge is a new one, related to the forms of plurality of our times, but part of it is quite old, related to the many forms of difference that constitute human life as such (Skeie, 2002, 58).

The question concerning the subject of RE is how to organize the subject in public schooling in order to fully appreciate diversity and plurality, or in other words, making plurality part of both the content and the process of learning as argued by many and here by Skeie. This is a complex issue and something the READY project has explored in depth from different aspects, which can be seen from the comments above. We will in the READY team continue to take part in the debate about the RE subject in our different contexts, and this also includes discussions on how to deal with diversity in teacher education.

Is it maybe “mission impossible” to reach important aspects of modern plurality in RE, including the plurality of cultures, the plurality of views on what is knowledge, and the plurality of individual identities, as argued by Everington (2000) and Skeie (2002).

However, there is a need to (re)address diversity and plurality in education because the complexities of globalization and migration in Europe give rise to tensions in the political and societal domain. Teachers routinely face increased racial, ethnic, socioeconomic, and cultural/familial diversity within the educational structure and as a result, there is a growing need for teacher education to prepare all teachers, not the least RE teachers, who deal with cultural complexities.

As shown in current elections around Europe, extreme right-wing parties and xenophobic voices try to undermine democratic states and shared values. Thus, teaching the

young generations how to deal with pluralism and respect diverse opinions remains one of the core challenges of education (cf., Stathopoulou & Willert, 2015, 114). In this respect, it is most important to reflect and to readdress the construction and impact of RE in young European lives in different national contexts. As stated by Vermeer, RE is a critical field for training young people to deal with diversity and plurality to give them the “hermeneutic and critical reflective skills” (Vermeer, 2010, 110) to form their own personal and social identity. Also the Council of Europe addresses normative statements about the importance of education in relation to religious co-existence and states that education is essential for combating ignorance, stereotypes, and misunderstanding of religions (Signposts, 2014). However, many scholars have long claimed that there have been insignificant changes in teacher education programs in preparation for students to deal with issues of diversity (Cochran-Smith, Davis & Fries, 2004, 965; Skrefsrud, 2016, 12). Projects such as the READY project constitute one way of developing and inspiring work in the field of RE and diversity within teacher education. Educating teachers in the RE subject is a demanding and critical issue, and it has naturally been much in focus in the READY project.

## 15 Reflections on teacher education

Teacher education is currently discussed and also questioned all over the world (Darling-Hammond, 2006) as many understand the teacher being important to society and for the success of future generations. Watson and Thompson underlines this when it comes to the RE teacher stating that:

The most fundamental factor in effective RE, as in the effective teaching of any other subject, is the teacher. Guidelines, syllabuses, books, aids of various kinds, all depend upon the teacher who actually applies them within the classroom situation. The same topic, with the same age and ability range of pupils, and the same general style and method of teaching, can yield entirely different results, depending upon the teacher. One lesson can really take off, and another be dead (Watson & Thompson, 2013, 3).

In Europe there are currently more than 28 different teacher training systems in place across the EU. The European Parliament, in its resolution of September 2008 on the improvement of teacher education quality, stressed that in essence the following challenges are common to all Member States and their suggestion was therefore:

- more and better quality teacher education and recruiting best candidates as priorities for all education ministries;
- promoting continuous and coherent professional development for teachers throughout their careers
- regular opportunities for all teachers to update their skills and qualifications (qualifications should be recognized in all Member States)
- need for transnational exchange of experience

- particular attention be paid to new teachers' initial induction; mentoring programs.
- composition of teaching workforce at all levels should represent social and cultural diversity within society
- teachers' participation in critical reflection
- ensuring teaching is an attractive and fulfilling profession with good career prospects (Teacher education in Europe, <https://epthinktank.eu/2014/03/20/teacher-education-in-europe/>).

The READY team has particularly been interested in different designs of teacher education for RE teachers, as well as the need for transnational exchange of experience in teacher education. The student teachers discovered that RE teacher programs might differ a lot between countries and sometimes between places of Higher Education in the same country, and this was much discussed. The overarching question within the discussion was: what is needed in order to teach RE; what academic subjects can be of use and what focus for the studies? This is of course related to the national curriculum and the construction of the RE-subject in schools in each country. A Swedish student commented on how the English RE students were trained and in relation to this, how much more both English and Swedish students and teachers need to learn about all the faith traditions in the world. She reflects:

It was very interesting to know that the students who are going to be RE teachers only got one day to learn about the other religions except for Christianity. We (Swedish student teachers) also learn more about Christianity. It shows that if we RE teachers want to teach more deeper about religion, we have to spend some free time to learn about it. Then we spent free time learning, we will catch up the news about what happen with religion in the world in present time. We are never done learning and thank God for that.

A German student comments on the differences in academic subjects studied in order to become an RE teacher in Scotland and subjects such as religious studies, ethnology, philosophy, or sociology for teaching RE. Also the lack of influence from faith traditions on RE and the issue of personal faith is commented on from this student. The quote captures in an interesting way the differences in approaches to RE in Europe, seen through the students' eyes:

Future Scottish RE teachers have not necessarily studied theology. It could also have been, for example, religious studies, ethnology, philosophy, or sociology. The students are admitted to the one-year PGDE (Professional Graduate Diploma in Education) program on the base of documents and an entrance interview. Churches and other faith communities don't have any influence. Only the expertise is relevant, not the affiliation to a religion nor the personal belief of the future RE teachers.

For summarizing the above reflections on teacher education, issues raise many questions when explored in relation to the different national academic programs for becoming an RE teacher. Exploring the different RE teacher education programs in higher education help to sharpen insights into how the nation's vision (or part of the nation), or the faith tradition of the school subject, is viewed. It also says quite a bit about how the formation of the future European citizen is perceived: what knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values are seen as necessary in a future Europe? Here RE plays a role in forming a personal and social identity (cf., Vermeer, 2010, 110).

This discussion also connects to the Key Competences in Europe (Halász & Michel, 2011). Halász and Michel (2011, 297) show through their work, that even if given the same regulations, there is great diversity among EU Member States, while responding to similar concerns, to give young people the basic capacities to address present and future challenges. Furthermore, the *Council Recommendation on Common Values, Inclusive Education, and the European Dimension of Teaching*<sup>7</sup> was adopted by the Council in May of 2018. Its goal is to strengthen national democracies and bolster the Union. It is also aimed at strengthening social cohesion in order to fight the rise of populism, xenophobia, radicalization, divisive nationalism, and the spreading of fake news. This policy recommendation has to be related to when constructing curriculum and teaching and learning, obviously in the subject of RE as well.

## 16 Voices on the importance of international exchange

In the READY group, the discussions concerning RE have been most intense close in time after study visits to schools in the participating countries (Austria, England, Germany, Scotland, and Sweden). Therefore, we all agree that study visits in different educational environments are very enriching; they challenge presupposed views and give rise to many thoughts. Thus, we see a great need for internationalization in RE, especially in teacher education and training, where students could meet, compare, discuss, and learn from each other. Internationalization is not a very clear concept, but it can be defined as “the process of integrating an international, intercultural or global dimension into the purpose, functions or delivery of post-secondary education” (Knight, 2004, 11; cf., Knight, 2003, 2). In today's multicultural classrooms, teachers need the competence to meet and discuss culture, religion, and worldviews from different perspectives, and they need knowledge about different educational systems in the world. Because constructions of RE vary, these are knowledge and competences much needed for RE teachers. One of the participating Swedish student teachers reflected after her school visit in a London school:

The week in London was intense and inspiring. I really enjoyed the school visits where we got to experience different types of schools. This was a great way to get a grip on the breadth of RE in English schools. One thing I think all of us Swedes really reacted to was the discipline of the English pupils, which was both unfamiliar to us and inspiring. It may be a thing we could learn from the English schools. I think the teachers in Sweden often expect the least from the pupils. If

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<sup>7</sup> <https://ec.europa.eu/education/sites/education/files/recommendation-common-values-inclusive-education-european-dimension-of-teaching>. [Retrieved 180722].

we would expect our pupils to behave better and to achieve more I think they would! This is something I thought about quite a lot during the week in London.

Another Swedish student teacher also underlines the discipline and the clear expectations of learning in the English schools, but also inspiration on how to organize teaching in RE. She states:

I have learnt many things from this week in London! First of all, about the British [English] school system and manners at schools. Discipline upon behavior was higher than I could have imagined, and many schools seemed to compare pupils and classes to each other. On the other hand, the pupils seemed to be well aware of what the intended learning outcome were supposed to be. I think teachers in Sweden can learn to be more clear about their expectations towards pupils, show expectations, and learn of ways to really develop learning.

Secondly, to experience RE teachings was my particular interest. A lot of didactical reflections that I hadn't thought of before came to my mind. As a result, I already started to think of how I would organize teachings of different religions, themes, etc., – which I believe is a sign of how well this week encouraged me as a teacher-to-be.

A third insight of mine is that I am impressed by the loads of progressive work that RE teachers seem to do in England. During my practice as a teacher trainee in Sweden, I haven't been able to see different approaches towards RE in this extent. Especially at Sion-Manning, the RE teachers really cooperated well, and I think Swedish teachers may learn a lot from something like that. I will remember this and be inspired in my forthcoming work, as I mentioned before. Furthermore, the teachers we observed use methods that inspired me. The British student told us about good classrooms methods as well, PEEL, for example, which means *point, explain, evidence and link(s)*. I will try to transform these methods in my future lessons in RE, Swedish, and Swedish as a second language.

Another student got more inspiration to work as a RE teacher after the study visits and comments:

I was even more motivated to work as a teacher after this experience. It was fascinating to observe how the teachers were working with the students to give them knowledge about religion.

Put simply but very clearly, one student comments on the surprise he had when learning about the differences between the RE subject in England and Austria:

The week was highly informative, and we were surprised by the significant differences in approaches between the English and Austrian teaching of RE.

In summary, the analysis of the student teachers' voices show the importance of international networking, connections, and ultimately, to be able to make study visits in classrooms that do not belong to their own national context, and to reflect on teaching and learning together with others. These are not new findings, but certainly they are important to develop more in teacher education.

## 17 Voices from the student teachers on participating in the READY project

The READY project has involved, except for teacher trainers, student teachers who have been in contact with each other through the eTwinning portal and other social media. They have together made lesson plans, taught, and visited classrooms and other cultural and religious contexts, such as temples, gurdwaras, churches, and local communities for faith traditions. All these experiences have made many impressions on the involved student teachers. In the following, two student teachers reflect on the meaning of the READY project for them. The first quotation comes from a participating German student:

READY has provided me with the opportunity to experience other ways of teaching RE. During our visit in Scotland, I was inspired by new ways and approaches of engaging students in deep discussions, (for example philosophy with children). I ended up adopting them to my own practice, where I have found them to be effective ways to support students who are very shy to talk openly in the classroom. The READY project has also made me think about my role as an RE teacher. It was interesting to learn that there are different ways to become an RME/RMPS teacher in Scotland. In contrast to Germany, where every RE teacher has studied either Catholic or protestant theology, in Scotland it is also possible to study, for example, only philosophy. In this sense they might offer a more "neutral" perspective on different religions but value every religion as an own entity. However, based on my short experience being an RE teacher, I wonder if neutrality might allow for plurality, but does it really encourage it? In addition to this, the religious backgrounds of the RE students are also not known to the teacher. I had expected to find a lively discussion from various religious backgrounds in the Scottish RE lessons. However, the discussions about religious topics were, again, very "neutral." From my point of view, you need to talk about one's religious background to form a religious identity, even if this is opposed to the way that I am teaching. So I think I will deal with this question of neutrality again and again while teaching students.

The next quotations are from two Austrian student teachers:

What in the end was the most striking experience in the context of the READY project was that I reflected on my own approach to religious education in a very intensive way. Knowing about other approaches, about other organization models of RE, raised the question of whether our way of teaching RE was "right" or "appropriate" in the context of a plural, and to a growing extent, secular, society. In this regard it was also of great importance to see how such different approaches work in practice – in my case how RE works in Sweden. And all discussions about different ways of thinking and practicing RE in which I took part were led in mutual respect, whatever one's personal approach. The core of my own concept of RE has not changed during the project, but many reflections and observations have influenced how I put this concept into "classroom reality," being aware that there would be also many other legitimate and well-founded concepts, and I should know why I have chosen mine.

As part of the READY project, I had the opportunity to get to know religious education in England and to exchange ideas with local teachers and students. After this trip, I was firmly convinced that "our" way of teaching religion, the denominational RE, would be the only proper way of teaching religion and that all the other reflections and approaches would be completely irrelevant to me. But then I taught at a school where students belonged to many different religions, who either had little or no religious experience. The requirements were very different, so I had to approach many topics quite differently. Here, the experiences from England helped me a lot. Again, and again I have considered, how would denominational RE approach this topic, and how would the religious approach look like? But I also found that the 12- to 14-year-old students at this school were significantly more interested in topics that were viewed from the perspective of different religions and ideologies. On the other hand, they largely rejected denominational themes at this age. The exchange and cooperation were therefore always beneficial for me. The demands on European schools are changing, along with social developments. That is why RE teachers all over Europe are faced with completely new tasks.

Finally, a reflection from a Swedish student teacher:

The READY project impacted my future practice in terms of showing how different countries teach about religions, where content as well as didactics differ. Most apparent was that teacher education differs in England as compared to Sweden, as does the way we teach religious education to our pupils. For example: in Sweden RE is compulsory, but non-denominational. In England, as I understood it, parents can give permission for their child to not attend religious education. Education in RE is non-compulsory, but all pupils must attend final

exams. In Austria religious education is denominational. The project was a great example of how different our school systems are. During our visit in London we also got to challenge our view on the way we can teach RE. For instance, we visited the national gallery, where we got a task to come up with ideas about how we can involve art in religious education. This task gave me ideas about how I can teach religious education together with other school subjects.

As can be seen from analysis of the reflections from student teachers on their participation in the READY project, all student teachers underline their newly acquired insights on the different approaches to teaching RE in Europe. These insights have contributed to further thinking on their own teaching approach and challenges and possible developments of this approach. Many more reflections can be found on the READY webpage:

<http://www.readyproject.eu/uploads/files/1532465266Finalstatements.18.7.18.pdf>

## 18 Students voices on RE: Some earlier research findings

The aim of the READY project has been to draw attention to the European dimension of RE teacher education and hence not on students in the RE classroom and their attitudes to RE. For such work, an ethical permission must be given, which our project did not ask for. However, as a background before concluding it might be relevant to give some comments on what earlier research has shown in relation to the question on how young students in secondary or upper secondary education view the subject of RE. A general view from some of the studies exploring this issue (see, e.g., Arweck & Nesbitt, 2011; Jozsa, Knaut, & Weisse, 2009; Knauth, 2008; Miller & McKenna, 2011; Kuusisto & Kalloniemi, 2014; Skeie & von der Lippe, 2009; Knauth & Körs, 2011; Valk, Bertram-Trost, Freidrici, & Béraud, 2009; von Brömssen, 2003; Åhs, Poulter, & Kallioniemi, 2016; Zilliacus & Holm, 2013) give a shifting image.

Miller and McKenna (2011, 181–182) state, for example, that there was a strong affirmation in their interview study by pupils of RE in the school curriculum. There were 22 of 25 students who answered that there should be a place for religion at school, and none thought that it should be an optional subject (Miller & McKenna, 2011, 181–182). Other studies show greater doubts and even lack of interest in RE (Arweck & Nesbitt, 2011; von Brömssen, 2003). One quote from the Arweck and Nesbitt study captures one of the critical voices of RE. It is a boy, Nathan, who says: “We hardly do RE anymore, because it’s not a glam subject” (Arweck and Nesbitt, 2011, 38).

The studies on students’ attitudes towards RE seem to a large extent to confirm attitudes about the teaching that already takes place in the national/local context of the students, and this is, of course, obvious because the students do not know anything else.

The international research project REDCo - Religion in Education. A Contribution to Dialogue or a Factor of Conflict in Transforming Societies of European Countries, summarizes their findings of the issue on young students’ attitudes towards RE as follows:

- Students wish for peaceful coexistence across differences, and believe this to be possible.

- Students’ peaceful coexistence depends on knowledge about each other’s religions and worldviews and sharing common interests, as well as doing things together.
  - Students who learn about religious diversity in school are more willing to have conversations about religions and beliefs with students of other backgrounds than those who do not.
  - Students wish to avoid conflict; some of the religiously committed students feel vulnerable.
  - Students want learning to take place in a safe classroom environment where there are agreed procedures for expression and discussion.
  - Most students would like the state-funded school to be a place for learning about different religions and worldviews, rather than for instruction into a particular religion and worldview
- (Jackson, 2001, see also <http://www.redco.uni-hamburg.de/web/3480/4176/index.html>).

The REDCo findings indicate that the RE subject, constructed as a separate, integrative school subject, would be the students’ alternative. This kind of subject construction certainly caters to diversity and plurality in the classroom, but maybe not to the legal dimension of RE (Franken, 2017). The right to education, as stated in international legislation, should be guaranteed and “in conformity with [the parents] own religious and philosophical convictions” (ECHR, 1st protocol, 2nd article). It is, as Franken reflects (2017, 106), difficult to know what this means in practice and needs to be discussed and further investigated. However, in countries where a separate and integrative subject already exists (Sweden, Denmark, Norway, England), recent research shows some tendencies in RE that might be worrying (Kittelmann Flensner, 2015; Moulin, 2011; Holmqvist Lidh, 2016). The educational approach taken is often based on a strong secularist discourse, making religious phenomena old-fashioned and something people thought, believed, and took an interest in earlier, but not now (Kittelmann Flensner, 2015). Thus, students who were members of religious communities often found their tradition stereotyped and simplified in RE lessons (Holmqvist Lidh, 2016; Moulin, 2011). Moulin (2011) also found that at times students were expected to be, or felt the need to be, spokespeople or representatives of their religion, and experiences of religious intolerance and prejudice, or the fear of them, were common. This led to some students being reluctant to reveal or discuss their religious identity in lessons (Kittelmann Flensner, 2015; Moulin, 2011). Also, these studies in the educational area, show (again) that education is very contextual and often linked to both national and European societal discourses regarding secularization and “othering” (Anker, 2011, Buckardt, 2010; von der Lippe 2011; Kittelmann Flensner 2015; Knauth, 2008; Nicolaisen, 2012).

## 19 Challenges and concerns in all countries

There are three particularly strong challenges to RE in Europe; secularization, the growing plurality of European cultures, and marginalization of subjects in the field of arts and humanities, of which RE is a part. These three challenges will be discussed below.

- The meaning and impact of secularization is a subject of much discussion in Europe today, although the grand narrative on secularization, where people predicted that religion would disappear in Europe as a result of the Enlightenment paradigm, is downplayed in recent research (Grote 2014). Religion seems to survive and come back in a variety of forms, sometimes violently, and is currently often in the forefront of the global scene. Thus, religious narratives and discourses among young people exist in many forms (von Brömssen, 2016), not the least due to globalization, social media, and transnational and hybrid identity constructions (Jacobson, 1997; Saeed, Blain & Forbes, 1999). RE as a subject must relate to these changes in order to be updated, relevant, and interesting to young students of today.
- The growing plurality and diversity in today's world affects the different constructions of RE subjects in Europe, and this is of great concern, challenging the stability, relevance, and maintenance of the RE subject in public schools. The national context seems to be one of the most important factors in how each country constructs and organizes RE (Schreiner 2014), as well as the particular relationships that exist between churches, faith communities, and states in each nation (cf., Franken & Loobuyck, 2014, 169). This raises questions in relation to the educational aim of RE, especially issues on what competences young people currently need in this area of knowledge. These issues need to be further discussed, above all between European politicians, educational policy actors, and educators, because it challenges what kinds of knowledge and literacies, attitudes, skills, and values in diverse societies are valued and needed in order to be a citizen. For RE to be relevant, it must provide young people with the necessary knowledge and values to become responsible global citizens. Religion changes, and therefore RE as a subject must also change (cf., Sijojoki, 2012). Just which knowledge, attitudes, and values will enable young people to reach this goal is a current matter of debate.
- Challenges for RE includes a trend of marginalization of RE due to education policy decisions moving toward economic criteria in education, which effects all subjects in the humanistic sphere, not only RE. We can here refer to Wardekker and Miedema, who express this in terms of “the ever-increasing dominance of thinking about education in terms of transmission and accountability” (2001, 76). This view of education connects also to high-stakes testing in education. Its effects can be viewed as part of the “datafication” of the world and “policy as numbers,” as well as other reforms of the state, including new public management approaches (Lingard, Martino, & Rezai-Rashti, 2015).

In addition to the three major changes mentioned above, we have seen a number of additional challenges to the RE subject and teacher education in RE that deserve to be mentioned:

- The discussions of the educational aim of RE in public schools, such as the identity of the subject, the status of the subject, and the time allocated to RE in different national contexts, points to an uncertain identity and often low status. Also, the name of the subject seems to be problematic because it in several

contexts it points to outdated knowledge, of no relevance to young people. Some argue for “worldview studies” as a more relevant name.

- There are not enough specialized teachers to ensure a high quality in RE in many countries. This combined with an uncertain identity of the subject and a confusion by many teachers and school leaders about the subject’s nature and purpose, and this also effects teacher education (cf. Aldridge, 2015, 199).
- There are challenges on how to relate to and implement policies from the European Council in RE-education, for example the policy document *Signposts - Policy and practice for teaching about religions and non-religious world views in intercultural education* (2014), *White Paper on Intercultural Dialogue “Living Together As Equals in Dignity”* (2008) and the *Council Recommendation on Common values, Inclusive Education and the European Dimension of Teaching* (2018). These policies have to be discussed among politicians, policy actors, school leaders, teachers and student teachers in order to relate and implement them. Thus, there needs to be an even more intensive debate on the education in this field.

Discussing, challenging, listening and learning have been a distinct feature of the READY project. The team has worked as a “community of practice,” or in other words, “groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly” (Wenger, 1998, 1). The READY team has agreed on to take our insight further to national and international conferences as well as continuing publishing on the material. In this way we hope to contribute to the discussion on teaching and learning on RE in the future.

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