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REDCo and the Council of Europe White Paper on Intercultural Dialogue: ‘Living together as Equals with Dignity’

CONTEXT and QUESTION

In this paper I propose to link the work of the REDCo project to the Council of Europe White Paper on Intercultural Dialogue (7th May 2008) noting where there are commonalities in origins, focus and approaches and what the empirical research, findings, implications and recommendations might add to that which is already in that document. I begin with the forward to the white paper, placed under the heading ‘Dialogue – a key to Europe’s future’ at the beginning of the document. The context is ‘Europe’s increasing cultural diversity’ and the question, ‘what is our vision of the society of the future?’ (Council of Europe 2008, 4).

Within this context of diversity, REDCo’s interest has been with religious diversity in particular, a reflection of the increasing profile of religion in public consciousness in Europe. And for the question of vision for the future, it is the future of young people we have been addressing with students from the 14 to 16 year old age bracket, in a number of schools in eight countries. It is their vision we have been exploring and their answer to this question of the future in the light of their present experiences of religion and religious diversity.

We sought the young people’s views through questionnaires supported in some cases by interviews. In each of our nine regions (the German contribution came from two states treated separately), around 70 young people filled in a qualitative questionnaire giving their views on the role of religion in their lives, in school and in society present and future. The open-ended questions gave them a chance to expand on their experiences and understandings and what they had to say formed the basis of questions for a larger scale quantitative survey of more than 8000 students on the same themes.

CONTEXT OF RELIGIOUS DIVERSITY

To return to the context, that of religion and of diversity- in the White Paper we find the observation that ‘religious practice is part of contemporary life’ (Council of Europe 2008, 22). The students in the REDCo project were asked directly about the role of religion in their own lives and the variety of the responses was notable. The students held several different positions on a spectrum between very important and of no relevance at all, yet whatever their own position the vast majority recognised the significance of religion in contemporary society, as the report of our quantitative findings expresses it, most of the teenagers, the data tells us, see religion as a normal part of societal life (Valk, Bertram-Troost, Frederici, Béraud 2009). Though many were aware of religion’s conflict potential, and those for whom religion was important in their own lives were more likely to value the role of religion in the world, students with or without a personal religion of their own were generally accepting of the place of religion and religious heterogeneity in society.

So we have religion as part of the context, and within religion we have diversity which parallels and is to some degree (though not entirely) part of that cultural diversity that the white paper addresses. The ever-growing diversity of European societies is the impetus and a continuing theme of the white paper and the sampling has aimed to capture some results of that diversification by incorporating different groups originating in the historical pluralisation of European Christianity, including schools where we expected to find students from the broad categories of Catholic, Protestant and Orthodox, and selecting a charismatic Christian school as part of the Norwegian sample, for example. It also sought to capture the increasing

pluralisation of religion, religious culture and religious discourse that has happened within each of the regions through the movement of peoples between European countries, as with the Russian heritage families of Orthodox background in the traditionally Lutheran Estonia, and into Europe from outside, as with the West African heritage Christians in the English sample, or Turkish Muslims in the North Rhine Westphalia sample, to take just two of several examples. It was also correctly anticipated that there would be young people in the sample whose non-religious identity reflected historical secularising trends in European society. In the questionnaires the students were given an opportunity to select a descriptor for their religious identity.

Like the white paper, the REDCo project recognised the importance of ensuring that the individual should not be lost within a group identity, it too was conscious of the need ‘to avoid the pitfalls of identity politics’ (Council of Europe 2008, 18) and applied to religious identity the white paper’s understanding of identity as being dynamic rather than static, ‘responding to new openings and experiences and adding new layers to identity without relinquishing one’s roots’ (p18). For this reason the project gave the opportunity to reflect on the role of religion in their personal history and present experience and to provide, a more nuanced description of their personal religious position than a group identity category might provide. Their responses to these questions highlighted still further the wide heterogeneity of the students’ religious convictions and worldviews. It was evident that in the schools we worked with there were sizeable groups of students for whom religion and God were personally important or very important, (‘God is everything to me, my life’, ‘God and Jesus is my life. If I didn’t have them, life wouldn’t be worth living’), for whom religion was of no personal importance, (‘I don’t think about God at all’, ‘Religion has my absolute lowest priority!’), and many who take various (often fluctuating) positions between the two. They may be doubting and wondering, ‘I believe there may be something out there ...I’m slowly thinking that there is nothing though’ (Ipgrave and McKenna 2008, 122) or thinking about God only now and then as the occasion demands, for example when they are worried about exams (Knauth 2008, 226) or the possibility of an accident on their motorbike (Dietz, Lorente and Garzón 2008, 32).

Another point of diversity was the young people’s experience of encounter with other religions. Some mixed with peers from a variety of backgrounds on a day-to-day basis in school and so were familiar with religious differences even in the minor practical details such as what food students from other religious traditions could or could not choose as they lined up in the school canteen. Others living in more heterogeneous environments did not have this opportunity for first hand encounter. If, as the white paper suggests, there is need to prepare young people for a role as citizens in an increasingly diverse Europe, then this imbalance of experience of religious plurality is something that needs to be addressed. While the white paper speaks of the importance of giving ‘young people opportunities to meet and engage with their peers from diverse backgrounds’ the REDCo recommended actions include,

Provide opportunities for engagement with different worldviews and religions, (including cooperation with local communities in order to increase exchange between different religious and non-religious groups) and to offer opportunities for encounters between students of diverse positions vis à vis religion. (REDCo Policy Recommendations)

An important message that the REDCo findings reinforce is that the young people of Europe are not only growing up in an increasingly religiously diverse society for which they need preparation, but that they too reflect that diversity of belief, commitment, practice and experience. Their different starting points, the variety of languages and references the pupils use when talking, or thinking about religion, constitute a significant challenge for teachers and have important pedagogical implications for the teaching approaches and forms of

discussion and dialogue that might take place in the classroom. Another of the actions in the REDCo policy recommendations is to

Train educators in methods that support and encourage students to be comfortable with difference and to engage with the diversity of their personal experiences (REDCo Policy Recommendations)

THE VISION

Having reviewed the context of religious diversity evident in the REDCo research, I now move to the young people's response to that diversity. The white paper sets out two stark alternatives for the future of society,

Is it a society of segregated communities, marked at best by the coexistence of majorities and minorities with differentiated rights and responsibilities, loosely bound together by mutual ignorance and stereotypes? Or is it a vibrant and open society without discrimination, benefiting us all, marked by the inclusion of all residents in full respect of their human rights? (Council of Europe 2008, 4)

It was the latter of these two, the positive vision of an open society marked by inclusion and respect, that was shared by the majority of the students, not only because they desired a peaceful co-existence across religious differences, but because most of them believed that it was possible. In their consideration of the possibility of peaceful co-existence encouraged by the qualitative survey, the students tackled the question at different levels, the macro level of wider society, the meso level of the community and the micro level of personal relations between individuals. Though it does not entirely match the white paper's formulation of local, national and international levels, nevertheless the variety in the responses does reflect this recognition of the multi-layered nature of intercultural relations.

At the macro level the students' responses were sometimes couched in the elevated language of religion, 'love all people since they have all been created by the same God', 'every religion tells us to create peace and love people', or of a humanist vision of a shared humanity 'at the end of the day we're all people', 'we are all humans in this world together'. Both speak of that sense of human equality and dignity enshrined in the white paper, of that common humanity that is presented there as 'the "glue" that can bind together people who share the continent' (p 13). Indeed in the paper it is viewed as a precondition for the kind of democratic society the Council of Europe is working to support;

'diversity without any overarching common humanity and solidarity would make mutual recognition and social inclusion impossible' (Council of Europe 2008, 14)

What the students are expressing is what the white paper recognises as the principle behind the whole corpus of human rights (Council of Europe 2008,14).

When discussing relations between people of different religions at the level of community or individuals, the students' responses took a more experiential and practical turn. They knew that people of different religions, or people with religious and non-religious positions, could get on well together because, 'My school is multicultural and we are proud of it because it is a community of so many people working together', because a Muslim aunty shared accommodation with a Christian friend, because a Christian girl had a Muslim boyfriend, because someone's religious granny lived together very happily with her non-religious grandchildren. They not only wrote about the positive but also recognised the practical issues entailed in people of different religions sharing their lives together, practical issues that might be the source of tension; the difficulties in a mixed faith marriage of deciding in which religion to bring up the children, different understandings of gender issues, Muslim prayer

mats and prayer times ‘getting in the way’ of family life, Muslims with Hindu partners not being able to accept ‘idols’ in the house (Ipgrave and McKenna 2008, 131-133).

The students were encouraged to think about such day-to-day practicalities in the context of their own schools when asked direct questions about whether there should be a role of religion in school and what it might be, about the religion of the teacher, about whether education about religion should take place in classes separated according to the religion of the students, or in classes where children of different religions and worldviews learnt about religion together. Here again, in answer to open-ended qualitative questions, it was noticeable how several of the students had assimilated the language and concepts of human rights, when they wrote, for example, of the right to freedom of worship, the freedom of students not to have the beliefs of the teacher (or of each other) imposed upon them, the freedom of the teacher to hold his or her own belief;

Why should you be discriminated against in employment because of your religious beliefs? (English student) (Ipgrave and McKenna 2008, 139)

The principles of ‘freedom of thought, conscience and religion’ are there in their answers. The readiness of young people of this age to engage in dialogue around religious issues within a discourse of human rights and the potential for the development of these skills is something to carry forward from the research. REDCo recognises this in its policy recommendation for the ‘inclusion of the religious dimension into general intercultural education, education for democratic citizenship and human rights education’ (REDCo Policy Recommendations).

THE PUBLIC SPHERE

One of the ways to relate REDCo findings to the white paper is to consider the application of some of its statements and approaches addressing wider society to the specific contexts of the young people’s lives, taking the student’s school context for example, and relating it to the statement in the white paper,

Religious practice is part of contemporary human life, and it therefore cannot and should not be outside the sphere of interest of public authorities, although the state must preserve its role as the neutral and impartial organiser of the exercise of various religions, faiths and beliefs. (Council of Europe 2008, 22)

In this statement the white paper considers the relationship of religion and the sphere of interest of public authorities. A number of the questions in the REDCo questionnaires invited the students to consider the position of religion in the sphere of interest of the authority of the school, that public authority that oversees a significant part of their lives. In the questionnaires they were even invited to take on the role of this public authority. In the qualitative survey they were asked to ‘imagine you are a person who can decide on school matters’ and outline and explain policy decisions they would make about the role of religion in their institution, and in the quantitative to ‘imagine you are a person in authority who can decide on school matter’ and indicate how far they would agree or disagree on various policy decisions about for example the wearing of religious symbols in school, the taking into account of religious dietary requirements in the school canteen, the provision of facilities for prayer, the permission for students to absent themselves from school during their religious festivals.

A key finding of the REDCo research was that the majority of students did think that there was a place for religion within the public sphere of the school, particularly as a subject or a cross-curricular theme, within the academic curriculum. In most countries, too, the majority of students supported the rights to manifest religion to some degree within that public sphere, by wearing unobtrusive symbols of their religion or by allowing voluntary acts of worship.

KNOWLEDGE AND SKILLS

To return to the students' vision of peaceful coexistence between religions (and non-religious positions) – in the qualitative survey, although the students were generally positive about the possibility of such harmonious living, the realisation of that vision was often seen by them as being contingent on several conditions that the school authorities and teachers might be in a position to effect or support. The prime condition was knowledge of the other's religion. This held a prominent position in many of the returns to both questionnaires. In the quantitative survey 'if they know about each other's religions' was the most highly evaluated prerequisite for peaceful coexistence. It was noticeable that in France, where the inclusion of information about religions in public school subjects is a recent initiative, the majority of students in the REDCo research subscribe to this pluralist approach and readily link it to learning to live together in a community. The white paper's position that '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' (p44) is mirrored in the young people's views.

I think everybody should learn about the different religions ...things that make it possible to live together in daily life with all the different people and world views. (Norwegian student) (von der Lippe 2008, 164)

Attitudes of tolerance, respect and open-mindedness were also cited as being of great importance in achieving this positive vision of the future in line with the white paper's acknowledgement that 'pluralism, tolerance and broadmindedness are more important than ever' (Council of Europe May 2008, 13). Many students proposed as activities to further the development of this harmonious society, interacting directly, listening to each other, getting to know a variety of views, learning to look at things from different perspectives, learning from each other, which are essentially dialogue skills. Responses to the qualitative survey showed that the young people viewed dialogue on religious issues as an important means of understanding others. Students who were accustomed to religious education in classes where students of different religious and non-religious identities and positions are taught together, often expressed their opinion that a religiously mixed religious education class provided a valuable forum for such dialogue. The following statements come from two of the regions (England and Norway) that have such educational models.

I think pupils should be taught together as this will help them to understand each other's beliefs better. It will help them to solve arguments by discussing it among themselves. This could reduce religious racism. (English student) (Ipgrave and McKenna 2008, 140)

My opinion is that all students should be taught together independent of their religion if we want peace in the world. It does not help to have Christians for themselves, we must talk together to be able to understand each other and to be able to live together in peace. (Norwegian student) (von der Lippe 2008, 166)

Such views expressed by young people fit with the white paper's statement on intercultural dialogue,

Successful intercultural dialogue requires ... open-mindedness, willingness to engage in dialogue and allow others to express their point, a capacity to resolve conflicts by peaceful means and a recognition of the well-founded arguments of others. (Council of Europe 2008, 17)

SPACES FOR DIALOGUE

The high minded aspirations and expressions of tolerance in the young people's responses are not the whole story however. The tolerance expressed in classroom discussion was not always replicated in their daily lives. One of our key research findings was that though the students were generally open towards peers of different religious backgrounds, at the same time they tend to socialise with peers from the same background as themselves, even when they lived in areas characterised by religious diversity. In spite of the openness towards religious pluralism expressed by most of the young people in the qualitative survey, and the view of many that dialogue was a valuable tool for understanding others better, they spoke about religion very little outside the classroom and if they did they mainly talked about it with peers who held the same religious views as themselves. The reasons they gave for this discrepancy were various. There may be lack of opportunity to mix with people of other religious backgrounds socially for a number of reasons, the nature of after school activities or family patterns of socialisation. There are many other interests and preoccupations for this age group that more readily formed topics of conversations than religion.

It is not appealing to us to be talking about different faiths. It's more the typical music-clothes-boy/girl thing. (German student) (Knauth, 2008, 223)

In the qualitative study some volunteered that religion, particularly one's own religion and questions of belief, was an embarrassing or 'uncool' subject to talk about in their peer culture, or expressed the view that though they would be interested to discuss religious subjects they would not bring them into the conversation with their friends for fear of being teased. There were a variety of contextual factors that made this more the case for some young people than others. Other reasons for avoiding religion as a topic of conversation related to its perceived conflict potential often connected with inter-group tensions or with conflicting truth claims. Such views are reinforced by media images of religions in conflict.

Religion is not spoken about in school [out of class] a lot as a lot of fights in this world happen over the differences of religion. ...Religion is basically one of the big causes of fighting and chaos and nobody wants it to happen so we try to refrain from talking about it a lot. (English student) (Igrave and McKenna 2008, 145)

Sometimes this fear of the conflict potential is stronger than the students' confidence in the ability of teachers to manage tensions that might occur in class, and it is given as one of the reasons by those students who advocate religious education in separate classes according to pupil religion.

If religion were taught for all independently of their creed, that would be absolute conflict, because, as we are from different creeds, not everybody thinks the same. (Spanish student) (Dietz, Lorente and Garzón 2008, 46)

There should be separation in order to avoid disagreements: everybody keeps his own beliefs. (Russian student) (Kozyrev 2008, 304)

But a contrary argument, still based on the premise of conflict, is that it is particularly important that students should learn about religion together in mixed groups if they are to learn those important relational and dialogical skills needed to get on well together, to learn how to associate, talk and co-operate.

No, then when you put together different groups and that will result in conflicts, because they don't get used to each other and don't understand each other. (Dutch student) (ter Avest et al. 2008, 104)

This last statement is in tune with the white paper's warning that 'shutting the door on a diverse environment can offer only an illusory security' (Council of Europe May 2008, 16), and its cautions against 'segregated and mutually exclusive communities' (p16). It also leads into the concept that meeting and dialogue between differences would benefit from a degree of pro-active, structured support and management which is the line taken by the white paper (p13).

In that paper there is a discussion of the importance and the nature of public spaces for dialogue and examples of physical spaces (with implications for town planning) and virtual spaces (for example, those created by the media) are given. The imperative to 'engender spaces for dialogue that are open to all' (p46), is supported by the REDCo research that shows that on one hand students see learning about and listening to each other as important for good relations and on the other that students generally do not dialogue much with different religious perspectives outside the classroom, and that also indicated that fear of conflict or in some cases of ridicule, were among the reasons for not engaging. Given that fear and embarrassment figure among the obstacles to dialogue it might be helpful to view the classroom not just as a physical space, but as an emotional space which, through the skills of the teacher, can become a safe and secure environment for discussion and dialogue, governed by what one student described as 'teaching conditions', where there could be exchanges of opinions and disagreements without the arguments spiralling out of control.

If you keep it civilised then it's OK to express your views and compare things and see where there's differences ...they're not drawing out guns and knives and shouting at each other, they're just talking like this, like we are. (English student) (Iprgrave and McKenna 2008, 145)

Creating such an environment is a challenging task, and though some teachers may have a natural gift, for most guidance and training in such dialogue skills would be very beneficial. The white paper places emphasis on the need for 'teacher training, educational strategies and working methods to prepare teachers to manage new situations arising out of diversity' and the REDCo policy recommendations include among the action points

The curriculum for teacher training should include the development of skills to organise and moderate in-class debates on controversial religious issues and conflicting worldviews. (REDCo Policy Recommendations)

DIALOGUE ABOUT RELIGIOUS ISSUES AND INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE

The content of the discussions and dialogue that can take place in such spaces will vary according to the school context and educational culture involved. In our REDCo team we have members from a variety of states. The study of teachers and of classroom interactions has been part of our work. These, the responses of the students to questions about their experiences and understanding of schools and learning, as well as the discussions we have held over the three years of our project have revealed (sometimes unexpected) commonalities in focus, purpose and approach but have not obscured the very real differences in pedagogies and educational philosophies that remain. One of these differences lies in our understandings of the role of the teacher, and where it fits in relation to transmission or facilitation models. Another is the degree to which young people are expected to express and consider their personal beliefs within the class.

The white paper expresses its appreciation of the value of interreligious dialogue as part of intercultural dialogue and recognises the important contribution it makes to 'an increased understanding between different cultures' (Council of Europe 2008, 22) and 'a stronger consensus within society regarding the solutions to social problems' (p24). It sees interreligious, and indeed intra-religious and intra-convictional dialogue as something that

should be encouraged though it is outside its own remit. In some national contexts the understanding of the role of the school and of the teacher is such that the dialogue that takes place within class will not involve the students' personal beliefs or theologies but will instead focus on religious issues. Nevertheless the experience of discussion around these will enable a refinement of skills, and the knowledge they gain from learning about religions will give them the content, for fruitful interreligious or inter-convictional dialogue in the future. In other states involved in the project, the educational context is different. Recognition of the various religious and non-religious positions of the young people, and an understanding of teachers as having a facilitating role in these contexts, means that interreligious and inter-convictional dialogue is something that could be (and in several cases already is) encouraged within class. The rationale for such dialogue would be the increased understanding it can generate between cultures and the opportunities it gives to students to develop 'the ability to express themselves' and 'capacity to listen to the views of others', rehearsing the 'open and respectful exchange of views' between differences 'on the basis of mutual understanding and respect' that is the spirit of the Council of Europe white paper (p17).

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Dr. Julia Ipgrave, Prof. Dr. Wolfram Weisse, Christian Rudelt and Dr. Séverine Mathieu are preparing for the conference

Ina ter Avest

Teachers responding to religious diversity. Impression of everyday practice and recommendations for teacher training

Introduction

The REDCo project focuses on the role of religion in the life of male and female youths in an important aspect of society where religion is an issue, namely in education. While in days gone by it was easy for students to identify with each other's story since they all were socialized in more or less the same way, in today's multicultural society, being different is normal in European classrooms (ter Avest 2009).

As both the initiator and facilitator of the learning process and responsible for creating and maintaining a safe environment for students, the teacher is of pivotal importance in education. This was the very reason to focus on the role of the teacher in one of the subprojects of REDCo.

The basic research question is: How does the role of the teacher and their personal and professional biography relate to the teachers' perceptions of diversity in the classroom and the development of ideas and strategies of inter-religious learning? (Van der Want, A., C. Bakker, I. ter Avest & J. Everington 2009)

We held in-depth interviews with six teachers each in six European countries. In this presentation I will present you some of the remarkable findings of the interviews of the thirty-six European teachers we interviewed on an interreligious classroom approach, focusing on the professional and personal biographical background for the teacher's perception of diversity in the classroom. Is diversity seen as a threat or as an opportunity? Our research explores the relationship between the valuation of diversity as developed in the individual biography and the emergence of ideas and development of strategies to respond to diversity in the context of interreligious learning.

Findings

We are aware of the fact that it is not possible to draw any general conclusions from our research due to the 'situatedness' of our research as well as the personal nature of this type of qualitative survey. At the same time, the personal relationship that is established during the interviews guarantees a more in-depth understanding.

Perception of diversity

What becomes clear from the thirty-six interviews is that religion is just one aspect of diversity. Gender is another, but the teachers far more often talk about differences in participation in classroom discussions, differences in knowledge or awareness of the subject and in learning attitudes and skills.

Although in some of the participating countries a great deal of effort is devoted to the development of curricula (in England the Agreed Syllabuses, in Norway the new curriculum for 'Religion, Philosophy of Life and Ethics' and in Hamburg/Germany 'Religionsunterricht für Alle'), the teachers themselves cast their aims and strategies in very personal terms. 'In my view...', 'As I see it ...', 'Following from my experience ...'.

Aims & strategies

The aims of a majority of the teachers in the six countries surveyed include promoting knowledge, understanding and respect for religion(s). Religious identity formation as the

‘Bildung’ aspect of teaching religion(s) is mentioned explicitly as an aim of RE in Germany and the Netherlands. It was also part of the former national curriculum of RE in Norway until August 2008, but was removed in the latest amendment. Promoting the development of spirituality or evangelizing is inappropriate, according to the majority of the teachers. As one of the possible strategies to teach religion(s), teachers mention presenting their own religious worldview or inviting the pupils to do so. Some teachers make use of the diversity in their classroom, others emphasize the equality and commonalities of students of different ethnicities, boys and girls.

Preconditions

To arrive at understanding and respect, a classroom atmosphere of trust and confidence is a necessary (but not sufficient!) precondition, according to the teachers. Some teachers try to create such an environment in their classroom conversations by being very open about their own religious stance, others draw up an agreement with rules and regulations for classroom behaviour. Openness and the willingness to share personal faith and beliefs with the pupils is favoured e.g. in the Netherlands and Germany; reluctance and an attitude of caution with regard to openness, and a propensity to rely on rules is noticeable for various reasons in England, Estonia and France.

A key strategy to arrive at understanding and respect is providing the pupils with knowledge, and – through classroom discussions – facilitate their exploration and elaboration of this knowledge.

Norwegian and French teachers explicitly mention the development of skills such as discussion techniques and knowledge-based inquiry. Sometimes, characters from a religious tradition are presented as examples of good practice, and thus form the starting point of a classroom conversation; a strategy used by some of the interviewed teachers in The Netherlands.

Importance of religion, and migration background

Whereas teachers do not always explicitly refer to the ethnic background of their students, we learn from the quantitative research amongst students that there is a clear correlation between migration backgrounds and the responses and response patterns of students. In our view the ‘importance of religion’ and the ‘migration background’ are nested variables. Based on the cultural and religious traditions and implicitly encouraged by the negative media coverage in the ‘host’ countries with regard to ‘them’ being ‘the other’, some groups of migrant families tend to form social support organisations, among which religious communities are not the least influential. For some of the migrant students, cultural organisations and religious communities might be ‘spaces of dependence’ i.e., “those more-or-less localized social relations upon which we depend for the realization of essential interests ... for which there are no substitutes elsewhere [and which] define place-specific conditions for our material well-being and our sense of significance” (Harod 2007, 243). Spaces of dependence and of belonging.

Gender

Yet another influential difference that emerges from the data of the quantitative survey and that is hardly mentioned by the teachers explicitly is gender. We learn from the quantitative research that girls are generally more likely than boys to exhibit an open attitude to ‘the other’ and the other’s religion. They are aware of their friends’ religious commitment. Girls seem more willing to talk to ‘the other’ and to listen to their point of view, whereas boys show a tendency to withdraw. Boys are more likely than girls to shy away from differences. Boys tend to try to convince ‘the other’ of their view or opt out of the exchange. Boys seem more able than girls to demarcate their own (and hence, the other’s) territory within an

encounter. Or, as the English report says: ‘Boys tend to be more militant in their attitudes and girls stress understanding and conformity’.

Gender appears to be a distinctive factor for the importance of religion in the life of youngsters. There seems to be a shared underlying motive in the significantly different positions taken by girls, as it is for Muslim students. ‘Differences between girls and boys in the degree to which they associate with people of different religions or speak with friends about religion might reflect their different patterns of socialization – whether, for example, they spend their break times playing football in larger groups or chatting with a few friends’ (O’Dell, Gemma (2009, forthcoming).

We recommend research on the gendered communication patterns, and the construction of individual students' positions towards religion.

Biography

Most of the teachers have a religious background themselves. In their childhood they have had positive experiences with religious diversity, either within the family (parents as examples of good practice) or in the neighbourhood (having playmates with different family background) as a context of tolerance, sometimes interpreted retrospectively as under-communication of religious differences (as in the Norwegian case). Teachers offer their pupils the pleasure of such positive experiences and try to reproduce their own positive (RE class) experiences for their pupils.

Not only biographical experiences within the family, but also experiences at school, at university and abroad have influenced the teachers’ strategies. The personal experience of living abroad, or engaging in encounters with different religious characters and philosophies, is explicitly mentioned in the German and English samples as a source of the knowledge required to appropriately address (religious) diversity in RE classes. Similarly, the personal experience of hope, comfort, protection and security is related to the teachers' classroom behaviour (‘I like them to believe in love’) (Van der Want, Bakker, ter Avest and Everington 2009, p. 152).

Alongside the abovementioned experiences with religious diversity in childhood and adolescent doubts, personal traits and teaching styles are stressed in the interviews with teachers. The personality of the teacher, related to her or his personal teaching style, is a decisive element for the perception of religion(s) and religious diversity in classroom interaction. The main question seems to be how to balance personal faith, beliefs and interests against a teaching practice that is interesting and inspiring for the pupils? Or to put it in other words: How do we – my students and I – practice interreligious communication?

We recommend to create space not only for the training of professional skills, but also for the personal development of the student-teacher.

As an example of the possible outcome of a successful exploration of personal and professional faith commitment, I present a characteristic example in the Dutch situation: a Dutch Roman Catholic teacher at an Islamic school, reciting the first *sura* of the Qur’an with her Muslim students at the start of the day.

Intercultural dialogue

How do we practice intercultural communication with students from different religious and non-religious backgrounds?

From the White paper (Council of Europe 2008, 17) I quote:

intercultural dialogue is understood as a process that comprises an open and respectful exchange of views between individuals and groups with different ethnic, cultural, religious and linguistic backgrounds and heritage, on the basis of mutual understanding and respect.

Dialogue seems to be a magic word referring to the classroom as a *meeting place* where differences can be resolved. Conflict is seen as something to be avoided or, if it is present, as something that needs to be got rid of. From the teacher's point of view, a conflict in the classroom appears as a negative 'critical incident' to be solved in order to restore the peaceful classroom normality, a safe environment which all accept as a precondition for learning. Dialogue may then serve as a teaching strategy: a way to resolve conflicts.

Dialogue understood this way includes debate in the course of conflicts, but aims at resolving them to establish a harmonious state where people exchange and explore their differing views in dialogical conversation. Dialogue is represents a particular form of conversation in the sense that it functions as an approach towards achieving better understanding between people, ultimately making them better citizens.

Citizenship

From the White paper (Council of Europe 2008, 28) I quote:

Citizenship, in the widest sense, is a right and indeed a responsibility to participate in the cultural, social and economic life and in public affairs of the community together with others.

The educational task of living together amidst growing cultural diversity while respecting human rights and fundamental freedoms has become one of the major demands of our times and will remain a highly relevant policy issue for many years to come.

In our view, the public domain constitutes a *meeting place*, a place of encounter. Multiculturalism favours interaction between people from different backgrounds, the encounter in the midst of diversity, abandoning indifference and opening up to mutual understanding, tolerance and respect through commitment of both sides (either positive or negative).

Competency: the methodology of listening

The teachers' narratives reflect a rising awareness of the continuum from teaching *about* differences to learning *from* diversity of commitments to religions and worldviews in their pedagogical strategy. It is unclear from our analysis whether teachers use diversity to learn about the other or to learn from the other for the pupils' own edification. Let me give you an example.

In the classroom, one of the students introduces the topic of 'hacking'. The ensuing conversation explores different positions on 'hacking' and downloading. The teacher makes use of these different opinions to encourage students to consciously explore and develop their own stance. Different and contrasting opinions are used for the edification of the child (ter Avest 2008).

The teacher

The perception of the public domain as a meeting place on the teacher's part can lead to an emphasis on the multicultural classroom as an example of future participation in the public sphere. Participation in the classroom then is envisioned as leading to participation in society: Inside-out.

Other teachers perceive the public domain as a place that is different from both their own worldview and the school's identity. They tend to explore their own stance towards religious or non-religious traditions in order to adjust to the demands of society. The reflected interpretation of worldviews in their opinion will lead to a proper adjustment to society: Outside-in (Rietveld-van Wingerden, Westerman, Ter Avest 2009).

At the end of the day

At the end of the day, the interplay of the teacher's perspective on citizenship and the public domain, flexibility in pedagogical strategies, and *last but not least* the personality of the teacher will create a classroom environment where students can learn to live together amidst diversity, inside out or outside in, day after day.

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