

Article

Balancing Differences through Highlighting the Common: Religious Education Teachers' Perceptions of the Diversity of Islam in Islamic Religious Education in Finnish State Schools

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Abstract: Muslims are Finland's largest and fastest-growing religious minority. In Finnish state schools, the number of pupils studying Islamic religious education (IRE) has almost doubled in a decade, and IRE has its own national curriculum, which is based on the general principles of Islam. Pupils are diverse in terms of their languages, cultures, ethnicities and in their religious and worldview backgrounds, religious diversity being reflected in the religious education curriculum content in which the diversity of Islam is addressed. In this study, we examine the diversity of Islam in IRE. The research results are based on interviews with IRE teachers (N = 17) working in comprehensive schools in the capital region of Finland, and we use data-driven content analysis to explore teachers' perceptions. This study shows that IRE teachers use balancing pedagogical tools in order to deal with the diversity of Islam. According to the findings of our study, dealing with this diversity in religious education requires a dialogicity that both highlights and blurs differences related to diversity. Religion-related dialogue in IRE provides an arena for a balanced discussion about religious differences as well as what they have in common.

Keywords: Islamic religious education; diversity of Islam; religion-related dialogue; superdiversity



Citation: Putkonen, Niina, and Saila Poulter. 2023. Balancing Differences through Highlighting the Common: Religious Education Teachers' Perceptions of the Diversity of Islam in Islamic Religious Education in Finnish State Schools. *Religions* 14: 1069. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel14081069>

Academic Editor: Zekirija Sejdić

Received: 28 June 2023

Revised: 27 July 2023

Accepted: 17 August 2023

Published: 20 August 2023



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1. Introduction

Muslims are Finland's largest and fastest-growing religious minority. An estimated 120,000–130,000 people with a Muslim background live in Finland (Pauha and Konttori 2022, p. 13). Although an increasing number of Finnish Muslims were born in Finland and have lived in the country all their lives, the majority of Finnish Muslims are first-generation immigrants who arrived in the country as asylum seekers or through family reunification. The Finnish Muslim population is diverse in terms of its languages, cultures, ethnicities and religious and worldview backgrounds (Konttori and Pauha 2021, pp. 238–39). Islamic religious education (henceforth IRE) in Finnish state schools is intended for all those children whose families identify themselves as Muslim. There is one syllabus for IRE, which is based on the general principles of Islam and is aimed to be suitable for Muslims from different denominational backgrounds (FNAE 2014; Sakaranaho 2019, pp. 82–84). The number of pupils participating in IRE in Finnish comprehensive schools nearly doubled during the 2010s (Ikkala and Putkonen 2022, p. 193), and this is obviously reflected in the diversity of IRE teaching groups in Finnish schools.

The purpose of this study is to examine Finnish IRE teachers' perceptions of the diversity of Islam in IRE. The research results are based on new information collected by this study, which includes seventeen interviews with IRE teachers working in comprehensive schools in the capital region of Finland. Recent debates in Finland as well as research on religious education (henceforth RE) have focused on the current model and its applicability to today's needs in a changing society (e.g., Kavonius 2021; see also Salmenkivi and Åhs 2022). The main focus of the discussion has been should RE at school be common for all

pupils rather than in separate groups, as is the case in the other Nordic countries (Poulter et al. 2015; Kallioniemi and Ubani 2016). There has been a call for change in the structural model of RE by, among other things, strengthening the dialogue between pupils from different worldviews (Åhs et al. 2019). Although dialogue in RE has been discussed in Finland from the perspective of pupils from different RE study groups, discussion within the group studying the same religion is missing.

In this study, we examine the diversity of Islam in IRE within the framework of religion-related dialogue in IRE. We understand the term religion-related dialogue to be both intra-religious and inter-religious dialogue, as well as dialogue with secular worldviews and issues related to different worldviews (see Vikdahl and Skeie 2019, p. 115; Poulter and Tosun 2020, p. 30). The concept of a worldview has been debated lately in the field of RE and more broadly in the humanities (e.g., Lipiäinen et al. 2020). Since our research is concerned with the religion of Islam and IRE lessons at school, we use the term religion-related dialogue instead of worldview-related dialogue. For the same reason, in this study we contextualize our focus on intra-religious dialogue.

First, we will introduce the religious landscape of Finland, especially from the perspective of Islam, as well as the Finnish model of RE. We then discuss the theoretical background of the study through its key concepts, which are diversity, superdiversity and religion-related dialogue. After introducing the research material, methodology and research question of this study, we present the key results emerging from the data. Finally, we discuss the research results in the light of previous research and conclude with the possibilities and challenges of IRE, concentrating on perspectives of diversity and dialogicity. By dialogicity we refer to situations of encounter in IRE, in/through which different dimensions of diversity are explored.

2. Background

2.1. Muslims in Finland

There are no official figures available for the number of Muslims in Finland, but an estimated 2.0 to 2.1% of the entire population has a Muslim background. About 25% of Finnish Muslims are Shia Muslims (Konttori and Pauha 2021, pp. 238–39). Especially the Sunni schools of thought (Madhhab), followed by Muslim communities, are determined by the community's country of origin. The Shafi school is predominant among Muslim communities originating from Somalia, whereas the Maliki school is followed by Muslims originally from Morocco, and the Hanafi school constitutes communities from Egypt, Bangladesh and Pakistan. The Finnish Shia Muslim population is comprised of Afghans, Iraqis and Iranians, and they mainly follow the Ja'fari school (Al-Sharmani and Mustasaari 2022, p. 52; Martikainen 2020, p. 43).

The number of Finnish Muslims has grown rapidly since the 1990s due to immigration. However, the history of Islam in Finland goes back much further. The Tatar Muslims from Russia settled in Finland in the 19th century (Martikainen 2020, p. 35). The Finnish Tatars also took the first steps to start IRE in schools. Between 1948 and 1969, Islam was taught in Turkish grammar schools maintained by the Finnish Tatars (Ikkala and Putkonen 2022, p. 191). It is estimated that in Finland a few thousand of the over 120,000 Muslim population are converts to Islam (Pauha and Konttori 2022, pp. 14–15).

Although Islam is not a newcomer to Finnish society, Islam is perceived in Finland as being incompatible with Finnish culture and values more than in other European countries (Pew Research Center 2018, p. 66). According to Teemu Pauha (2018, pp. 53–54), young Finnish Muslims themselves also consider that Finnishness conflicts with Muslimness. Compared to other European countries, 35% of Finnish respondents, a relatively small proportion, know a Muslim personally (Pew Research Center 2018, p. 62). This obviously diminishes the opportunities for religious dialogue in everyday life. In education, as well as in Western societies in general, Islam faces religionizing. This may both provoke a one-dimensional understanding of a unified Islam that blurs the differences between

individuals with a Muslim background and increases the divisions between assumedly religious Muslims and the secular West (see [Panjwani 2017](#), pp. 605–6).

2.2. Religious Education in Finnish State Schools

The Finnish RE model highlights positive religious freedom, namely, that children have the right to be taught in accordance with their own religion ([Seppo 2003](#), p. 179). The organization of RE is based on the Basic Education Act (13 § 454/2003) and the Religious Freedom Act of 2003 (453/2003). The Finnish National Agency of Education (henceforth FNAE) produces the Finnish National Core Curriculum for Basic Education (henceforth FNCCBE). The subject of religion has currently a curriculum consisting of fourteen different syllabi, among them the Evangelical-Lutheran religion, Islam and Judaism ([FNAE 2014, 2022](#)).

The goal of the Freedom of Religion Act to promote religious equality (see [Kallioniemi and Ubani 2016](#), p. 182) is reflected in the RE curriculum, where all RE syllabi share the same key content areas: relation with one's own religion, the world of religions and the good life. One's "own religion" gives a perspective for studying the shared key contents. The alternative subject for RE is culture, worldview and ethics (henceforth CWE; in the English translation of FNCCBE [[FNAE 2014](#)] called 'ethics'). It is offered to pupils who do not belong to any specific religious community. Together, religion and CWE are referred to within the Finnish school context as 'worldview education'.

Like other Nordic countries, religiosity and culture in Finland have been influenced by Protestant Christianity and a close church–state relationship ([Sinnemäki et al. 2019](#)). Today, the number of people without any religious affiliation in Finland has notably increased, although about half of the population are still members of a Lutheran church ([ELCF 2022](#)). Although traditional membership-based religiosity has, to some extent, lost its meaning, its echoes can be seen in the way RE is organized (see [Berglund 2014](#); [Rissanen et al. 2020](#)). Whereas those who belong to the Evangelical-Lutheran or Orthodox Church automatically study Lutheran or Orthodox RE, the widest freedom of choice is given to pupils from a minority religion. For instance, a Muslim pupil has three ways to participate in worldview education at school: (1) IRE (in accordance with one's own religion), (2) Lutheran RE (in which every pupil can participate), and (3) CWE ([FNAE 2022](#)).

Although RE in Finland is based on a specific religious tradition, its aim is not to commit pupils to any particular religious tradition or worldview. Teaching is, in principle, religiously non-confessional and does not include practicing religion. RE aims to provide knowledge about the child's own religion as well as other religions and worldviews and to support reflection and the search for the child's personal worldview and identity. As the model of RE in Finland is based on religious affiliation but is not religiously committed, this model in previous research has been characterized as "weak confessional" ([Ubani 2007](#), p. 21).

3. Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework of this study is based on the exploration of the concepts of diversity and superdiversity, as well as religion-related dialogue.

3.1. Diversifying an Understanding of Diversity

In the field of education, the term 'diversity' has been characterized as "the new normal" ([Hummelstedt-Djedou et al. 2021](#), pp. 8–9). In the institutional use of language, it has partly replaced terms such as 'equal opportunities' and 'antiracism' ([Ahmed 2012](#), p. 52). There have also been critical voices concerning the discourse on diversity. According to Sinfree [Makoni \(2012, p. 192\)](#), "[i]t is the powerful who celebrate the notion of diversity; those of us from other parts of the world feel the idea of diversity is a careful concealment of power differences".

'Diversity' indeed is not an unambiguous term, and the concept is used differently in different contexts. 'Superdiversity' is a term introduced by Steven [Vertovec \(2007\)](#) to

describe the diversification of diversity. The concept, which initially dealt with phenomena related to new migration patterns, has since been used in various scientific fields, including educational and political discussions (Vertovec 2023, pp. 51, 201, 222). According to Vertovec (2023, pp. 163, 222), the current social complexity derives from the dynamics of social organization, common social categories and individual identities that are in dynamic relation with each other, and their mutual dependency means that they need to be constantly reassessed. Social categories often underlie social organizations, and changes in category definitions have an impact on organizations' as well as individuals' perceptions of their diverse categorical belonging (ibid.).

Religion has been characterized as "a phenomenon of difference" (Heimbrock 2009, p. 91). The religious dimension of encounter is described as being both transcendent and concrete. From the perspective of a so-called 'lived religion' (Bråten 2021), this religious dimension of encounter relates to concrete traditions, narratives and rituals, whereas the transcendent dimension of religion refers to what is holy (see Heimbrock 2009, p. 91). Along with the growth of irreligion, especially in Europe and North America, the role of religion is increasing and diversifying on a global scale (Casanova 1994; Drescher 2016; Parkkinen and Taira 2023). Examining religion in the framework of superdiversity underlines the fact that diversification is not only related to 'religion', but religious diversity also diversifies (Beyer and Beaman 2019, pp. 9–11; Vertovec 2023, p. 176; Burchardt and Becci 2016). In addition to traditional perceptions related to diversities and differences, new diversities are emerging and should be recognized (Vertovec 2023, p. 112).

In understanding this complexity by means of superdiversity, the multiple settings in which different people negotiate multidimensional meanings need to be emphasized. People's social positions, for example, direct their individual understanding of meaning (Vertovec 2023, pp. 165, 222).

3.2. Diversity in RE

According to Sara Ahmed (2012, p. 81), "[t]o speak the language of diversity is to participate in the creation of a world". Although diversity does not appear to be clearly demarcated or divisible, by talking about diversity in different contexts, space for diversity is created (Ahmed 2012, p. 81). In the context of education, RE has been introduced as a place for diversities to encounter each other (see Jackson 2014; Heimbrock 2009). However, it has been recognized both in Finnish and in international studies, organizing RE can also isolate religious minorities, supporting mainstream social cohesion, serving national interests and strengthening the monolithic image of Muslims (Niehaus 2009; Sakaranaho 2019).

The latest FNCCBE (FNAE 2014) reflects the increased interest in diversity and pluralism, emphasizing the pursuit of inclusiveness and pluralism more vigorously than the previous curriculum (2004) (Zilliacus et al. 2017, pp. 236–37). The role of cultural, linguistic, religious and worldview diversity in shaping society and constructing one's own identity is recognized in the 2014 curriculum and the discourse of diversity is present in RE instruction, which in Finland is part of the FNCCBE (FNAE 2014).

Intra-religious diversity is part of instruction of RE and learning about the diversity of Islam is addressed in IRE instruction (FNAE 2014; Ubani et al. 2020). The national curriculum, however, does not offer detailed content for handling the diversity of Islam. Obviously, if these contents are not specified in either municipal or school-specific curricula or textbooks, the role of teachers in defining current perspectives becomes increasingly important (e.g., Tuna 2020).

Supporting the development of a pupil's own Muslim identity as well as growing into Finnish society as an equal citizen has been seen as central to the organization of IRE in schools (Uittamo 2007, p. 135). Previous studies (Zilliacus 2013, p. 517; Rissanen 2023) suggest that Finnish teachers of minority religions and teachers who themselves have a minority background are aware of the importance of their work in promoting tolerance both in the classroom and in society. However, in their everyday teaching work, RE teachers

have also experienced challenges when teaching culturally diverse groups and groups of diverse ages (Zilliacus 2013, p. 517). Moreover, where IRE pupils' experiences have felt that their IRE teachers have biases when dealing with diversity in Islam, this has led them to feel excluded in the IRE class (Rissanen 2019, p. 138; Sakaranaho 2019, p. 84).

3.3. Religion-Related Dialogue in RE When Encountering Difference and Sameness

Religious diversity is a fabric that includes other diversities in compounded and variable ways (see Beyer and Beaman 2019, p. 11). In contemporary societies, the contents and goals of religion as a subject in state schools often demonstrate a combination of political and educational aims as well as perceptions and understandings arising from the subject itself. This makes the examination of the relationship between RE and religious diversity a multifaceted one (Halstead 2015, p. 5). Hence, the religious dialogue that takes place in schools should not be understood only in the context of religious classes nor only in the school context. It is a reflection of a larger whole that is connected to both local and global societal and political contexts both now and in the past (see Fancourt 2016; Vikdahl 2019, p. 95).

The dynamics in the classroom, the religious atmosphere at home, the pupils' assumptions about the negative attitude of schools towards religion, the influences of political authorities and the impact of the media all affect how dialogue is expressed in the classroom (Vikdahl and Skeie 2019, p. 124). Above all, a safe space is required for dialogue to take place (e.g., Iversen 2019; Jackson 2014). Having said that, dialogue and conflict should not, according to Kevin O'Grady (2019, p. 152), be differentiated too sharply. Both dialogue and conflict should be conducted in an atmosphere where pupils' reflections on their own worldviews and beliefs are supported. In this way, dialogue with those who have different thoughts and beliefs becomes possible (O'Grady 2019, pp. 151–52). Such dialogue, rather than aiming to reach one truth, is open to the possibility of differences. It allows space for identity search and encourages pupils to have an understanding of different phenomena from diverse perspectives, which makes dialogue a learning process (see Heimbrock 2009, p. 95).

Friedrich Schweitzer (2011) has argued that “dialogue needs difference”. Instead of perceiving another person only as a source of information, dialogue reaches a commonly built understanding that accepts disagreement (Schweitzer 2011, pp. 121–22). Dmitri Nikulin (2010, p. 90) also debates dialogue as the expression of one's personal other. Nikulin (2010, p. 156) separates dialogue from “non-dialogical conversations”: whereas dialectic is impersonal, dialogue is personal (Nikulin 2010, p. 87). Dialectic reasoning aims to provide a rational conclusion organized by something external to it, whereas dialogue is self-organized. Dialectic aims at knowledge, is based on logical reasoning and produces something that is repeatable, whereas dialogue derives from narrative and is unfinished in character (Nikulin 2010, pp. 87, 92).

RE as a place for both inter- and intra-religious dialogue has been recognized. John M. Hull (2009, p. 31) suggests that “religious education has a unique vocation because it offers not only an inner interpretation of faith and an interreligious dialogue but also an intra religious view springing from its character as an educational discipline”. Further, Hull (2009, p. 32) states that this “unique vocation” underlines the social and societal significance of RE as well as personal religious and worldview reflection. In line with this, in the current Finnish RE curriculum, intra-religious diversity is not only referred to as content, but is also associated with dialogue skills (Ubani et al. 2020, p. 13).

4. Results

4.1. Examining the Diversity of Islam in IRE Is Essential Because of the Pupils' Diverse Backgrounds

According to IRE teachers, the IRE study groups are diverse, not only in religious terms but also linguistically, culturally, ethnically and nationally, which should be taken into account in IRE (T1; T2; T4; T5; T8; T10; T15; T16; T17). Supporting a pupil's own

religious, cultural and linguistic identity in IRE is seen as important, and IRE classes are also seen as a bridge between Finnishness and Muslimness (e.g., T4; T15; T16). Teaching about the diversity of Islam is considered important for minority identity, and especially Shia pupils are mentioned in this respect (T6; T13).

An increasing number of children who attend Islamic classes in this study were born in Finland, but many of them have family roots in different countries and in different Islamic traditions. At the level of denominations, teachers describe the diversity of Muslims on the Sunni–Shia axis. Sunni Muslims are the majority, and Shia Muslims are the minority in the classroom (e.g., T3; T13; T15). Students of Ahmadiyya background are mentioned in the high school context. One teacher said that from a doctrinal point of view she was initially confused about the attendance of Ahmadiyya adherents in IRE, but then considered that if their self-understanding was to be Muslim, the class was suitable for them too (T11). The teacher’s reflection can be seen to be in line with the idea of Finnish IRE, where, instead of religious orientation or commitment, the emphasis is on the Muslim background identified by the pupil and the family.

One of the teachers calls IRE at school a “credible” place to get information about different interpretations of Islam as well as to reflect on ethical questions for those pupils who base their moral foundation on Islam:

“If they’re just being talked about somewhere, like somewhere in the culture, worldview and ethics lesson and they’re talking about something related to a sexual minority, then a Muslim there could think that it’s not related to me, in a way. I don’t need to think like this, it’s Finns who think like this, but I don’t need to. But if it is discussed there in Islam classes and brings out the Islamic world and these interpretations, and what the sources of Islam actually say about it, that there are many new interpretations and it is possible that they exist, and then it’s a completely different matter.” (T4)

Islamic classes are also attended by pupils from secular non-religious families (T1; T6; T8; T10) and families where one parent has a Muslim background (T2; T12). The pupils’ knowledge and expressed relation and understanding of Islam also demonstrate the different backgrounds and diversity of Muslims in the classroom. Some of the pupils go to a Quranic school, some seem to have no prior knowledge of Islam or mention that they do not want to act according to some religious practice discussed in class, such as praying (T1; T2; T4; T6; T7; T8; T10; T17). Some teachers consider that these pupils without prior knowledge of Islam are a challenge (T8; T2). However, teachers emphasize that children from secular families and children who have no prior knowledge of Islam should also be taken into account in IRE (T1; T2; T6).

“And the other really big problem are those kids who don’t know anything about Islam. Where at home they eat pork and don’t pray. There are those who don’t know that you have to perform wudu before touching the Quran. . . . if everyone else in the group knows everything . . . that you’re supposed to do this and you’re not supposed to do that, then it’s really scary. . . . So this is also a thing that I have tried to bring out in the classes, that hey, let’s keep everyone involved. If you notice that there is someone in the mosque who is not involved . . . Tell them what to do.” (T2)

4.2. Dealing with the Diversity of Islam Requires Sensitivity and Consideration of Pupils’ Own Perceptions and Experiences

Teachers highlight that they are not allowed to ask about pupils’ convictional backgrounds (T4; T11; T12). However, how pupils express their views on topics such as Muslim women dressing and the hijab (T1; T5; T6; T8; T10; T11; T15; T17), fasting (T12; T17) or celebrating different feasts in their family (T3; T4; T11) show their different understandings of Islam.

“Or even if we talk, . . . some children talk freely about Christmas. Then again, a Somali family certainly doesn’t celebrate Christmas, and a proper Muslim certainly doesn’t celebrate Christmas. Still, some moderate families may have some kind of Christmas vacation, or something related to Christmas. In other words, I can conclude from these things that this belongs to that In other words, this is one way that I can get to know about these backgrounds, about the pupils’ backgrounds.” (T3)

Pupils’ diverse understandings and backgrounds are also apparent when using religious language (T3; T13), when dealing with themes such as praying and ablution (T2; T4) as well as with ethical themes and interpretations in Islam related, for instance, to sexuality (T2; T7; T13). However, some teachers point out that respect for each pupil’s own worldview means that the teacher does not make any kind of assumptions about it (T9; T10).

Although the diversification in IRE groups seems to be related to the more positive attitudes of pupils and homes towards learning about the diversity of Islam, many of the teachers consider it to be a sensitive topic. Familiarizing Muslim pupils with different backgrounds about the diversity of Islam requires time, a confidential atmosphere, student knowledge as well as teachers’ own knowledge of the subject and their pedagogical skills (T1; T4; T5; T6; T10; T14; T16). Along with one’s own identity, ethical reflection related to living as a human being is mentioned by some teachers as the starting point for familiarizing pupils with the diversity of Islam (e.g., T1; T14; T16).

Some teachers address the fact that they avoid stating their own beliefs and views, but they deal with the diversity of Islam ‘neutrally’ (T1; T4; T6; T13; T14; T16), relying on Islamic tradition (T3; T8; T11; T14; T17) as well as the curriculum and their professional role (e.g., T1; T8; T14; T17).

Some of the teachers pointed out that they also encouraged pupils to be critical (T4; T6; T10). One teacher, for example, reflected on the connection between practicing critical literacy and understanding the diversity of Islam in the following way:

“ . . . where to get that information, and what is reliable information and what is not? And maybe some idea that things are not so black and white. So that these pupils would realize that it’s not either this way or that way and that there are other options both inside Islam and in the world.” (T10)

Dealing with different interpretations of Islam as well as reliable Islamic sources in IRE is also seen as an open space for a balanced discussion about radicalization and for dismantling the negative image of Islam created by the media (T1; T3; T4; T6; T10; T15; T16).

The diversity of Islam as content is discussed in Islam classes through Islamic ethics, schools of law, movements and interpretations both in primary school (especially in grades 5–6) and secondary school (T2; T4; T5; T9; T10; T11; T12). It is also discussed in lessons dealing with the history of Islam, where the issue of leadership (the first four caliphs) is mentioned as a challenging content, in which the textbooks do not take sufficient account of the Shia perspective, but which the teachers aim to add in their teaching (T1; T2; T3; T4; T6; T7; T8; T9; T16). Prayer and ablution as teaching content both present and embody the diversity of Islam in the class (T2; T6; T8; T10; T11; T12; T15; T16).

Ashura is an example of challenging content related to the diversity of Islam. It may mean different things to pupils from Sunni and Shia backgrounds and may be seen as a source of prejudice in the classroom (T2; T3; T7; T13). Some teachers mention female genital mutilation as a challenging and sensitive topic. This relates to the cultural effects of religion and illustrates to pupils that there is no single or uniform Islam, and instead culture influences the perceptions of what Islam is (T7; also T4).

Interpretations of Islam concerning sexuality and gender are also perceived to be sensitive topics that require a significant amount of advanced preparation and reflection by the teacher (T1; T2; T4; T5; T6; T7; T10; T12; T13). However, dating and premarital sex are topics where the teachings of Islam and the lived lives of young people meet, and therefore it is important that they are discussed (T1; T3; T6; T8).

“Like premarital sex. It’s such a challenging topic. And it’s the kind of thing that some pupils are like ‘heehee’, but it’s still something that’s quite important to discuss . . . even though Islam teaches certain things, the life of young people is the life of young people. It doesn’t always go exactly according to the teachings. And how should one react to something like that?” (T1)

By naming these as topics that might be more likely to be talked about at school than in homes, teachers introduce the idea that IRE plays a complementary role to home upbringing (e.g., T6; T16). Polygamy is also mentioned as a topic that pupils wanted to talk about, and that teachers also reflected on concerning their own perceptions in relation to their understanding of Islam that they presented in class (T1; T17).

4.3. The Ummah Is Emphasized to Defuse Tensions between the Denominations in Islam and to Strengthen the Cohesion of Muslims

Sunnism and Shiism conceptualize the diversity of Islam at the level of denominations. Sufism is also referred to in connection with different religious practices in Islam and as a learning content related to the diversity of Islam (T2; T3; T4; T13; T16). Some teachers state that IRE in Finland emphasizes the concepts of the Sunni tradition. According to teachers, Sunnism is emphasized in IRE in teacher training, in the curriculum and in published learning materials (T2; T4; T12; T13). This bias is seen to be unfair towards Shia pupils (T4; T6; T11; T13). Some of the teachers prepare material about aspects of diversity and especially Shiism to complement the published material. The perspective of Shiism is introduced, for example, in dealing with hadiths, the creed of faith (Shahadah), prayer and the history of Islam, especially the issue of leadership (T2; T4; T6; T10; T11).

However, according to some teachers, some pupils consider Shiism to be heresy, which is why lesson content on Shiism can be perceived as challenging (T4; T7). Pupils’ prejudices relating to Shiism crop up in class situations and discussions (T2; T4; T7; T10; T12). Preconceptions are often related to rituals or rites (prayer and Ashura) as well as when questioning the Muslimness of Shia Muslims (T2; T3; T4; T7; T12; T13). As the following citation shows, pupils also reflect the perceptions of home:

“It’s often that a comment comes from a child about what has been heard. Namely are Shia Muslims Muslims at all? I remember a trip, a visit to a mosque, and then one pupil said: ‘My father let me go here, but he thinks that Shiites aren’t Muslims’.” (T12)

The religious backgrounds of IR teachers are also featured in IRE. Although many teachers emphasize that they keep their own convictions out of their teaching, it is nevertheless of interest to both pupils and guardians (e.g., T1; T2; T8; T14; T17). In these situations, it is the teacher’s choice whether to talk about their own religious and worldview background:

“So the pupils ask, ‘Teacher, are you Shia or Sunni?’ They ask it directly. I say, ‘I’m a Sunni Muslim.’ . . . ‘That is, the curriculum of basic education is no different for Shias or Muslims’. . . . ‘[Y]ou can ask your own family or your own father, but in school we always use the same curriculum’.” (T17)

This citation emphasizes the teacher’s attempt to avoid addressing the differences between Muslims in the class and to direct diversity-related questions so that they are discussed at home rather than at school (also T1; T4). This also explains the different religious education tasks of school and home.

The religious backgrounds of homes also affect the families’ expectations of IRE. The conflict experienced by guardians between the religious convictions expressed at home

and the teaching of Islam at school has also caused tensions between home and school. Teachers report that pupils have quit the school's IRE because of the teacher's assumed Sunni background (T14), Shia background (T2) or non-Muslim background (T6). Diversity-sensitive study contents (Ashura and caliphs) have also been a reason for pupils stopping attending IRE classes (T13; T16).

However, diversity is also seen as a strength in home-school interactions. One teacher, a Sunni Muslim, said that she had contacted Shia families when planning her teaching about Shiism (T16). Another teacher, on the other hand, said that she asked her Shia friend about unclear issues related to Shiism (T4).

Emphasizing the common features of all Muslims in IRE is repeated in the teachers' interviews (T1; T4; T6; T8). Teaching about the diversity of Islam also often starts with teachers familiarizing pupils about common issues (T4; T6; T14), which obviously builds also a pedagogically sound way to construct the learning of new for the basis of the familiar.

“... you always try to find something that is familiar, so there's not something to come across that is completely new and different. That is, start with what is familiar. And we started about what Islam is, and what is in a way common to all Muslims. So we started from faith in one God and prophets and prayer. Pilgrimage, alms, all that. Good manners, and all sorts of things that they have in common.” (T4)

The five pillars of Islam (Arkan al-Islam) and behavior (Akhlaq) as unifying bases for learning about Islam are also mentioned by other teachers (e.g., T14; T16; T17). The diversity of Islam is approached in IRE classes by talking about 'some Muslims' and 'different Muslims' in different countries as well as 'different kinds of families' rather than naming denominations such as Sunni and Shia (T4; T9; T11; T13; T14). This is emphasized especially in primary school, where the focus is on supporting group cohesion, and the diversity of Muslims is dealt with through reflecting on the child's own family, while in secondary school, the subject is covered in more detail at the content level (T4; T11; T13; T14).

According to some teachers, highlighting the Ummah when dealing with the diversity of Islam is important when addressing the unity of all the Muslims in the class. It prevents conflicts and strengthens the community of Muslims with roots in different countries and Islamic traditions (T2; T5; T6; T12; T13).

5. Materials and Methods

5.1. Aims and Research Question

The purpose of this study is to examine Finnish IRE teachers' perceptions of the diversity of Islam in IRE. The research results are based on new information collected by this study, which includes seventeen interviews with IRE teachers working in comprehensive schools in the capital region of Finland. The interviews were conducted in 2020–2021. The aim of the relatively large number of participants compared to the total number of IRE teachers working in the capital area is to ensure the reliability of the research and to bring out the diverse elements of the topic (Drisko and Maschi 2015, p. 102). The research question is as follows:

How do IRE teachers define the diversity of Islam in IRE?

5.2. The Data

With the increase in the number of pupils participating in IRE in Finnish schools, the need for qualified subject teachers of Islam has been identified (Tainio et al. 2019, pp. 2, 4, 15). Most of the seventeen interviewed IRE teachers are formally qualified (N = 11), while some do not have a teacher's qualification (N = 6). The teachers work in the capital area of Finland, where a large proportion of Muslims in Finland live (Konttori and Pauha 2021, p. 239). For the purpose of our research, a research permit was requested from the municipalities in which the teachers work. At the time of the interview, the work experience

as IRE teachers ranged overall from 1 to 21 years. Eleven of the teachers taught only Islam, three of them also taught some other worldview education subject, and four taught other subject(s) than worldview education.

Most of the teachers were working only in basic education (mostly grades 1–9). Four of them taught Islam both in basic education and in general upper secondary education. Most IRE teachers are itinerant teachers who teach in several different schools during the same day. Those teachers who wanted to share their worldview identified themselves as both Muslims (N = 10) and non-Muslims (N = 5). As stated earlier, in Finland, RE at school is religiously non-confessional, nor do teachers of religion need to be a member of any religious community. For example, teachers of Islam are qualified to teach Islam after completing a master's degree, teachers' pedagogical studies and studies in the subject to be taught, i.e., Islam (FNAE 2022).

All interviews were conducted remotely due to the COVID restrictions. A pilot interview enabled the researcher to gain extensive feedback for further development of the research interview. A research bulletin was sent in advance and the interviewees had the opportunity to ask questions about the research at the beginning of the interviews. Teachers participated in the interviews both at home and at school. The interviews were recorded and transcribed with the consent of the interviewees. The semi-structured thematic interviews lasted from one to three hours altogether. The data were stored and handled in Umpio, which is a storage place for sensitive data under the auspices of the University of Helsinki. The interviews were analyzed using a qualitative content analysis employing the Atlas.ti application.

5.3. Research Method

Qualitative content analysis can be used not only to find and describe key meanings in the data set, but also to explore new perspectives on the phenomenon (Sandelowski and Barroso 2003). It is a method for research that deals with sensitive phenomena (Elo and Kyngäs 2008, p. 113). We used data-driven content analysis to explore teachers' perceptions about the diversity of Islam. In the analysis phase, this method can be referred to as the aim to 'let the text talk' (see Graneheim and Lundman 2003, p. 111).

The key work phases of the analysis were recording material, transcribing the material, coding and building connections between categories (Jolanki and Karhunen 2010). As part of organizing the data, site notes were made in the margins of the interview transcriptions, and multiple readings of the interviews were carried out before starting the coding (Graneheim and Lundman 2003, p. 108; Polit and Beck 2004). In the open coding phase, the text was reduced to open coding categories in order to find the content aspects of the research question (Hsieh and Shannon 2005; Elo and Kyngäs 2008, pp. 109, 111; Saldaña 2021).

After open coding, the categories (reduced expressions) were grouped under lower-order categories gathering headings that were similar and related. The analysis continued by combining lower-order categories and forming higher-order categories from them. The upper categories were further combined into main categories, from which the research's gathering concept, i.e., the unifying category, could be formed (Graneheim and Lundman 2003, p. 106; Tuomi and Sarajärvi 2018). (See Figure 1).

5.4. Ethical Considerations

Authentic citations increase the trustworthiness of the research (Patton 1980; Polit and Beck 2004, p. 58), although for ethical reasons, participants should not be identified (Ford and Reutter 1990). The number of IR teachers in the capital area is relatively small and therefore citations in this study have been anonymized and used with discretion. The responsible researcher has made translations from Finnish into English and they have subsequently been checked by a qualified native speaker.

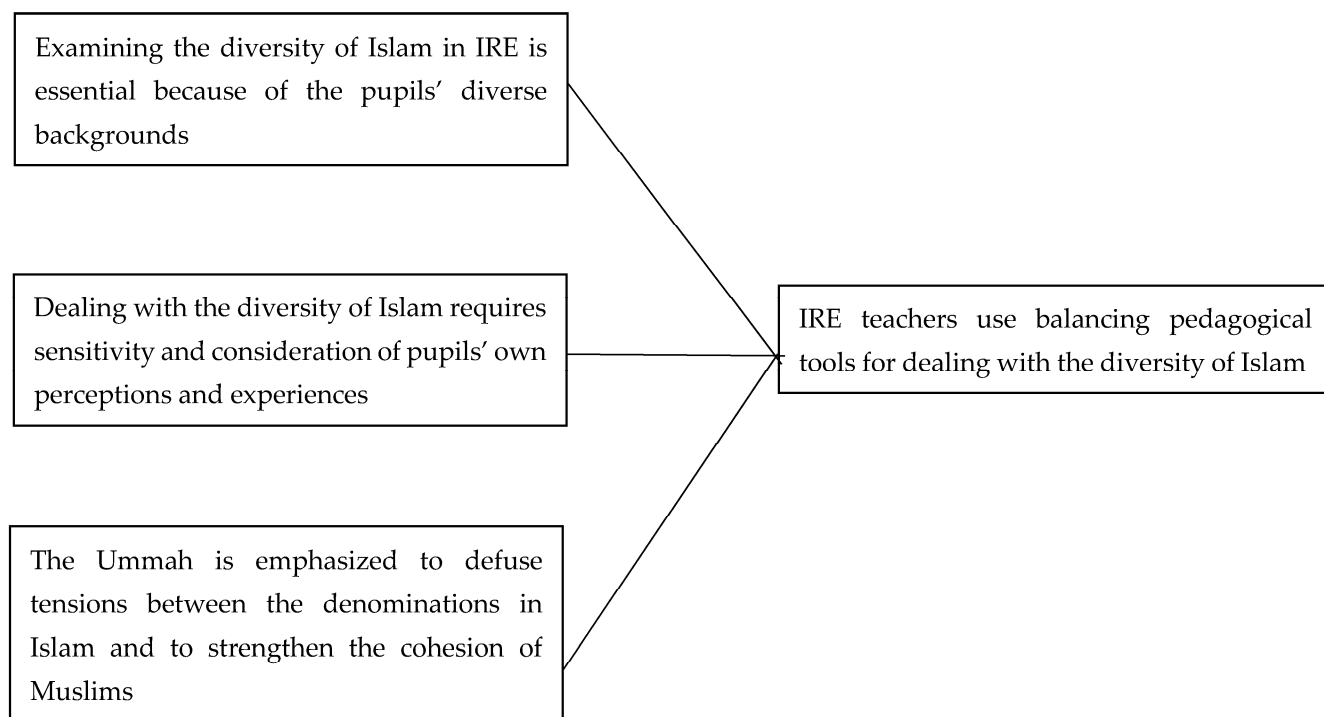


Figure 1. Results.

6. Discussion

6.1. IRE as a Laboratory of Superdiversity

Islamic religious education in basic education brings together Muslims from different religious, worldview, cultural, ethnic, national and linguistic backgrounds. IRE forms a woven fabric in which various diversities cross, intertwine and interact dynamically with each other. Personal identity, various social categories such as religion, gender, language, ethnicity and nationality and the framework of society are in dynamic and dependent relationships that forms in each other's wake (Vertovec 2023, pp. 163, 222). This superdiversity is also part of the processes in which Muslimness is repeated and created in IRE.

Many teachers emphasize that they do not ask about pupils' religious backgrounds or beliefs, hence respecting the individual's freedom of religion and privacy protection. On the other hand, teachers draw conclusions about their pupils' religious backgrounds on the basis of how much prior knowledge pupils have about Islam and how they express their understanding of Islam in relation to topics such as Islamic rituals and rites (e.g., praying and fasting), ethical considerations (e.g., sexuality and gender), dress (especially women's dress and the hijab), and Islamic dietary laws. They also consider the use of religious language to be a marker of an individual's understanding of religion.

The pupils' examples from their own lives and experiences of lived religion are, on the one hand, fuel for deepening the contents of lessons, but at the same time they tie their teaching to the dimension of religiosity and confessionality, which is emphasized by not being part of the Finnish model of RE. The results of this study are in line with a previous study by Anuleena Kimanen (2016, pp. 275–76), where she argues that although Finnish IRE pupils feel that Islam teachers mostly convey knowledge about Islam to them, pupils seem to connect this knowledge as part of their reflections on belonging to the Muslim community. Previous research has also shown that the confessional nature of teaching is found in Islamic classes (Kimanen 2016).

Obviously, the pupil's world of experience in all learning plays a central role. Robert Jackson (2000, pp. 130–54) has called for flexibility when teaching RE whether beginning with a pupil's question or an item of religious interest. For instance, interpretations of Islam related to sex, sexuality and gender relations are perceived as challenging topics, although

they are meeting points of issues where the teachings of Islam and the experiences of young people meet and therefore it is important that they are discussed. The strategy is to awaken and support meeting points in class by bringing out different perspectives and diversity and also by dealing with questions that arise from the pupils' lives.

However, underlining pupils' experiential knowledge in RE can tie both religion and culture together in one's background and personality and lead to religionizing (see Buchardt 2014, pp. 174, 179–80). The fact that teachers keep gathering pieces of information about pupils' backgrounds and then place them into certain categories of Islam can also undermine teacher ethics (Lipiäinen and Poulter 2022).

6.2. Diversification of Religious Diversity within Religion-Related Dialogue in IRE

In Finland, Islamic religious communities are often formed on denominational and ethno-national bases (Martikainen 2020, pp. 42–43). Many of the teachers interviewed perceive Islam classes at state school to be a unique space for brave encountering of contradictory topics (Iversen 2019), where differences can be discussed among Muslims from different backgrounds. Teachers create a space for this by encouraging pupils to think critically (e.g., providing different sources on Islam) and by emphasizing their own role as a neutral mediator of information about Islam. However, the curriculum or published learning materials contain little content or concrete means for dealing with diversity, and teachers prepare the pedagogical material themselves. Thus, they select and interpret the meanings and dimensions of diversity in IRE. Through this pedagogical reduction (Lewin 2021), teachers participate in defining what is 'the proper' Islamic tradition and what elements are context dependent.

Teachers can direct pupils to ask their parents about matters related to the diversity of Islam and especially ethical issues at home and thus avoid the position of a religious authority. They also justify the teaching of even sensitive topics related to the diversity of Islam by means of their professional skills and by following the curriculum. These elements relate to the ethics of teaching, and the characteristics of RE teachers discussed in studies concerning the professionalization of RE teachers (Freathy et al. 2016). According to teachers, dealing with different interpretations of Islam as well as reliable Islamic sources in IRE can also open up space for a preventive discussion about radicalization and challenge the negative images of Islam created by the media. Discussion and encouraging critical thinking in teaching are seen to play an important role in these matters.

Although teachers emphasize that they do not wish to ask about the pupils' religious background, they find supporting the pupil's own identity and worldview reflection to be central to IRE. In this respect, religion-related dialogue in IRE encourages dialogue between religious views and beliefs as well as supporting interaction and encounters. According to the findings of this study, Finnish RE in state schools forms the framework for learning about the pupils' "own religion", Islam, both for secular and non-religious pupils with a Muslim background and for those whose life values have been formed and shaped by Islam.

Through religion-related dialogue in class, the complexity of religious diversity (e.g., Beyer and Beaman 2019, pp. 9–11; Vertovec 2023, p. 176) is brought to the fore. The questions that arise from young people's own lives in the lessons also illustrate this diversification and at the same time help bind the experiential knowledge that arises from a lived religion that is part of the definition of Muslimness in the Islam lessons. As stated before, confessionality is present in Islam classes. IRE as a gathering place and space for different Muslims also enables the participation of non-religious pupils and pupils from secular families in religion-related dialogue that diversifies definitions and meanings of Muslimness. Muslimness is defined in the teachings of Islam not only positively by synergy but also by acts of separation. Acts of coming together and separation are made in connection with content dealing with the diversity of Islam, for example, when different interpretations of Islam are discussed in class or when pupils question the Muslimness of Shia Muslims.

Teachers emphasize their neutral role in teaching about sensitive topics of diversity. However, one question arises. Can a genuine religion-related dialogue take place in the IRE classroom if teachers only participate in such dialogue because it is their job without bringing in their own opinion or personal thoughts. Although this detachment might comply with the teacher's ethical principles, can we then talk about dialogue or should this kind of interaction instead be characterized as dialectic, to use Nikulin's (2010) distinction? Previous research on religion-related dialogue (Vikdahl 2019, pp. 93–94) has identified it as problematic if teachers encourage pupils to bring up their own thoughts but do not share with the class their own views.

6.3. *Balancing Differences through Highlighting the Common*

Multiple understandings of RE, along with different political and educational aims, meet in the RE class. The religious diversity that is visible in contemporary societies is reflected in debates about how religious and worldview education should be organized in schools. Within the world of RE, IRE is seen as being important for Muslims and for other religious minorities. With IRE, supporting the identity of minorities emerges especially in the presentation of the diversity of Islam as well as perspectives related to Shia tradition. Some of the teachers point out, however, that a Sunni bias is emphasized in IRE.

Religion-related tensions in dealing with the diversity of Islam within IRE become apparent in home–school interactions. Tensions are related to guardians' expectations concerning IRE and IRE teachers. The reasons for tensions related to the diversity of Islam often relate to guardians' expectations of teachers' teaching according to their own Islamic traditions (Sunni or Shia) and understanding of Islam. As with previous studies (Ikkala and Putkonen 2022), this study shows that different expectations and understandings of IRE at home and at school have resulted in pupils being taken out of the school's IRE class and instead attending lessons given by their own religious community.

On the other hand, the diversity of Islam is also seen as a positive in home–school interactions. Teachers see the diversity of a class as an opportunity to learn about the diversity of Islam, and some of them say that they have been in contact with a pupil's family or a friend with a Shia background while preparing a lesson on the topic. This demonstrates the cooperation between home and school as a positive resource for teaching and practices of worldview and cultural awareness in home–school collaboration. However, it also brings out the fact that the current teaching materials do not offer enough content for teaching. It is also problematic because it highlights personal interpretations instead of academic knowledge in IRE.

Similar to previous studies (Rissanen 2014; Sakaranaho 2019), it is also obvious in this research that teachers attempt to emphasize the things that unite Muslims in their teaching. Common issues are emphasized—while the differences are balanced—both in connection with the processing of the contents and in the teaching of speech in a way that does not distinguish Muslims by the names of denominations. This is in line with previous research, which suggests that these kinds of pedagogical tools can be used to balance the teachers' discussions about diversity (see Kimanen and Poulter 2018). The approach is also age-appropriate, which is understandable in the light of the current curriculum, which states that in the early grades pupils should start familiarizing themselves with their "own religion", starting from their own family, and later address contents related to the diversity of Islam (FNAE 2014; see also Ubani et al. 2020). The emphasis on common issues is also in line with the general intention of the curriculum, as Islamic instruction is intended for all those pupils (and/or their guardians) who identify themselves as Muslims.

The teachers' professional strategy appears to play a mediating role in relation to religion-related tensions that appear within the diversity of Islam. One balancing strategy is to highlight commonalities and Ummah among different Muslims. The teachers emphasize Ummah in their teaching to demonstrate that despite differences, Muslims are united. Highlighting Ummah can both strengthen the cohesion that emerges from the self-understanding and concept of Islam, but can also define the pupil's identity and make

room in the classroom for such religious speech that not everyone necessarily feels they can relate to. Highlighting the common among Muslims through Ummah can, however, be seen as the teachers' prompt to balance differences among Muslims and to promote social cohesion in the class and society. Meanwhile, teachers see IRE in Finnish schools to be a part of global and transnational Islam.

7. Conclusions

According to the findings of this study, RE is a platform that enables pupils to deal with the diversity of Islam in IRE from the perspective of general education, supporting pupils' Muslim identity and own worldview reflection as well as strengthening mutual respect. Dealing with the diversity of Islam in RE requires dialogicity that both highlights and blurs the differences related to diversity. This study shows that IRE teachers use balancing pedagogical tools to deal with the diversity of Islam, such as discussion, content selection that emphasizes the common yet utilizes student knowledge and a striving for a neutral role as a teacher. Religion-related dialogue in RE provides an arena for balanced discussions about differences as well as for common also from an intra-religious perspective.

It is vital to acknowledge that the meanings or tensions related to dealing with the diversity of Islam at school relate to the wider societal debate about Islam. All these factors together contribute to the diversification of religious diversity. Based on the findings of this study, pupils' diverse pre-knowledge on the subject as well as their backgrounds need to be taken into account in IRE through building a content-wise and pedagogically coherent whole starting from the first grade of elementary school. However, there are challenges for this aim. The challenges relate, for example, to the fact that some of the pupils are born in Finland, while some are newcomers to the country and are still developing their Finnish language proficiency. The work of IRE teachers as itinerant teachers can also affect the possibilities of far-reaching teaching planning.

Teachers have a significant role to play in the selection of learning content, which is evident in the perceived inadequacy of materials dealing with the diversity of Islam, which teachers supplement by preparing learning materials themselves. This is in line with the Finnish understanding of teacher autonomy; however, without common guidelines, the equality of teaching can be challenged. The significant role of teachers in the selection of teaching materials and methods in RE also makes teachers responsible for their own worldview reflection, which supports them in becoming aware of possible emphases and biases behind the choices.

IRE at school aims to be inclusive in terms of diverse worldviews, and the diversity of Muslims in lessons reflects the diversity of Muslims in society. Therefore, dealing with diversity in IRE can also be considered through a democratic orientation. In our view, intentional religion-related dialogue in IRE, which includes elements of worldview reflection for all participants, can create a space in which the diversity of Islam can be dealt with in a constructive way, both in terms of general knowledge and supporting diverse identities—the key elements of Finnish RE. In this respect, the findings in this study also relate to recent research into IRE development as democratically oriented education, that is, objective and critical, yet inclusive (Franck 2021) as well as reflexive (Franken 2021).

There are still few studies on the teaching of Islam in Finland. As the number of pupils participating in IRE is increasing, more research is required. In teacher training, attention should be paid to the professionalism of IRE teachers. Our research results are related to the context of IRE at school, but through them, perspectives are opened up to examine diversity in education in general. For pupils, religion, in its diverse personal and social meanings as well as in its contradictions, can be one of the intersections of diversity. This perspective should be acknowledged when examining diversity in the context of education. More research is needed on diversity as perceived and explicated by pupils themselves. In this way, a wider research perspective can be opened up to examine diversity among IRE pupils and dialogicity in IRE.

Author Contributions: Both authors have contributed in planning, conceptualizing and writing of the article. N.P. as corresponding author carried the main responsibility over correspondence and process management as well as writing the article, data collection, and data analysis. S.P. has contributed in supervision and writing of the article. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Acknowledgments: Open access funding provided by University of Helsinki.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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