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Teacher discourse constructing different social positions of pupils in Finnish separative and integrative religious education

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ABSTRACT

This article examines social practices within classroom discourse in two different Finnish religious educational contexts. The article critically observes the construction of certain positions and identities as part of the school discourse and the inclusive vs exclusive practices of language. The research material consists of classroom observations and staff interviews from two separate studies. The first study investigates two cases in separative religious education (RE), Islamic and Lutheran. The second study deals with integrative practices of RE. In this study, discourse analysis as a methodological tool is used to examine discursive practices in RE lessons. The study will explore the following question: What kinds of subjectivities are constructed through teachers' discursive practices in separative and integrative RE? The study will demonstrate that teachers use scientific language to underline the objective nature of RE and use the language of belonging to engage their pupils on a personal level. The former ends up silencing the religious stance, while the latter often excludes those who do not share those specific experiences. The findings reveal some challenges in developing inclusive teaching.

KEYWORDS

Religious education (RE);
teacher discourse; exclusion;
discourse analysis

Introduction

This article examines religious education (RE) from the perspective of the discursive practices used by a teacher of an RE class. In this study we presume that, although language is never neutral or apolitical, impartiality and inclusiveness in education are being constructed through language. In other words, RE teachers wishing to claim openness and inclusion of all identities in an RE class employ certain discursive practices to create such educational spaces. This is not a simple task, as language is also a powerful tool of exclusion. The study critically observes the construction of subject positions created through teacher discourse and the inclusive vs exclusive practices of language. The study will explore the following questions: What kinds of discursive practices do teachers employ and what kinds of subjectivities are constructed in separative and integrative RE?

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The Finnish RE model can be called separative (Alberts 2007), a model that teaches students either their 'own' religion or secular ethics, according to their religious or non-religious affiliation. Finnish RE is defined as non-confessional in that religious practice in education is not permitted nor should pupils be given a particular religious identity. As teacher training is organised in state universities, the religious communities have only an advisory role in defining the national curriculum. Currently, there are individual national curricula for 11 minority religions and secular ethics parallel to the majority Lutheran education and the Orthodox Christian education. In 2017, 88.8% of students in Finland took part in Lutheran religious education (LRE); 1.5% in Orthodox RE; 2.1% in Islamic religious education (IRE), 6.3% in secular ethics; and 0.5% in other minority RE classes (Education Statistics Finland 2017).

New studies of Finnish schools have pioneered a partially integrative model of religious and worldview education (Åhs, Poulter, and Kallioniemi 2016, 2017; Kämpylehto 2015). Integrative RE can be defined as an inclusive education, which encompasses all pupils, despite their different religious or non-religious backgrounds, in studying a common subject in a physically shared classroom (Alberts 2007; Evans 2008). However, the Finnish version of the integrative model has been initiated by individual schools without governmental action. Schools have independently implemented integrative subjects within the framework of the current National Core Curriculum (The Finnish Board of Education 2014). Consequently, anxiety and resistance among minority religious and secular groups have been shown towards integrative practices based on the argument that such teaching arrangements do not guarantee children's rights to religion or freedom of religion (see for example, Parliamentary Deputy-Ombudsman of Finland 2017).

In educational literature, there is quite a wide range of studies concerning discourses on religion in school contexts in general, but studies on the discursive practices of teachers used in RE classes are few (Castelli 2012; Eriksen 2010; Kittelman Flensner 2015). In this study we examine both separative and integrative RE classes side by side, a task that we consider relevant and timely. We then discuss the discursive challenges in integrative RE for teachers accustomed to teaching according to one religious tradition.

Discourse analysis and social identities

Critical discourse analysis recognises the power exercised in discourse (Fairclough 1992, 2001). Understood in the Foucauldian sense, power exists as appearance and emergence and as relations and technologies (Foucault 2001, 336). Thus, power relations are seen as productive: discourse is both a producer of social relationships and produced by social reality. Discourse creates social identities or subject positions or types of self (Fairclough 1992, 64), understood here as installations or effects of power – not as autonomous, permanent, authentic or bounded entities (Buckhardt 2014, 40; Riitaoja 2013, 34). Thus, the relation between the discursive (language use) and the non-discursive (social reality) dimension is dialectical. As Shi-xu (2005, 31) observes, it is central to understand discourse not just as an utterance of self-identity but 'as a way of forging, maintaining and transforming both self and other, both identity and relationship.' For instance, in classrooms, the different discourse types set up subject positions for teachers and pupils; thus, subject positions are never fixed or given, but are always negotiated and created in certain contexts. 'Occupying a subject position is essentially a matter of doing (or not doing) certain things, in line with the

discursal rights and obligations of teachers and pupils – what each is allowed and required to say’ (Fairclough 2001, 32).

In this study we employ discourse analysis as a methodological approach (e.g. Gee 2000). Fairclough (1992, 2001) suggests analysing three levels. On the descriptive level, the linguistic properties of the text, e.g. vocabulary, are studied. The interpretative level pays attention to the discursive practices, e.g. what kinds of representations the text contains. The level of explanation accounts for the social consequences of the text. Our focus is on the last level, where constructing social identities and consequently inclusion and exclusion take place, but we build our argument on the first two level. On the second level, we also take into account the socio-cultural resources that affect teachers’ classroom discourse, such as the curriculum.

In our attempt to investigate the social practices of teachers, we are interested in looking at inclusive vs exclusive effects of language in making certain positions and identities available. A subject can never be understood without its wider contextual framework: different contexts, discourses and social relations construct different subjectivities (Riitaoja 2013, 34). It is important to take into account the dialectical nature of language and subjects that are socially constructed in relation to each other (Riitaoja and Dervin 2014, 7). This connects with the question of asymmetries and power imbalance discussed in post-colonial, post-structural and feminist theories (see Riitaoja and Dervin 2014) of the construction of the self and the other. Given that multiple concurrent aspects such as the epistemological, discursive, institutional and material play important roles in intersectional analysis (see Riitaoja 2013) in looking at positioning and identity making, we will focus here on the discursive practices.

Contextual framework and the data collection

At the time the fieldwork for the two studies presented here was carried out,¹ the curricular framework for RE was as follows: the Finnish National Core Curriculum for Basic Education (2004) included a general introduction to all RE subjects and more detailed aims and contents for 13 RE subjects (e.g. Lutheran, Orthodox, Islamic and Roman Catholic). A separate curriculum was created for secular ethics. It has been noted that, despite the general aims shared by separate subjects, there is variation in understanding the nature of any given subject (Sakaranaho 2013, 235–239). For instance, the curriculum of IRE contains competing discourses. On the one hand, religion is talked about in closed terms when Islamic identity is to be strengthened. On the other hand, there is openness in that pupils should be familiarised with religion as a phenomenon and with religious traditions other than their own (Kimanen 2017). Sakaranaho (2013, 239) also points out this tension in all the minority RE subjects that mention the strengthening of pupils’ identity in a specific religion while sharing broad RE aims. Zilliacus (2014, 13–14) further points out that the secular ethics curriculum, which is taught in part along with RE subjects in the integrative cases in this study, differs from the RE curriculum in its clearly secularist interpretative framework for religious worldviews.

Consequently, in terms of the professional use of RE and secular ethics curricula, diverse options are available for elaboration in the classes for identity and subject positions. In all RE subjects, the pupil’s freedom of religion needs to be maintained, but in minority religions, fostering religious identity is also required. In the secular ethics curriculum an

Table 1. Cases and data.

Separative RE study		Integrative RE study
Lutheran RE teacher Elina	Islamic RE teacher Saara	RE teachers Maria and Laura
10 lessons	10 lessons	32 lessons

identity clearly outside religions seems to be constructed. Thus, the teacher of integrative RE has to balance many conflicting discursive expectations. Teachers of integrative RE must simultaneously follow different syllabuses for religion and secular ethics in the class. It is worth noting, though, that in the case of LRE anyone is entitled to participate in the class; thus, not all pupils are members of the Lutheran Church or have any sort of Lutheran upbringing (Poulter et al. 2017).

The two data sets (Table 1) are somewhat different as they emerge from separate research projects with somewhat differing goals, but both contain classroom observations and teacher interviews. The first set of data was collected by the first author during the academic year 2015–16 from a lower secondary school in the capital region of Helsinki. The second data set was collected by the second author during the academic year 2013–14 from a secondary school in Helsinki, which was in the process of shifting from the separative model of RE to a common subject for all pupils; most of the time this involved teaching pupils from both religious and secular backgrounds in the same classroom. All names are pseudonyms.

Analysis

In discourse analysis, it is often essential to scrutinise a limited number of excerpts to show how language both builds on socio-cultural resources and produces social identities (Fairclough 1992, 225–231). For this article, we examined the data sets to identify examples in which exclusion or inclusion through language occurred. The most relevant excerpts were chosen for closer analysis.

Two types of discourse emerged as a result. The first is called ‘*scientific language*’, which refers to the vocabulary and expressions used in academic theology or religious studies. The second is called ‘*belonging language*’, which aims at engaging pupils’ personal and group experiences and feelings of belonging. Expressions such as ‘we’ or ‘us’ and other ways of marking the borders between insiders and outsiders operate here as examples of the latter type of discourse. In addition, the teachers sometimes used balancing discursive techniques that attempt to diminish exclusive effect of those discourses.

Separative RE cases: religious and non-religious stances

Two RE teachers participated in the study on separative RE. Elina taught LRE. In the interview she stressed the significance of RE from cultural and societal points of view. She also said that she wanted to make clear that the aim of LRE was not to convert anyone. Saara was the IRE teacher. In the interview before class Saara often talked about the aims of RE as being twofold: there was both a need to explain Islamic ideas and a need to maintain an open spirit and avoid what she called confessionality. She also observed that pupils seemed to expect religiously committed RE.

During the lesson about Jesus, the teacher discourse was dominated by distancing and scientific discursive practices, such as the following:

‘Find a partner and try to think of things that are alleged about Jesus, but can’t be investigated.’

‘Your textbook doesn’t take sides in these matters, but presents Jesus as an historical person.’

‘Among other things the supporters [of Jesus] believed that he was the Messiah. Others didn’t believe it. ... A religious idea was connected with the death on the cross.’ (LRE field notes, 17 March 2016.)

Using the word ‘allege’ in talking about religious beliefs is a linguistic practice that strongly distances the speaker from the religious discourse. Talking about ‘taking sides’ and mentioning the supporters of Jesus as opposed to those who did not believe in him also creates the opportunity either to agree or disagree with the religious truth claims and avoids excluding those in the class who do not believe these claims. Simultaneously, the historical stance is presented as a neutral option. This can also be seen as a social practice in which the position of an RE teacher is defined as a scientific and neutral observer. Pupils are not explicitly invited to take the same position of being the outsider. The ‘scientific’ discourse remains dominant, but the believer’s stance is mentioned.

In our conversation after the lesson about Martin Luther, Elina told me that in her view it was difficult to make the pupils understand great changes from so long ago. In this lesson her orientation was thus completely different: she wanted to engage the pupils. Consequently, the classroom discourse abounded with the language of belonging. Using words like ‘our’ and ‘us’ created a space wherein both teacher and pupils were positioned as Lutherans, that is, as church insiders:

... the founder of our Lutheran Church ...

How does this trade of indulgences sound to you? [smiling] Yes, it’s a bit strange to us Lutherans.

... our reformer Martin Luther ... (LRE field notes, 1 April 2016)

Martin Luther was also depicted as a hero:

The freedom of speech of our time is thanks to the risk Luther took. (LRE field notes, 1 April 2016)

Elina’s practice in this lesson differed strongly from the practice employed in the lesson about Jesus. Whereas in the first case Elina wanted to define the position of the teacher as a neutral expert and the position of the pupil as a learner of information who can adopt any beliefs he/she wants, in the second case she wanted to encourage the pupils to relate to events of the remote past. However, in the discursive practice Elina used, relating to the history of the Reformation required a Lutheran identity and thus excluded those without that identity.

Saara’s multi-layered orientation to the subject was reflected in the IRE classroom discourse. By presenting several competing points of view and elaborating on them briefly, she left the choice open and thus balanced between teaching Islamic dogmas and maintaining freedom of conscience:

Pupil: Is it true that you mustn’t eat meat that isn’t halal, even if it isn’t pork?

Saara: Difficult question. Everybody has to solve that for him/herself. Normally, the scholars [of Islam] say that one should stick to halal meat. There is also the point of view that meat slaughtered by people of the Book is halal. [Goes on evaluating the argument.] Everybody decides for him/herself. (IRE field notes, 30 October 2015)

In this situation, initiated by a pupil's question about the correct way of life, Saara employed a discursive practice that seems to be very common among IRE teachers (Zilliacus 2013, 516; Rissanen 2014, 128–129), namely stating that everyone must decide for themselves what to do. With this practice she avoided condemning any pupils' or their families' choices and thus excluding them.

In the following exchange Saara employed scientific discourse in dealing with a religious truth claim.

Saara: What did [the angel] Jibriil do before the Prophet's death?

Pupil: Went through [the Quran] with the Prophet.

Saara: That's how it's recounted. (IRE field notes, 23 October 2015)

In this excerpt Saara was going through the written assignments with the pupils. Her initiating question comes from the teaching material. After the pupil's response, which reiterates the religious truth claim from the learning material, Saara used a discursive practice derived from a (popularised) study of religions, 'That's how it's recounted', which leaves the floor open to interpretation. It means both 'This is how it goes according to Islam' and 'This we know (only) from a story'. As Saara's orientation balanced religiosity and critical thinking, her wording served as a discursive practice in which these two stances fit together well. It also provided an opportunity for pupils with a critical stance to feel included. Saara's use of belonging language consisted mainly of assuming a Muslim identity. However, she also used balancing techniques, as in these excerpts:

Saara: What is God like in your view if someone didn't know or wanted to know your perception? The Quran tells about God, but it doesn't have to ... (IRE field notes, 6 November 2015)

Saara: I don't want to be intrusive, but it would be interesting to know what kinds of thoughts reading the Quran has aroused. Does it feel affirmative, that yeah, I'm a Muslim? (IRE field notes, 30 October 2015)

In both incidents, Saara took for granted some amount of religious commitment. However, through balancing, as in 'it doesn't have to ...' in the first excerpt, she sought to include those whose beliefs were not consistent with Islamic dogma. By saying 'I don't want to be intrusive' in the second excerpt, Saara communicated to the pupils that they are entitled to the integrity of their religious feelings. Then she went on to ask a closed question in the language of belonging and provided an example of a proud Muslim drawing strength from faith in the Quran. In the discussions after the classes Saara reflected on ways to engage the pupils more. On the one hand, more pupil engagement would improve class participation, but on the other hand, Saara felt that engaging pupils' emotions would be 'confessional'. Although the question was obviously meant to encourage the pupils to share their feelings, here Saara did not provide any alternatives to this emotionally strong image. Consequently, the neutral space constructed in the previous sentence was somewhat weakened.

Integrative RE cases: taking diverse identities into account

The teachers observed in the second study, Maria and Laura, had experience teaching separative religion (Lutheran, Orthodox and Islamic) and secular ethics, but they were currently engaged in teaching practices that were fully or partly integrative. Thus, they reflected a great deal on the effect of the RE model on a teacher's task and analysed the benefits of teaching all worldviews in one classroom. In observing teachers over several months, one notices

different instructional and discursive strategies. The discourses used mirrored the teachers' own processes of learning in a new situation wherein the teacher ought to be inclusive in a new way: not just recognising the internal diversity of one worldview, but also being sensitive to all religions and worldviews present in the classroom.

Maria's orientation as a teacher can be called multi-layered, as she altered her orientation in the classes and said in her interview that she recognises that there is never just one way of doing things in teaching RE. Maria wanted to include everyone in the classroom by making minority identities visible and stressing the idea that 'we are all the same'.

In the excerpt below Maria's class is discussing the Jewish Bar Mitzvah, and the eighth-grade students are being urged to compare the Jewish tradition to the Christian confirmation. The teacher is curious to know how many actually are going to attend the Lutheran confirmation training the following summer. In talking about confirmation training as a shared social norm, Maria used the belonging language. She also introduced a balancing technique:

Teacher: You don't need to raise your hand but it would be nice to know how many of you are going to attend the confirmation training?

Most of the students raise their hands and keep looking at each other to see who is going to attend. The teacher soon notices how unpleasant the question has been for those who do not fit into the majority and thus offers an alternative:

Teacher: Of those of you who didn't raise your hand, how many have thought of attending the non-religious Prometheus camp? Or one can go to both of these, of course.

Now, no one raises a hand, and those who did not raise a hand in the first round seem reluctant to make their decision public at all. (Field notes, 12 March 2014.)

Here, Maria was interested in knowing how many (of those whom she knows are coming from LRE) would be attending the Lutheran Church's traditional confirmation training, which is still surprisingly popular among teens in Finland (approximately 86% of the age group), despite Finnish society's secularising trend (Finnish Church Research Institute 2017; Salomäki 2014, 30). At the individual level the teacher's appeal, 'You don't need to raise your hand' but 'it would be nice to know', was meant as harmless persuasion for pupils to make a personal stance public. This balancing technique is similar to Saara's phrase in the IRE class, 'it would be interesting to know', in inquiring about the pupils' perception of the Quran. The context, however, is different. Because Maria was addressing the majority in the class about a choice that was probably interpreted by the pupils as being desirable, the situation became unfavourable for the minority.

At first, Maria attempted to help her pupils understand the Jewish liminal rite by talking about an experience probably familiar to most of them. Then, similar to the IRE case, she tried to make the Lutheran choice optional by bringing in the secular alternative. Yet at the discursive level she was actually pointing the finger at 'those of you who didn't raise a hand', thereby revealing the norm of cultural hegemony. Following the intention emphasised in her interview, namely to safeguard the rights of the minority students, Maria wanted to question the binary view of either participating in the Lutheran confirmation or in the secular Prometheus camp. Interestingly, not attending was not seen as an option. Thus, at the social level the inclusive attempt to 'take everyone into account' actually turned into a power imbalance against those outside the norm (Riitaoja and Dervin 2014). At the institutional level the incident reveals the normativity of concepts embodied in the language: the social identity of a young Finn is constructed as involving a Lutheran confirmation.

Simultaneously, other options are made the exceptions, and certain positions are designated as subaltern and inferior.

In the following excerpt, Maria used distancing and scientific discursive practices to justify the legitimacy of worldview education among other school subjects, arguing the need for every individual to have this knowledge, regardless of personal conviction. This is in line with the teacher's views expressed in the interview, whereby she stated that the main aim of RE is to serve as a broad cultural subject. Talking about the similar needs of the students, Maria used belonging language, thus practising inclusiveness.

The topic of the second class is three monotheistic world religions, and the teacher uses comparison as a method to identify elements that are similar and different in the sacred texts. Maria says that within each religion are groups who disagree about the interpretations of the holy texts and lifestyles. She argues that non-religious people also need to know about sacred religious writings. To emphasize her message, she says: 'There are also people in this class who are non-religious.' (Field notes, 22 March 2014)

However, the belonging discourse was turned upside down when Maria mentioned that certain types of people are represented '*also in this class*'. The teacher's intention was understandably to bring the issue closer to the pupils' own lives, but the discourse managed to point out those who are different, those whose identity can be categorised as outside the norm. By creating through her discourse a group of students with no religious conviction, the teacher treated certain individual identities and positions as 'special cases' and implied that their social identity was outside a fixed category.

Maria took her class through the main facts concerning the year 1054 in church history. Knowing that there were at least two Christian denominations (Lutheran and Orthodox) in the classroom, she constructed the discourse on the sense of belonging and the mutual feeling of being not so far from each other when speaking about the great break between the two churches.

Teacher: In the end they [the churches] were not so different from each other. We can still be the same, be together. Some of you may think that God certainly exists, some of you might think that God might not exist – nevertheless, we can share the same place as we are doing now in studying together. (Field notes, 19 November 2013)

Using expressions such as 'share the same place' and 'we can be together' is a discursive practice to unite the audience and position them together with the speaker in an inclusive space whereby differences are almost bypassed. Maria believes a good worldview education is about studying together, helping each other to widen the personal horizon of understanding. Although she considers it important to take into account the minority perspective in her teaching, she explained in the interview that often such a mechanical grouping into certain fixed categories of different faiths is not something that young people consider relevant in their own lives. She explained how artificial it can be to put students into their 'own' religious groups when they would like to be in the same group as their friends; some do not feel their official religion is that important or even that it is their 'own religion' at all. Here the teacher's discourse was brought from the very general, societal level to a deeply individual level, and thus, this discursive practice maintained the construction of the social identities of sameness.

Laura's orientation as a teacher is more straightforward; she expressed her view of RE as being definitely a non-confessional subject that should not provide any ready-made thoughts or sources of identity for a student. More than Maria, Laura emphasised in her

interview the duty of RE to challenge the students to reflect on their own thinking and attitudes. However, when these issues were brought up in the classroom, the discursive practice employed most often was not to respond.

Laura's teaching orientation kept changing: she first wanted to challenge the dominant Christian-based thinking, but next she chose to use secular, scientific discourse instead of one with religious truth claims. Later in the interview Laura said that, for her, it is important that RE at school keeps a distance from personal confessional views, and thus, for her, employing a 'thin' interpretation of impartiality is a natural choice (Skeie 2016).

Here, Laura uses a discursive practice that responds to her ideal of RE as encouraging reflection on one's thinking. Like Maria, she uses a comparative approach in discussing the Golden Rule in different faith traditions and thus employs scientific discourse. Additionally, Laura challenges the uniqueness of Christian moral conceptions:

The class is busy doing independent reading and assignments.

Pupil: Hey teacher, in this Confucianism, there is the same thing as in Christianity!

Teacher: Like what?

Pupil: This Golden Rule.

Teacher: True. It is just put the other way round there: 'do not do'. You see, that came already 500 years before Jesus.

Pupil: Mmm ... true. (Field notes, 27 February 2014.)

Laura wanted the student to notice the similarities and differences between religions and also to be critical of the superiority of Christianity by hinting that the idea of the Golden Rule existed before Jesus was even born. Similarly, Laura employed scientific language in the following incident. Here she more clearly distanced classroom conversation from confessional claims. The topic of the second class was to analyse different views and pictures of Jesus. The pupils were given an assignment with three categories labelled 'Christianity/the Bible', 'Islam/the Quran' and 'Historians'. Pupils are supposed to tell the views of Jesus's acts that would be sound according to a traditional understanding of each category. The teacher asked the pupils what they should put in the box labelled 'Christianity/the Bible':

Pupil: He died for the sins of people. The teacher doesn't comment on the student's answer at all, but suggests something else: 'The carpenter, miracles, fighting against injustice.' (Field notes, 26 March 2014.)

By suggesting different terms, Laura ignored the pupil's evident religious claim and thus distanced the religious truth claims from the RE discourse. Whether or not the pupil expressed his personal belief with his statement, bypassing the student's religious view can be interpreted in several ways. On the one hand, the silence and/or ignorance discourse places certain types of answers in the category of the confessional or religious, which do not belong in the school context. Given the teacher-pupil exchange, it is also possible to interpret this as the teacher placing the pupil's belonging on the side of the 'religious' as opposed to a neutral secular space. Thus, it is possible to create a position of subaltern 'Others' who are not seen as subjects to be heard (Spivak 1988). However, the incident can also be interpreted as a social practice whereby the teacher positions herself as a neutral actor vis-à-vis strong value claims by avoiding 'too-difficult answers' in a confessional sense. In this way, the teacher's silence is a form of scientific discourse intended to create neutrality towards all views expressed in the class. As a consequence, as certain religious claims are silenced, those pupils positioned as 'religious' are excluded from the 'common' classroom space.

Conclusion

In the excerpts given above, there were two main teacher discourses, one that derived from scientific language and one that sought to engage pupils' experiences and used language of belonging. These discourses evidently were derived from the resources available to the teachers. The discourses are also suggested by the RE and ethics curricula, the first discourse mentioned being stronger in secular ethics, the second one more apparent in RE. The importance of available resources was also highlighted by Maria, who seemed to use some discursive practices she had probably taken from separative RE, even though her effort to address a variety of worldviews in her class was clearly evident.

When language is considered to be socially constructed, individual comments must be interpreted as part of a wider construction and as the maintenance of a (shared) social reality. The few excerpts presented in this article do not provide information on how RE teachers talk in general, but they show possible consequences of certain discursive practices employed by these teachers. As these practices are derived from different socio-cultural resources, mostly the RE curricula, the conclusions can be assumed to have broad significance. In contrast, although two of the four teachers used scientific discourse to distance their teaching especially from Jesus and it is possible that this practice is common among Finnish LRE teachers, this study does not prove its frequency.

The two main discourses had different social consequences. When scientific discourse was dominant, it often silenced the religious stances. This has been pointed out in previous studies (Castelli 2012; Eriksen 2010; Kittelman Flensner 2015). When the language of belonging was used, positions outside the specific religious group were often excluded. However, the teachers also aimed to diminish exclusion. In some cases, they used balancing techniques that provided alternative interpretations. In other cases, they softened their assumption of belonging with phrases that respected the pupils' integrity. Whether these tools worked in the ways they were intended depended very much on the context.

Finally, there are implications for the practice of RE. It is evident that secular scientific discourse does not provide a neutral basis for RE. As argued by critical and post-colonial theorists, modern, scientific discourse is based on the binary opposition between so-called neutral, objective and public knowledge stances by comparison with value-laden, subjective, private and traditional stances (King 2009; Mignolo 2009). However, as has been discussed in depth in philosophy, cultural studies and critical theory, there is no place outside culture or language. Every context and position is bounded in many ways and constructed by human actions (Poulter, Riitaoja, and Kuusisto 2015). Thus, if everyone is to be included, the religious stance must have a voice in RE classes. This is especially important in the Finnish integrative case, where fostering different religious identities has a strong curricular basis. Educators' quest for a neutral stance, such as a teacher's non-responsiveness to pupils' answers, can be a message about not making religious claims at school. Simultaneously, some positions interpreted through the secularist framework are constructed as 'Others'.

Giving a voice to many different stances could be boosted by reflective use of discursive practices. In using techniques that activate pupils' experiences, teachers need to give special attention to providing sufficient options or open-ended questions so that more than one type of subjectivity or life-history is included. Also, when the discourse in the classroom is

constructed in a manner that emphasises minorities versus the majority, the institutional consequences are to preserve the neutrality of the majority. The observed teachers also used balancing techniques, but balancing would be more effective if the techniques were used more consistently and if alternative perspectives were to be explained instead of merely being mentioned. All four teachers shared the aim of widening their pupils' horizons of thinking. Putting more weight on the different alternatives and being reflective about their choice would certainly enhance learning from this perspective.

Note

1. A new National Core Curriculum began to be implemented in 2016 and is to be completed by 2019. In that document religious identities are less specifically described.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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Anuleena Kimanen, PhD, is currently a postdoctoral researcher in the Faculty of Theology at the University of Helsinki. The study presented in this article was conducted in the Faculty of Educational Sciences of the university. Kimanen's research focuses on religious education, especially from pupils' perspectives, and interfaith competencies.

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