



Developing teachers' intercultural sensitivity: Case study on a pilot course in Finnish teacher education

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HIGHLIGHTS

- Previous research and educational approaches have omitted religion from close scrutiny.
- Complementary learning processes between secular and religious citizens are needed.
- Sensitivity to worldviews as identity markers is central to teachers' intercultural sensitivity.
- Ethno-relative orientation to diversity is developed through self-reflection.
- Questioning the neutrality of one's own position increases empathy towards others.

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ABSTRACT

In scholarly discussions, developing intercultural competencies, with intercultural sensitivity as their core, is an acknowledged aim of teacher education. Religion forms a foundational part in many cultures, and its prominence in the public sphere is increasing. However, educational research and practice have largely disregarded religious diversity. This paper examines how Finnish student teachers' develop intercultural sensitivity through self-reflective learning processes in a pilot course on cultures and religions in education. The results depict students' willingness to engage in self-reflection as a necessary starting point for developing ethno-relative orientation to diversity and sensitivity to religious identities.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Supporting teachers' intercultural competencies and sensitivity in teacher education

Currently, one of the crucial tasks of teacher education is to prepare teachers to acknowledge and embrace the increasing diversities in societies. In previous literature, issues related to encountering diversities in education are discussed under multicultural and intercultural education. We utilize the notion 'intercultural', but do not place it in opposition to 'multicultural'; both

concepts are polysemic and have been dichotomised in the literature. However, [Holm and Zilliacus \(2009\)](#), and [Dervin, Paatela-Nieminen, Kuoppala, and Riitaoja \(2012\)](#), believe that because of the multifaceted nature of these constructs, they could be used as synonyms. The concept 'intercultural competence', defined, for instance, as an "ability to effectively and appropriately interact in an intercultural situation or context" ([Berry & Southwell, 2011, p. 453](#)), is also widespread in educational research and in teacher education. Intercultural competence has been defined in various ways (see, for example, [Bennett, 2008](#); [Byram, 1997](#); [Lustig & Koester, 2006](#); [Noel, 1995](#)), but is generally considered to include attitudes, knowledge and skills. In this article, we utilize the plural form of the notion, "competencies", as suggested by [Dervin et al. \(2012\)](#), who emphasise that rather than relying on essentialist understandings of culture and focusing on the ability to understand the "cultural other", the focus should be on encounters between

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persons with different identity markers in particular contexts, which means that the positions of the majority are better recognised. Thereby, the development of intercultural competencies is a contextual, never-ending and unpredictable process (Dervin, Paatela-Nieminen, Kuoppala, & Riitaoja, 2012).

Intercultural sensitivity has been seen as the very foundation of intercultural competencies, or even synonymous with it (Hammer, 2011), as an individual's "active desire to motivate themselves to understand, appreciate and accept differences among cultures" (Chen & Starosta, 1998, p. 231) or "the ability to discriminate and experience relevant cultural differences" (Hammer, Bennett, & Wiseman, 2003, p. 422). Bennett's (1993) *Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity* (DMIS) includes orientations that describe different reactions to cultural dissimilarities. *Ethnocentric orientation* refers to attitudes denying the existence of cultures in one's environment, seeing cultural differences as a threat or simply disregarding and minimising cultural differences. In an *ethno-relativistic orientation*, cultural differences are acknowledged, accepted and respected; furthermore, cultures are adopted and integrated into one's own identity. In Bennett's model, the recognition of deep forms of difference requires a shift from ethnocentric to ethno-relative orientations of intercultural sensitivity, a shift that may happen through the transitional orientation of minimization whereby an understanding of shared humanity starts to develop, but only cultural commonalities, not differences, are recognised (Hammer, 2011; Kuusisto, Kuusisto, Rissanen, Holm, & Tirri, 2016). This shift, which enables teachers to recognise diversities and to depart from the ideals of colour-blind treatment, is achieved through increased self-awareness and can also be considered a relevant goal in teacher education (DeJaeghere & Zhang, 2008). Even though Bennett's model has been found cross-culturally valid, it has also been criticised for overlooking religion, even if religion typically forms a core part of a culture. Religious claims differ from cultural claims, which is why empathy towards others, rather than adapting to differences or even integrating differences into one's own identity, could be perceived as suitable goals in developing sensitivity to religious diversity (Abu-Nimer, 2001).

The focus of this article connects with timely discussions on diversities, interculturality, equality and justice in the context of teacher education. We endeavour to contribute to these discussions by raising a topic that has not received sufficient attention in previous studies on intercultural learning and multicultural teacher education, namely the role of religions as identity markers and as dimensions of culture (Riitaoja, Poulter, & Kuusisto, 2010; Riitaoja & Dervin, 2014). Broadening the consideration of culture to include religion might have far-reaching implications for views on multiculturalism and, consequently, for understandings of intercultural competencies (Cohen, 2009). Religion belongs to several layers of culture (see e.g. Trombenaas & Hampden-Turner, 1997), and its influence at the core level of implicit basic assumptions should be recognised. It is equally important to acknowledge the power of non-religious worldviews in shaping individual and group identities. However, since "religious identification offers a distinctive 'sacred' worldview and 'eternal' group membership, unmatched by identification with other social groups" (Ysseldyk, Matheson, & Anisman, 2010, p. 60), our particular focus is on religions as identity markers which teachers in multicultural and multi-religious contexts should increasingly recognise.

This approach is also motivated by the expressed need for more critical approaches in intercultural teacher education (see Gorski, 2009). Previous studies on preparing pre-service teachers for multicultural contexts have noted the importance of cross-cultural experiences and extensive field experience (Garmon, 2004; Ladson-Billings, 2009; Pohan, 1996; Smith, Moallem, & Sherrill,

1997), as well as opportunities to reflect on and mediate experiences in encountering diversity (Causey, Thomas, & Armento, 2000; Garmon, 2004; Magos, 2007; Whipp, 2013). However, with promotion of educational equality and social justice as acknowledged aims of intercultural teacher education, more efforts to engage student teachers in counter-hegemonic teaching and consideration of larger socio-political contexts are needed (Gorski, 2009; Jenks, Lee & Kanpol, 2001). This is why in developing student teachers' intercultural sensitivity, we emphasise supporting recognition of worldview hegemonies and examining the position of religion in contemporary post-secular societies.

1.2. Sensitivity to religious identities as a central aspect of teacher's intercultural sensitivity

Educational contexts are increasingly pluralistic in terms of religion. However, probably due to the ideals of restricting religions to the private realm in liberal democracies, previous research and educational approaches have commonly neglected giving religion close scrutiny (White, 2009). It has been noted that in these secularised societies, teachers who have no personal connection with religious ways of life, despite expressing positive attitudes toward diversities in general, have difficulty in recognising religious identities and find it difficult to empathise with religious students and their families or to understand their needs and wishes (Kuusisto, 2011b; Riitaoja et al., 2010). Still, religion is a relevant identity marker for many students in these contexts, and if teacher education programmes fail to support student teacher's sensitivity for religions, exclusionary educational practices readily arise (Kuusisto, in press; Kuusisto, Kuusisto, Rissanen, & Lamminmäki-Vartia, 2015).

Furthermore, in contemporary multicultural democracies, the prominence of religion in the public sphere is increasing, while there are also tendencies in worldview polarization towards fundamentalist religious and secular camps. This is why issues related to the role of religion in public arenas, such as school, are acute. In line with Habermas (2006), we see that in contemporary multicultural democracies that can be defined as post-secular, the liberal state cannot protect religious freedom and simultaneously require pious persons to participate in political debates without the right to refer to their religious convictions. Thus, individuals and communities should be allowed to participate in political discussions by using religious language if they also are willing to reflect on their faith from outside and relate it to secular views: processes of critical self-reflection and negotiation inside both religious and secular traditions are needed, as well as a willingness to learn to understand the language other citizens are using. These complementary learning processes can happen only through a self-reflective mindset and a willingness to understand the other. Those whose arguments (in political and societal discussions) are based on religious convictions have to accept that their views need to be translated into secular language. Likewise, citizens without such convictions need to trace the ideological roots of their thinking and accept religions as valid partners in discussion (Habermas, 2006).

These ideas have strong educational implications: in order to promote complementary learning processes, recognition of and meeting different religions in education is an issue that needs to be given more attention. In Europe the European Council's recommendations to include religion in education can be considered as a sign of acknowledging the need to recognise different worldviews (Jackson, 2010, 2014). Bestowing recognition for religious identities is not just a courtesy: students can suffer real psychological and social harm if they internalise a misrecognised image of themselves (Taylor, 1992). However, recognition of religions and

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