Developing interreligious competence in teacher education

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Introduction

In many parts of Finland, issues related to religious and cultural diversity have only recently been encountered. During my studies, there has been minimal discussion on these issues, even though all of us now studying to be teachers will encounter students from different cultural backgrounds when we start working. How can anyone assume that teachers will have the ability to work in the types of environments in the future without a proper education? Whether or not a student teacher learns about these issues should not be a matter of his/her own interests. The abounding discussion of how schools should be changed without efforts to acknowledge these changes in teacher education is problematic. Being able to merely handle challenging situations should not be the essence of

teachers' intercultural competence, because teachers should also develop their students' intercultural competences. (Rissanen, Kuusisto & Kuusisto 2016.)

Student teachers seem to be well aware of the increasing diversity in society and in educational institutions, as well as the challenges this diversity will present them with as educators. The citation from a Finnish student teacher above depicts the willingness to develop intercultural and interreligious competences as part of their studies, as well as the student teachers' concerns related to the feeling that the support they receive for the development of these competences is inadequate.

In this chapter, we will examine the concepts of *teachers' intercultural and interreligious competence* and discuss the challenges related to developing them in teacher education by drawing from multiple studies conducted in the Finnish context. First, we will portray how teacher's intercultural competence and intercultural sensitivity have been defined in the research literature and discuss the particular challenges related to dealing with religious forms of difference. The notion of interreligious sensitivity will be described, which will lead us to discuss the need to better understand what makes a teacher not only interculturally but also interreligiously competent. Second, we will discuss the Finnish context and the current status of intercultural and interreligious competences in Finnish teacher education. Third, we will elaborate research results from studies that have examined the intercultural and interreligious sensitivities of Finnish teachers and student teachers as well as the development of these sensitivities during their teacher education. Finally, we will discuss the implications of these findings from the perspective of further development of teacher education.

Teacher's intercultural and interreligious competence

What is intercultural competence in teacher's pedagogical approach?

One of the critical challenges of teacher education today is to prepare teachers to face the increasing diversity in societies. Teachers at every grade level need intercultural competence that can be understood as an "ability to effectively and appropriately interact in an intercultural situation or context" (Berry & Southwell 2011). The dimensions of intercultural competence have been defined in different ways (e.g. Noel 1995; Byram 1997; Bennett 2008; Lustig & Koester 2006). However, intercultural competence is typically considered to include attitudes, knowledge and skills—in other words: cognitive, affective and behavioural dimensions.

Furthermore, intercultural sensitivity, which is part of the affective dimension mentioned above, can be seen as the very foundation of intercultural competence. According to Bennett (1993), it refers to a person's ability to observe and experience relevant cultural differences and to have the cognitive and behavioural skills to deal with these differences. Without intercultural sensitivity as the subjects' "active desire to motivate themselves to understand, appreciate and accept differences among cultures" (Chen & Starosta 1998, 231), it is impossible to create cognitive and behavioural dimensions, which also include teachers' willingness to act as critical and active agents of change who promote equality and inclusion in schools (Jokikokko 2005; Niemelä 2015). By and large, intercultural sensitivity is associated with greater potential for exercising intercultural competence (Hammer, Bennett & Wiseman 2003).

Bennett's (1993) *Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity* includes orientations that describe different reactions to cultural dissimilarity. According to the model, the development of intercultural

sensitivity follows the three stages of ethnocentric orientation (*denial, defence* and *minimization* of difference), with regard to the attitudes related to the existence of cultures in one's environment, i.e. whether the existence of cultural differences is denied, seen as a threat simply disregarded and minimized. Subsequent to the *ethnocentric* orientation is the ethnorelativistic orientation (*acceptance, adaptation* and *integration* of difference) whereby individuals learn to acknowledge cultural differences, accept and respect them and, in the final stages, even adopt and integrate them into their own identity. A shift from ethnocentric stage of minimization to ethnorelativistic orientation seems to require increased awareness of one's own worldview including practices, assumptions and values: self-awareness is the basis of becoming aware of the differences in these forms of subjective cultural differences (Hammer, Bennett & Wiseman 2003; DeJaeghere & Zhang 2008).

Self-awareness and self-reflectiveness have also been seen, on the one hand, as necessary components of teacher's intercultural competence that should be developed in teacher education, and on the other hand, as personal character traits that indicate how an individual responds to education on diversity (Rissanen, Kuusisto & Kuusisto 2016; Garmon 2004; Adams, Bondy & Kuhel 2005). In developing self-awareness and positive attitudes towards diversity, cross-cultural experiences seem to be affective especially when they are combined with opportunities to reflect and mediate learning experiences related to encountering diversity (Pohan 1996; Smith, Moallem & Sherrill 1997; Causey, Thomas & Armento 2000; Garmon 2004; Whipp 2013). Although different ways of preparing student teachers for teaching in multicultural contexts have been studied (see, e.g, Sleeter 2001; Cushner & Brennan 2007), these studies do not have very clear implications, and there is no consensus on how changes in the student teachers' attitudes could be achieved. Furthermore, worldviews and religion are rarely discussed in these studies. Nevertheless, what is known is that previous experiences and

attitudes of student teachers function as a filter for learning, meaning that negative attitudes are very difficult to change through courses on multicultural education. Overall, student teachers' beliefs and assumptions of other people or groups have proved to be very difficult to change (Garmon 1996; 2004; Causey, Thomas & Armento 2000), but successful developments during teacher education programmes have also been reported (Kumar & Hamer 2012).

Particular challenges in dealing with religious diversity – towards interreligious competence

The public role and political significance of religions in contemporary Western multicultural democracies have increased. The polarisation of worldviews into fundamentalist camps of the religious and the secular have created issues related to the new, more visible role of worldviews into heated debate topics (Habermas 2006). Furthermore, the transnational ties of citizens have increased and at the same time nationalist expressions and imaginations have intensified (Abowitz & Harnish 2006). Many European nations endeavour to be aware of and regulate the values of their citizens – for example, through education (Himanen 2012). However, this regulation often seems to focus on certain groups especially – Muslims, in particular, who seem to have become "the critical case of multiculturalism" in many liberal societies, since their religious values are often perceived to be in opposition to liberal discourses of individual rights and secularism (Modood 2011). In state-organised religious education, for example, the aim is often that students internalize national values associated with democratic liberalism and human rights discourse, but these forms of liberal educational practices have also been seen as "othering" towards non-Western worldviews (Rissanen 2018; Poulter, Riitaoja & Kuusisto 2015). Finnish teachers are also extremely oriented towards promoting mutual democratic values, but their willingness to recognise diversity and, in particular, to support the integration of

Muslim students in school and society is not very strong (Rissanen, Kuusisto & Tirri 2015).

However, in many multicultural educational approaches, religion is a silenced aspect (see, e.g, White 2009), and only recently have some of the advocates of multicultural education began to include religion and worldviews in the discussions (see, e.g, Banks 2009). Nevertheless, there seem to be disparate challenges in dealing with the diversity of religions in education. In secularized societies, teachers who have no personal connection to a religious way of life sometimes have difficulties in recognizing religious identities and accepting their influence in schools and kindergartens. Even teachers with positive attitudes towards diversity in general sometimes find it difficult to empathize with religious families and understand their needs and wishes. (Rissanen, Kuusisto & Kuusisto 2016; Kuusisto 2011; Kuusisto & Lamminmäki-Vartia 2012.) In regard to religion, teacher's ideals of colour-blindness appear to be particularly prominent. In the Finnish context, religious minorities are among the forms of diversity that are most poorly recognised by teachers (Jokikokko 2005). However, recognition and appraisal of students' religion and culture increases their dignity and feeling of belonging, contribute positively to personal development, and are important strategies in fighting against the educational disadvantages of some minority students (Ipgrave 2010; Byfield 2008). Thus, in addition to intercultural sensitivity, teachers' 'pedagogical toolkit' is in dire need of the interreligious sensitivity component (Kuusisto, Kuusisto, Rissanen & Lamminmäki-Vartia 2015).

It has also been acknowledged that there are some important qualitative differences between intercultural and interreligious sensitivities. According to Abu-Nimer (2001), Bennett's model of intercultural sensitivity operates at a general level and overlooks religion, even if religion typically forms an essential part of cultural identity. Abu-Nimer states that religion can even become a hindrance to the development of cultural sensitivity, as it exerts such a strong

influence on individual cultural behaviour and on the views of people and groups (Abu-Nimer 2001; Kuusisto & Lamminmäki-Vartia 2012). Similar to Bennett's model, Abu-Nimer's *Model of Interreligious Sensitivity* (2001) also includes *religiocentric* and *religiorelative* orientations. However, according to Abu-Nimer, the levels of adaptation and integration are not reasonable or desirable goals for interreligious sensitivity, as the self-understandings and truth claims of religions differ from cultural claims (Abu-Nimer 2001, 687–701). Thus, in an educational context, the goal would be to reach the level of acceptance of religions or even acquire some adaptation skills, such as empathy (Holm, Nokelainen & Tirri 2014). However, religious adaptation in terms of integration and syncretism is beyond the purpose of education, and could be regarded as practices that misrecognise the religious identities of many students.

Although intercultural and interreligious sensitivities only form a part of a bigger whole of moral sensitivities (Tirri & Nokelainen 2011), the lack of them can generate significant harm through oppressive and disregarding attitudes and practices. Both intercultural and interreligious sensitivities can be seen to set the very foundation into the development of intercultural and interreligious competences in teacher education. (Kuusisto, Kuusisto, Rissanen & Lamminmäki-Vartia 2015.) It is also important to recognise their qualitative differences in order to understand the particular issues related to dealing with religions in education. Interreligious sensitivity, and the increased ability to recognise religious differences that comes with it, forms a ground for teacher's interreligious competence, but there are good reasons to begin a more careful consideration of other factors also —behavioural and cognitive aspects —that could be included. Furthermore, development of the students' interreligious competence in teacher education is an issue that critically deserves more attention in both research and practice.

Finnish societal context

Multicultural and multireligious Finland?

In Finland, there is an official multiculturalist orientation which means, for example, that there are efforts to meet the cultural needs of immigrants in schools. However, there seems to be a gap between official idealistic principles and the practical reality (Saukkonen 2013). Many teachers think that the atmosphere and attitudes in Finnish schools are still characterized by a dominant monoculturalism. In Finland, as well as in other Nordic countries, the combination of Protestantism and secularism has been distinguished as "Secular Lutheranism", which seems to hold the position of a hegemonic worldview, setting the more confessional Lutheran worldviews into the position of "Other" (Poulter, Riitaoja & Kuusisto 2015). Despite the increasing religious pluralization during the last few decades, mainly explained by secularization and immigration, most Finnish people (roughly 70 percent today) still belong to the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland. However, in comparison to other European countries, Finland has only a small number of strongly religious citizens and also relatively few who would consider themselves completely non-religious. Attitudes towards intense religiosity are relatively negative, and exclusivist religious views are regarded as forms of intolerance. However, Christianity as a tradition is valued positively, which probably reflects the exceptionally strong link between the Lutheran religion and national identity in Finland. Furthermore, in Finland, attitudes towards Muslims are among the most negative in Europe (Ketola 2011a; Ketola 2011b).

Developing teacher's intercultural and interreligious competence in Finnish teacher education

Finnish teacher education is highly regarded, partly due to Finnish pupils' academic achievement in international comparisons such as PISA. Both primary school teacher education (MA in Education) and kindergarten teacher education (BA degree) are university degrees. Furthermore, subject teachers complete a master's degree in their subject, which also includes teachers' pedagogical studies (60 ECTS). Teacher education curricula are research based, and the aim has been to educate research-oriented, autonomous and reflective teachers who are willing to continuously develop their teaching (Tirri 2014). Thus, the level of expertise in teacher education, in general terms, is excellent. However, societal values and aims are naturally always reflected in university education, too, both in the outlined aims and contents and, to some extent, in the emphases and other implementation factors of each individual staff member.

Continuous development of the teacher education system is needed since new challenges arise as society changes (Hökkä & Eteläpelto 2014). One of the most important challenges is the increasing multiculturalism: according to the PISA 2012 data, the achievements of first and second generation immigrant students in Finland are on an alarming level (Harju-Luukkainen et al. 2014, 106). Furthermore, according to previous research, even though Finnish teachers typically view themselves as being responsible for the personal and ethical growth of their students, they need more education in the domain of moral sensitivities including intercultural and interreligious sensitivity (Tirri 2011; Hanhimäki & Tirri 2009; Tirri & Nokelainen 2011). There is some variation in the aims and contents of the courses related to intercultural education depending on the particular institutions offering teacher education degrees. In primary school teacher education, the variance is significantly smaller. This is perhaps partly due to the fact that the curriculum guidelines

are perceived to streamline the directions of primary education much more specifically than for teaching specific age groups, where the national guidelines are not equally binding.

For example, at the University of Helsinki in 2014, all student teachers had an introductory course in encountering diversity as part of their pedagogical studies, covering a range of topics from cultural diversity and inclusive education to special educational needs. The course aims included, for example, providing students with an increased understanding of people's different cultural and language backgrounds and "to see them as individuals in their community, also in multicultural situations." Furthermore, the course contents included, for example, "The elementary notions of multicultural education, the documents guiding it as well as the different approaches, attainment of social justice, different families, cultures and values, cultural capital and cultural identity, different worldviews, religions, intercultural communication and the everyday matters of multicultural school and Kindergarten." (University of Helsinki, 2014.) However, as mentioned above, there is some notable variance between Finnish universities.

The differences are significant in relation to kindergarten teacher education in particular. This is unfortunate, as research indicates a great deal of uncertainty among the educational staff in the field, e.g. among both the educational staff and kindergarten heads, who also voice a hope that the institutions' educators would better equip student teachers with the knowledge and means to relate to intercultural and inter-faith settings and to implement worldview education (Lamminmäki-Vartia & Kuusisto 2015). This is an important part of teacher education, not the least because according to a study, among the Finnish teachers, it is the kindergarten teachers and primary school teachers who hold the most negative attitudes towards Muslim pupils and the supporting of their integration (Rissanen, Kuusisto & Tirri 2015). In the Finnish educational system, these are the age groups typically taught by one teacher in particular,

being responsible for the teaching of all subjects; in comparison to the older age groups who are typically taught by specialized subject teachers (Rissanen, Kuusisto & Kuusisto, 2014). This also means that if an individual teacher is particularly opinionated towards a certain cultural or religious group and has not been able to reflect and work on his or her attitudes, such presuppositions may be compellingly visible in his or her educational approach (Kuusisto & Lamminmäki-Vartia 2012).

Developing Finnish in-service teachers' and student teachers' intercultural and interreligious competences

In-service teachers' and student teachers' intercultural and interreligious sensitivities

In order to study as well as to help individuals reflect and develop their intercultural and interreligious sensitivities, Holm, Nokelainen and Tirri (2009; 2011) have created an *Intercultural Sensitivity Scale* (ICSS) and an *Interreligious Sensitivity Scale* (IRRSS). The former is based on Bennett's (1993) and the latter on Abu-Nimer's (2001) models of intercultural and interreligious sensitivities. Items of both measurements have been created based on lower secondary school students' authentic statements about cultural and religious differences (Holm 2012). Previous studies of Finnish lower secondary school students have confirmed the validity and reliability of both instruments (Holm, Nokelainen & Tirri 2009; 2011; 2014; Kuusisto, Kuusisto, Holm & Tirri 2014; Kuusisto, Kuusisto & Kallioniemi 2014).

The ongoing project at the Universities of Tampere and Helsinki aims to test and develop these instruments for adult respondents, especially teachers, from different backgrounds, religions and cultures, and to allow the use of these instruments in a multicultural

society and in cross-cultural studies (Kuusisto, Kuusisto, Rissanen, Holm & Tirri 2015; Kuusisto, Kuusisto, Rissanen & Lamminmäki-Vartia 2015). These types of measurements will provide important knowledge about attitudes at schools and universities as well as offer valuable tools for self-reflection. The instruments can also help teacher educators design courses, choose methods and guide discussions to enhance reflections on and development of intercultural and interreligious competence.

The preliminary findings indicate that applying these instruments to adult samples needs further methodological adjustment. The original instruments measure responses to either cultural or religious issues in five categories: (1) *Denial*, (2) *Defence*, (3) *Minimisation*, (4) *Acceptance*, and (5) *Adaptation*. Denial, Defence and Minimisation reflect *ethno-/religiocentric* orientations and Acceptance and Adaptation reflect *ethno-/religiorelativistic* orientations. However, among in-service and student teachers the ICSS revealed three intercultural attitudes towards cultural differences: 1) negative ethnocentrism in terms of defensiveness, 2) positive ethnocentrism in terms of minimization and 3) ethnorelativism in terms of acceptance (Kuusisto, Kuusisto, Rissanen, Holm & Tirri 2015). Further, both in-service and student teachers were more sensitive than pupils, which could be seen as indicating the learnability and developmental aspect of this moral sensitivity but also the attitudinal gap between teachers and students.

Learning experiences on a pilot course

Data and methods of the study

We have also studied student teachers' learning experiences in a theory-based course on cultural and religious diversity in schools and kindergartens (Rissanen, Kuusisto & Kuusisto 2016). This was an action-based research (see, e.g., Brydon-Miller & Maguire 2009)

that was conducted in Tampere in spring 2014. A total of 31 student teachers studying early childhood education (n=7), primary school education (n=13), subject teacher education (n=6) and adult education (n=5) participated in the course that was not part of the curricula of any of these programmes, but was planned and taught for the first time with a purpose to utilise experiences from this course in the curriculum development processes of the department.

The course was voluntary and consisted of five sessions, four of which were founded on more typical theory-based teaching and discussions, and one of which included a panel discussion with invited participants—mostly teachers with considerable experience working in multicultural schools or kindergartens. Different forms and contents for the lessons were chosen to examine the ways in which the student teachers experience the relevance of these different themes for the development of their intercultural and interreligious competence, and what types of learning methods they regard as most beneficial. The themes covered during the course were 1) teachers' intercultural and interreligious competences and sensitivities, 2) cultural and religious diversity in Finnish schools and kindergartens with a special focus on Islam, 3) stereotype threat and supporting the learning of diverse students, and 4) politics of recognition and implications on the policies and practices of schools and kindergartens.

At the beginning of the course, the student teachers were asked to participate in this study using course diaries and were told that the purpose of the study was to analyse their learning experiences and use the results in curriculum development. All of the student teachers wanted to participate. In general, as was learned later from the course diaries, they were frustrated with the insufficient ways in which issues related to diversity had been dealt with in their previous studies. Thus, they were very motivated to participate in this type of participatory action research, the purpose of which was to include students in the practitioner inquiry (Brydon-Miller & Maguire 2009). The research questions for the study were: *1) What did students learn*

during the pilot course according to the self-reported measure? 2) What did the students report as contents that had influenced their learning?

During the course, the student teachers kept a course diary in which they reflected on the contents of the lessons from their own perspective and in light of selected literature, more specifically, a list of articles they had to choose from. They were also asked to explicate their learning process in these course diaries. Furthermore, the course diary included a pre-task in which imaginary cases from the everyday life of multicultural schools or kindergartens were described and the student teachers were asked to reflect on how they would act in these types of situations. The student teachers uploaded these pre-tasks to the virtual learning platform before the course, and at the end of the course they were asked to reflect in their diaries on how and why they would like to change or develop their initial responses in light of what they had learned. The students were also asked to give anonymous feedback on the course. The data for this action research included the course diaries as well as the separate feedback forms. Student teachers' learning experiences as reflected in the data were analysed by means of inductive qualitative content analysis. According to the student teachers' self-evaluations, their learning processes during the course resulted in changes in their 1) *beliefs and attitudes* 2) *practices of dealing with difference*, and 3) *self-reflection and self-efficacy*.

Self-evaluated changes in attitudes and practices

The attitudinal changes of the student teachers during the course include increased understanding and empathy, increased interest towards cultural and religious diversity, increased recognition of religion and an understanding of the need to balance between similarity, individuality and difference in dealing with diversity. In previous literature, influencing student teachers' beliefs and attitudes towards diversity has been presented as one of the most challenging tasks in teacher education (Garmon 1996; Causey, Thomas &

Armento 2000). In this study, we noticed that most of the attitudinal changes reflected in the course diaries seemed to be induced by merely an increased knowledge about diversity. Most of the student teachers knew very little about Islam and its internal plurality before the course, but knowledge of Islam and its influence on the everyday life of Muslim students' and their families led to more understanding towards these families. Furthermore, this knowledge seemed to have raised a willingness to learn more and it also led to improved ability to recognise religious identities in general, as can be seen in the reflections of this student teacher:

> Even though I have some knowledge of Islam from my courses in religious studies, the more I familiarise myself with Islam, the more I realise how little I know about it. Much of my knowledge about Islam is through what I read only, but my understanding of the everyday life of people and the role of religion in it is very sporadic. Somehow, I have previously disregarded religion considering it a private matter. I don't have personal religious conviction and in Finland religion is commonly regarded as a personal matter. This is why I only recently have begun to realise what an important part of identity religion can be for some people, and it cannot be separated from their everyday life, or be regarded as an inner, personal issue (student 1.). (Rissanen, Kuusisto & Kuusisto 2016.)

Altogether, the results of the study indicate a need to include teaching about diversity as an important aspect of developing teachers' intercultural competence. In this short course, a decision was made to concentrate only on one minority group, which in this instance was that of Finnish Muslims. The student teachers considered Islam and Muslims in Finland as one of the most important contents of the course but would have wished for a similar type of discussion on other cultural and religious minorities, too. Furthermore, it should be noted that the increased knowledge of diversity did not have a

positive influence on the attitudes of *all* the student teachers, i.e. the perceptions of Muslim families as demanding and difficult seemed to be reinforced. Thus, the observations in previous studies of earlier experiences, beliefs and personal traits functioning as a filter for learning (Garmon 1996; 2004) were, in some respect, also confirmed by this study. However, for most students, their increased understanding and empathy correlated with a (self-evaluated) behavioural change towards more dialogic and attentive ways of dealing with difference; in particular, their willingness to negotiate with the parents and learn to understand their educational ideals had increased.

All in all, the course seemed to have induced both an attitudinal change of increased recognition of religion as well as changed ideals of how cultural and religious diversity should be dealt with in practice. The focus had shifted towards positive recognition and seeing diversity as a resource. One interesting finding of the study was the strong emergence of the ideal of neutrality in student teachers' pre-tasks. When reflecting on their ways of dealing with religious diversity, especially, the student teachers' statements related to a post-modern liberal and relativistic worldview (for example, students should be taught that all religions are equally true or that religion is a private matter), but represented these as acts promoting neutrality in education. These observations support the view that in Scandinavian contexts, strong ideals of the perceived 'ideological neutrality' in education exist, while the mediation of fundamental national values based on liberal Protestant secularism is regarded as an important educational aim (Berglund 2013; Rissanen, Kuusisto & Tirri 2015; Poulter, Riitaoja & Kuusisto 2015). Furthermore, these views also reflect the negative attitudes of Finns to exclusivist truth claims and visible forms of religiosity (Ketola 2011b).

However, these ideals seemed to be, in some respect, questioned by the student teachers during the course due to increased understanding of Muslim identities as well as discussions on *politics of recognition* (see, e.g., Taylor 1992). One of the topics of the course

was politics of recognition, the implications of which in educational contexts were discussed and compared to politics of similarity and politics of difference. Politics of recognition is grounded on the idea that identities are defined in dialogue with the attributes other people see in us, and it encourages an open and interested attitude towards difference but does not entail an uncritical "celebration of diversity" (Taylor 1992). These discussions led the student teachers to change some of their ideals related to very practical questions in schools and kindergartens. For example, instead of idealising "neutral" festivities and "colour-blind" practices, the student teachers had more multiculturalist ideas in the post-task. Their ideals had shifted from restricting and "thinning" the educational content for everyone and "the culture of cutting off" (Kalliala 2001; 2005; Kuusisto & Lamminmäki-Vartia 2012) towards seeing the value of different cultures and religions as resources, also. This change is reflected in the course diary of a student teacher who already had quite a lot of teaching experience:

> My aim should not only be to adapt them (immigrant families) to the Finnish kindergarten, but also to enrich my class with their knowledge and practices. Many lost opportunities, where I could have paid more attention to multicultural children and their families, come to my mind. Surely I have acted with my best understanding and skills in these situations, but now I feel I have almost offended a couple of families with my ignorance. When I go back to work, I hope I will remember what I have learned here, be able to act better and be more conscious of the different habits of families. I am very happy I participated in this course (student 2). (Rissanen, Kuusisto & Kuusisto 2016.)

Furthermore, increased knowledge generated through recent research results concerning the impact of recognition to the academic achievement of minority groups (see, e.g., Byfield 2008; Ipgrave 2010; Cohen, Garcia, Apfel & Master 2006), the course had also changed

the student teachers' ideas of the practices to support minority students' learning and achievement. Before the course, most of the students regarded only language issues as the main reason for the achievement gap, and they wanted to concentrate mostly on them in their practices. However, after the course they had added recognition as well as the promotion of commonality and cooperation to their solutions.

Increasing self-awareness and self-efficacy

In addition to self-evaluated changes in student teachers' attitudes and practices, important processes during the course included improvements in self-awareness and self-efficacy. The pre-tasks gave the impression that student teachers' ideals of dealing with difference were mainly focused on how they should understand and communicate with *others*; however, during the course they began to understand the significance of being aware of their own worldview, attitudes and ways of acting to their intercultural competence. The student teachers' inability to see the ideologically laden and culturally rooted nature of their own ideals of dealing with difference, as brought forth in their pre-tasks, illustrates the need for better awareness of one's own worldview (see also Kuusisto & Lamminmäki-Vartia 2012). The majority culture tends to have blind spots and without the willingness to self-reflect, values related to liberal Protestant secularism could, in this way, become confused with neutralism and lead to new forms of imperialistic educational practices (see also Rissanen 2014, 142-144; Berglund 2013; Poulter, Riitaoja & Kuusisto 2015). All teachers, whether they do it intentionally or not, transmit values in the classroom — the tone of voice or even silence as an answer to a child's religious question, for example, is enough for this type of situation to evolve (e.g. Holm 2005). Thus, particularly in multicultural contexts, the willingness of teachers to reflect and work on their own worldviews and the impact of cultural or religious

ideals, beliefs and values in their pedagogical approach and the actual educational practices is an essential part of their intercultural and interreligious competence (see also Kuusisto & Lamminmäki-Vartia 2012). In the course of this study, the student teachers were asked to reflect on their own values, worldviews and the influence of these on their educational ideals and pedagogical practices. This was regarded as a starting point for developing sensitivity towards others. M.J. Bennett's six-stage theory of intercultural sensitivity (Bennett 1993, 2008) appeared to function as a useful pedagogical tool in inducing student teachers' self-awareness. In the first lesson, the students were asked to reflect on their own thinking in the light of Bennett's theory. This had provoked intensive and long-lasting thinking processes which was illustrated in the learning diary data. Many of the student teachers considered the reflections on Bennett's theory to be an important wake-up call that made them aware of flaws in their own thinking and engendered a willingness to reflect critically on their own attitudes. This was also the case in the experiences of the following student teacher:

> The most important outcome of this course that I will surely remember forever was Bennett's developmental model, and how I realised I might not be as interculturally sensitive as I had thought and hoped. It woke me up to actively reflect on how I could develop my openness and my ability to accept and pay attention to those who see things differently. (student 3) (Rissanen, Kuusisto & Kuusisto 2016.)

Furthermore, the course seemed to have a two-way impact on the student teachers in that, on the one hand, their self-awareness and constructive self-criticism increased and they began to feel a stronger need to develop their intercultural and interreligious competences. On the other hand, they also achieved a stronger sense of self-efficacy and more trust in their ability to deal with diversity in practice. For example, they felt a need to seek help from other members of

the school/kindergarten staff in challenging situations and started to reflect on the practices of their work communities from a more expert perspective in light of the theoretical knowledge they had achieved during the course. It was interesting to notice that the ability to argue for their personal views based on theoretical grounds seemed to increase the student teachers' feelings of competence. This was especially so for those students with more practical experience and those from primary school teacher, subject teacher and adult education programmes. The way in which the increased theoretical understanding seemed to support these student teachers' confidence and sense of efficacy probably reflects the academic emphasis in the teaching profession in Finland: many teachers do, indeed, want to develop their professional identities as academic experts (Tirri 2014).

Discussion

Bearing in mind the role of religion in contemporary acute political issues, barriers built between secular and religious citizens, as well as the sacred nature of religious identification for some students, it is reasonable to state that besides intercultural sensitivity, teachers need interreligious sensitivity. Interreligious sensitivity enables recognition of religions/religious identities and forms a basis for interreligious competence. However, in addition to the importance of paying more attention to the notion of interreligious sensitivity, we think it is important to develop an understanding of interreligious competence in which its cognitive and behavioral dimensions would also be included.

On the basis of our studies, we suggest some factors relevant in developing teachers' interreligious competence. Knowledge of religions and especially of "lived religion", i.e. the daily realities of religious individuals and groups, seems to be of great importance in supporting student teacher's empathetic attitudes and willingness to

openly encounter religions. Furthermore, understanding the internal plurality of religious traditions clears confusions and supports the willingness to encounter students and their families as individuals. By developing the cognitive dimension of interreligious competence through increasing knowledge of religion, it is possible to develop the behavioural dimension. In the pilot course of our study, the student teachers' increased knowledge enhanced their willingness openly communicate with students and their parents about their religious needs/wishes without considering them as taboos or private matters. Being interreligiously competent also requires that teachers understand issues and negotiations related to the public role of religion in contemporary society and are able to mediate these negotiations constructively in their own multi-religious educational communities.

One important implication of our study is the need to help student teachers understand that the views they hold about religion are not neutral but based on a certain ideological framework, and they should learn to see when these views contradict the convictions and truth claims of some traditions. For example, when ideals of tolerance are based on the liberal relativistic framework, they may contradict the ideals of tolerance based on the teachings of a religious tradition. To be able to support their students who often balance between these different frameworks and whose identity negotiations are complicated by the conflicting demands from school and their families, teachers need to understand the different frameworks and also be able to reflect on their own stance. An important factor in interreligious competence is the ability of teachers to reflect on their own worldviews and the cultural or religious roots of their own ideals and values. Thus, despite using the term interreligious competence, we acknowledge the need to pay equal attention to both religious and non-religious worldviews and support teachers' capacity to recognise their influence as part of their own and their students' identities (see Kuusisto, Kuusisto & Kallioniemi 2014; Kuusisto & Lamminmäki-Vartia 2012).

We are rather optimistic about the possibilities to develop these competences in teacher education. Our studies, as well as our experiences as teacher educators, have convinced us of the strong motivation of student teachers, who have experiences in working in multicultural contexts, to develop their intercultural and interreligious competences as part of their studies. Despite the proven power of such courses in teacher education that combine extensive field experiences with personal reflections, much can also be done in theory-based courses. In research-based teacher education, theories can be used as pedagogical tools that induce self-reflection and help teachers do research and develop their pedagogical practices, and in this way increase their feelings of competence. A good example of this in our case course was how the developmental model of intercultural sensitivity by M.J. Bennett induced very intensive self-reflections in the student teachers. However, in order to further develop the notions of teacher's intercultural and interreligious competence as well as to increase understanding of the most effective ways of developing them in teacher education, more research is needed.

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