

NEWSLETTER

Issue 8 > July 2018

Welcome

... or rather Good bye!?! For this is the last issue of the READY newsletter. In order to update you on recent events with regards to READY, this newsletter is slightly longer than usual. You can find a detailed report on the international multiplier event as well as some conclusions from the project. Furthermore, we have given voice to some RE student teachers, who participated in the project and they have reflected on their experience. Enjoy reading the newsletter and we hope it inspires some new thoughts on religion and diversity.

Recap of the READY project

After three years of intensive work, communication and encounter the READY project is coming to an end on August 31st, 2018. The project has included:

- 10 transnational project meetings in Aberdeen, London, Münster, Karlstad, Tübingen, Vienna and Zurich
- 5 one week study visits in European partner institutions, bringing together RE teacher trainees and RE teacher educators of different countries
- Experiences with eTwinning in RE teacher education
- Much, sometimes daily, communication via email, phone, skype
- Two national and one international multiplier event for over 200 colleagues and students in London, Tübingen and Vienna
- Numerous presentations, workshops and discussions about READY at regional, national and international conferences

The aim of the READY project was to draw attention to the European dimension of RE

teacher education. Religious education is being questioned and changing across Europe, it is trying to meet the challenges of growing diversity on many different levels. We have learnt a lot from each other and have developed a professional and amicable network of teacher educators. These contacts will certainly stay after the official end of the READY project.



As the READY project comes to an end, we can offer seven products, in the language of the ERASMUS+ programme, seven "intellectual outputs":

- Guidelines for the use of Etwinning and online communication in teacher education
- Guidelines for planning, organising and evaluating study visits
- Case studies comparing RE and RE teacher education in the five READY countries
- Guidelines for teaching about "Religion and diversity"
- A documentation of the eTwinning process, RE lessons and the study visits, including three DVDs: "Creation and Diversity", "Exploring RE in Austria" and "Exploring RE in Sweden"
- Our READY website (www.readyproject.eu) full of material and reflections and which will be open for at least three more years
- A READY print publication which will be published in cooperation with the Waxmann-Verlag Münster soon

Final Multiplier Event

From 11-12 April 2018, Vienna was host to the final Multiplier Event of the READY project. Participants from nine European countries attended and participated in the keynotes on whether and in what form an ethnically, culturally and religiously diverse Europe needs religious education and consider how the RE classroom can do justice to this. The central findings from the project were further developed in a variety of workshops which reflected on issues such as theology and truth claims, RE for everyone in a class, Islamic RE and inter-religiousness in early childhood education. Participants also had the opportunity to go on city walks through the Islamic and Jewish Vienna and learn about the impact of the Reformation on the city as well as experience an 'Evening of Welcome' with Sufi and Klezmer music.



Participants of the international multiplier event

Issues we share

Diversity

Religious diversity does not automatically create tolerance and respect. Although people exchange ideas about other cultures, religions or denominations, often the acquired or self-constructed images of the other remain. The religious Other thus seldom emerges as a relatable individual but remains opposite to "Us" and does not become a "You" (cf. Martin Buber).

External and internal ethnic, religious and cultural diversity can be seen in schools and classrooms and hence also in RE. We have learned that sometimes RE teachers feel underprepared to teach students from diverse backgrounds. As it has been shown that conflicts that are quickly classified as religious

actually have social or cultural triggers, more and more educational scientists are arguing for the necessity of a solid theological basic education for teachers of all subjects - but especially RE teachers - as well as expertise in dialogue, communication and mediation in order to deal appropriately with the emerging overlapping situations (or 'critical incidents').

Cultural and religious self-awareness and knowledge of the implications of cultures, religions and world views for the school as a living environment can break down one's own prejudices, question prevailing communication patterns and - if necessary - deconstruct existing "truths" about others.

Religious literacy

Religious traditions arise out of and continue to be shaped by particular social, historical and cultural contexts. Lacking this insight can produce the potential for misunderstanding, stereotyping and oversimplification - based on ignorance. RE is considered an essential means of cultivating religious literacy through reflection of basic texts, symbols or rituals in order to discern and analyse the fundamental intersections of religion and social/political/cultural life.

RE as a school subject

Despite the overall view that a deeper understanding of religion, world view, belief, spirituality and ethic is comfortable to comprehend the variety of any kind of belief systems, however, the role of religion and RE in school is disputed at the same time. The debate is not so much about respecting the faiths and world views of those present, but to what extent schools should and can contribute to religious education and literacy at all.

Furthermore, the point has been raised about whether certain forms of RE (e.g. denominational RE) promote segregation processes and thus hinder a better mutual understanding.



Final Multiplier Event

What to consider

Prof. em. Siebren Miedema, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, from the Netherlands, described the return of the concept of Bildung (edification) to the current discussion about teaching content and goals and outlined the relevance of religion and world view in a secularized environment. In a world of constant measurability, accountability and control, the necessity of (religious) education rests

- in fostering religious or world view personhood formation as well as identity formation of all pupils in all schools
- in the contribution of dialogue, encounter and understanding to personal and social well-being
- in countering "politics of fear in an anxious age" (Nussbaum) with the cultivation of empathy and principles such as openness, participation and inclusivity.



International discussions on diversity in the classroom

Prof. Andrea Lehner-Hartmann, University of Vienna, raised the question of why religion and humanistic world views have an important role to play in school environments beyond RE. Among other things, she argued that religion can substantiate the commitment of those working in school

- to perceive students and teachers not merely in their functions but as people with their specific questions, needs and expectations
- to speak out against the exclusion of individuals on the basis of their origin or religion
- to oppose the misuse of the human being in view of mere (economic) exploitability
- to nudge others to decide for or against this view.

Heinz Ivkovits, KPH Wien/Krems

Insights from the READY project

Here I will outline some of the insights that have come through after many discussions and reflections amongst the READY team. The discussions have been at times intense and have generally taken place after study visits to schools in the participating countries (Austria, England, Germany, Scotland and Sweden). All members of the team agree that study visits in different educational environments are very enriching; they challenge presupposed views and have helped participants to become reflective thinkers about the practice in their own countries. Thus, we see a great need of internationalization in RE, especially in teacher education and training where students can meet, compare, discuss and learn from each other. In today's multicultural classrooms, teachers need the competence to discuss the subject from different perspectives, as well have knowledge about different educational systems in the world. Educators also need to be aware of the background and aim and purpose of RE in different countries as these are varied.

Internationalization as a concept has many meanings. In this context, the READY team want to stress the dimensions of courses for studying abroad, connect with students over the world through the internet as well as for institutions to construct an internationalized curriculum. Numerous researchers emphasize the centrality of the curriculum and the internationalization of the curriculum and teaching and learning processes as critical elements of internationalization. Knight (1994) describes the curriculum as "the backbone of the internationalization process" (Knight, 1994, p. 6; cf. Leask, 2001).

One of the issues being reflected on, is that of "Us and Them" in RE education. How can the dangers of simplistic and stereotyped categorisations in general be avoided? There is a danger that categorizations simplify the issue but categorization is a way of identifying different ideas which is needed for understanding the world. However, there are inherent problems with simplification and categorizations which should be avoided in RE. The main objection to simplification/categorization in general is that such processes might lead to divisions and separations and thus

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create borders between students, which is contrary to what the aim of the subject of RE is about. If the primary objective of RE is to enable unity, respect and understanding, then we need to think carefully about our language as well as how the content is represented, taught and studied. Thus, the language used in RE needs to be considered carefully both in school and in teacher education.



Another issue discussed in the READY team has been the issue of how to deal with truth claims in RE. It relates to issues of ontology and processes of theological reasoning. As some religions make strong absolutist truth claims about the laws of nature and human nature, while others make relativist or universalist truth claims, the role and aim of RE is interesting. In an article on religious education, the British theologian Andrew Wright proposes that searching for ultimate truth is "the key driver of critical religious education" (2003, 279). Furthermore, Wright believes that such an "enquiry constitutes a 'Wissenschaft', a striving for wisdom, understanding and truth on the basis of reasoned, ordered and disciplined thought" (2003, 280). Wright is one of the scholars who argues that RE should be about "truth claims", even in a non-denominational RE education. Members of the READY team discussed the issue of "truth claims" at length.

One member commented:

The READY project have discussed at length organizational and strategic issues when a colleague, protestant theologian, suggests not to forget discussing content. His impression is that Swedes make do with the 'description and comparison of religious phenomena'. It is true that pupils also exchange personal opinions, but basically the question of truth and the existential reference which is necessary for the understanding of religions are excluded. The colleague uses the term "truth claim" and we notice in the body language of our Swedish colleagues but also of our colleagues from England and Scotland that they react with spontaneous rejection. They do not believe a "truth claim" should have a place in schools. Obviously, the colleagues understand the expression "truth claim" in the sense of a claim of absoluteness und connect it with the idea of imposing other persons one's own concept of truth. [...] Another colleague explains very competently and in details that exactly this is not meant by Jürgen Habermas, who also uses the term "truth claim". The name and philosophical approach of Habermas triggers positive connotations for the colleagues coming from Scandinavia and Great Britain but nevertheless, they refuse to use the expression "truth claim". The debate is intensive and committed and is flaring up again in the evening.

Discussing, challenging, learning and listening to each other with mutual interest and respect has been a distinctive feature of the READY project. The issue of "truth claims" is just one example of the sensitive concepts in RE that is important to scrutinize from our different positions. Concepts such as "Us and Them" and the issues about truth claims are central to our discussions about how to teach RE in a plural society. As can be seen from the quotes above, the discussions in the READY team have been at times intense but very important. The team has really been a community of practice (Wenger, 1998). Etienne Wenger summarizes "Communities of Practice (CoP)" as "groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly." Yeah, the READY team is an example of this.

Kerstin von Brömssen (Karlstad University)

What else is new?

Transnational Partner Meeting Aberdeen

During June 12-14, 2018 the READY consortium met for the final time at the University of Aberdeen in Scotland. This meeting allowed the team to finalise the project's intellectual outputs, particularly the Print Publication which the Comenius Institute has been leading on. This will summarise and collate the many fruits of the project and present the many insights and benefits for teacher educators and student teachers that have emerged. As part of the meeting the group travelled to the Findhorn Foundation (www.findhorn.org) which offered a tour of this eco-village and discussion of contemporary spirituality. The group also visited one of the recumbent stone circles which are unique to the North East of Scotland.



One of the main discussion points of the meeting was how to take forward the relationships, friendships and networking that the project has facilitated. It was agreed that the consortium would meet and present on READY at the European Academy of Religion (March 2019) and European Forum for Teachers of Religious Education (August 2019) conferences. Members of the consortium are already collaborating on research papers and it is hoped this can be further developed.

Print Publication

A final product of the project will be a real printed book. It summarizes the main activities and outcomes of the READY project and presents issues, viewpoints and insights. The publication is offered to inform teacher educators, RE student teachers, RE teachers and other stakeholders of RE as well as politicians about main activities and products of the READY project. Readers may want to connect the presented material and insights to their own contexts and their concern for a value oriented school education where religions and non religious world views have a place and a space in an inclusive concept of education. The book includes a glossary of key terms of the project and is organized in six chapters. It

provides

a general introduction of the READY project, puts READY in the wider context of Religious Education in Europe and introduces the wide range of elements and activities which sit under the umbrella of READY.

DVD on Religious Education in Sweden

Religion for you and in your neighbourhood

In Sweden, religion is a compulsory subject for all pupils. As an integrated subject, all pupils study the same subject, in the same classroom. Teachers would not know the religious affiliation of pupils. Depending on the area of the school, the class might be very diverse, or less so. The discourse of religion in Swedish society in general could be described as sceptical towards at least religious institutions, as well as, arguably, religion itself. The teacher thus needs to both introduce religion as a phenomenon as such to the students, as well as introduce "the five world religions", as the curriculum puts it. We have tried to illustrate how actual lessons might look on the DVD. Student teachers, participating in the READY project, prepared lessons which subsequently were taught in schools, in Karlstad.

Two clips, of two different lectures, by two different pairs of student teachers are included. The lesson "My Identity", is based on one goal of the RE curriculum; that students should be able to give examples of how identity is shaped and connected in relation to religion and conceptions of life, as well as a developed analysis of religion related to ethnicity, gender, sexuality and socioeconomic background is also part of the qualities of knowledge. The student teachers have open discussions about identity with a small group of pupils.

In the other lesson, "Where can you find religion", the student teachers explore the concept of religion together with the pupils. They discuss different kinds of definition of religion, and ask them to reflect on where they can see religion. They discuss religion within the private sphere and official religion, as well as expressions of religion found publicly. An exercise, included on the DVD, is the pupils locating where religion can be found in the local area, using the tool Google Earth.

Going beyond

Student teachers about READY

35 student teachers were part of the READY project. Some just participated in the online exchange, others had the chance to visit other RE student teachers in their country and to observe real-life RE lessons. At the end of the project they were asked: "What impact has READY had on your practice as an RE teacher?" The following brief statements are from RE student teachers from each of the participating countries.

The READY project has sharpened my personal view on diversity wherever I come into contact with diversity and variety, with strangers or things that are 'different'. Since joining this great project, I now know that religious education is a subject with a principle of diversity. Diversity invigorates our everyday life and makes life extraordinary and 'colourful'. It's interesting and amazing to see the world from different perspectives - or even to try it. Since READY, I have focused more on diversity in religious education.

Annette Biderbost, Austria

One thing I learnt was perhaps teaching religion from an insider's perspective isn't an issue if it means that pupils can grasp some form of understanding about why people believe and its influence on them. I've found that when teaching RE, especially Islam, I share deeper and personal experiences. At first, I feared pupils from other faiths and those of no faith may feel detached, but it has made for a greater acceptance of each other, as well as an understanding that the classroom is a safe space for pupils to express their religious and non-religious identities.

Siddiqa Khatun, England

The subject RE offers students profitable experiences like no other. However, teaching RE is not easy! READY offered me the opportunity to meet young RE teachers from Scotland, who are facing the same challenge as we do in Germany. Through the exchange with fellow teachers I've been encouraged in my work. It is good to know that there are motivated RE teachers in many European countries. Together we can give our students a space to think about the big questions of life.

Gabi Weber, Germany

It was through my experiences with the READY project that I started to come to terms with my role as an RE teacher. By being given the opportunity to engage in real-life classroom observations, I started to gain a real sense that simple trust and respect were of vital importance in teaching. [...] At every opportunity I try to ensure I get to know the pupils and their families. My students come from a variety of backgrounds and cultures; just as there is no such thing as fixed-ability, there is no such thing as a fixed-identity.

Stewart Clelland, Scotland

READY has helped me to think about Religious Education and different ways of teaching. This includes examples of different paths for learning and how religious phenomenon may be introduced in multicultural groups of pupils. Moreover, the experiences have really made me reflect upon my own cultural - as well as Religious Educational - frame.

Tilda Aronsson, Sweden

More student teachers have reflected on their experiences during the READY project. You can find all statements in full on our website: <http://www.readyproject.eu/uploads/files/1532465266Finalstatements.18.7.18.pdf>