Introduction to religions and world views creating purpose and meaning for learning

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EDITORIAL

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The topic of this special issue is 'Religions and worldviews creating purpose and meaning for learning'. Scholars such as Noddings (1993) and Nash (2002) have called for increased attention to issues related to values, purpose and meaning in public education. At schools, religious education has traditionally acknowledged these issues as one of the core features of the subject. Recently, a group of scholars showed with empirical data how problematic the issue of meaningful learning is in religious education in the UK (Conroy et al. 2013) – although the results may have a more universal application (see Ubani, Poulter, and Kallioniemi 2015). However, researchers such as Loukes (1962), Grimmitt (1987) and, in the Nordic countries, Hartman (1986) has already been highlighting the question of going beyond the surface of the educational practice and learning. Arguably, this scholarship has aided the formation of the learning *from* religion approach in religious education, which emphasises human personality development (Hull 2002). However, as the recent results by Conroy et al. imply, meaningfulness of education remains a problematic question in religious education (see also Ubani 2013).

In addition to 'religion', the work on this special issue has been built around the terms 'meaningfulness', 'purpose' and 'world views'. 'Meaningful', 'significant' or 'purposeful' are terms that are used in different research traditions with an emphasis on the aspect relevant to the respective tradition. One such research tradition is the humanistic psychological approach benefitting, for instance, from the work of the founder of logotherapy, Viktor Frankl. This tradition has emphasised the existential aspect in meaning and significance (Frankl 1946/2004; Baumeister 1991; Emmons 1999; Pargament 1999; Ubani 2013) – in many ways, the discussion on purposefulness in education (Tirri and Kuusisto 2016; Damon 2008) can be viewed as based on this school of research and build on the intentional quality inherent in that research tradition (Ubani 2013). The research in educational sciences stemming from the constructivist approach on learning has emphasised meaningfulness as a quality of good learning: Jonassen, Howland, Moore and Marra (2003) describe that meaningful learning takes place when learners are 'active, constructive, intentional, cooperative, and working on authentic tasks' (Jonassen et al. 2003; Jonassen and Strobel 2006). On the other hand, in the situated learning theory, meaningfulness is evaluated, for instance, on the basis of one being able to behave and produce in such a manner that other members of the same community are able to understand one's actions and creative artefacts: to function in a meaningful way (Lave and Wenger 1991; Wenger 1998).

In the 1990s, in research on children and youth, 'world view' was examined, for instance, in a cognitive psychological (Helve 1996) and cognitive constructivist framework (Erricker and Erricker 2000), but originally the concept finds its home

in German *Weltanschauung*. In general, 'worldview' can be defined as a 'set of assumptions about physical and social reality'. These assumptions can have 'powerful effects on cognition and behaviour' (Koltko-Rivera 2004). During the past decades, 'world view' has often been used in international religious and values education literature as a concept apart from religions and as inclusive of non-religious world views (Erricker and Erricker 2000), or as a concept explicitly encompassing both religious and non-religious world views (Van der Kooij, de Ruyter, and Miedema 2017; Miedema 2012, 2014). In the field of religious education, recent developments toward integrated practices in somewhat confessionalised contexts have often found the concept useful and more inclusive than 'religion' (ÅHs, Poulter, and Kallioniemi 2015; Commission of Religious Education 2018). While it can be argued that it is useful for depicting the individual diversity in the age of pluralisation and secular-isation with regards to outlook on life, beliefs and values, concerns have also been raised that 'world view' as a substitute concept for religion in religious education tends to neglect the global, societal, cultural and communal aspects of religions and is actually narrowing the scope to the individual in education about religions (Ubani Forthcoming; Ubani, Rissanen, and Poulter Forthcoming). In more generic educa-tional literature, the term 'world view' has been used to some extent in themes related to the sociology of education (e.g. Vaisey and Lizardo 2010), or educational psychology perspective; however, more research is needed also in these respects. From the educational psychology viewpoint, the concept of world view is often used with an attribute of 'personal'. The significance of the 'world view' or 'personal world view' in this sense is considered to lay in its function in the learning processes (see, e.g., Rauste-von Wright 1986; Hirsto 2001, 2012a). Similar perspectives can also be found in the sociology of education perspectives to 'world view', but educational psychology perspectives have conceptualised its function further and brought the importance of it in relation to learning strategies and professional learning (e.g. Hirsto and Tirri 2009; Hirsto 2012b) as well as in relation to experiences of the learning environment (e.g. Rockenbach et al. 2015; Mayhew et al. 2016).

Suffice it to say that while it is possible to see a family resemblance between the concepts of world view, purposes and values, bridging research on these topics has been scarce. One concrete example of such a bridge is a researcher community functioning as a special interest group 19 of the European Association of Learning and Instruction (EARLI). The EARLI SIG 19: 'Religions and Worldviews in Education' (previously 'Religious and Spiritual Education') was established in 2003 to bring together research-ers from various backgrounds, such as theology, religious studies, psychology, peda-gogy, educational studies and philosophy. The SIG 19 advocates empirical and theoretical research that includes cognitive, social and emotional components. The special issue is guest edited by scholars representing the special interest group. The previous special issue by the research community was published in 2014 in the Journal of Beliefs and Values volume 35, issue 2 (Kuusisto and Lovat, Eds.). The articles of the present special issue represent the diverse theoretical and methodological approaches in the SIG 19 community. The majority of the papers of this special issue were presented at the biennial SIG 19 conference held in 2018 in Joensuu, Finland. The conference included over 30 participants from, for instance, Finland, Sweden, Norway, Germany, Ireland, France, US, Netherlands, China, Iran and Mexico.

This special issue consists of six original peer-reviewed articles. The first article is a study by Riegel and Delling. They investigate how religious education in Germany fills its primary goal of developing the pupil's personal world view within a pluralistic society. The topical structure of 15 teaching units, including 116 videotaped lessons, gives evidence to a claim that it is possible to address the plurality of the world views within denominational religious education. However, they argue that this opportunity is not frequently utilised since most religious education classes address only their own denominational issues.

The second article, by Hirsto, studies experiences of learning environments in relation to personal world views among Finnish theology students (N = 80). In the study, the learning environment in higher education is perceived from the social dimension and conceptualised in terms of experiences of representing majority, minority and non-religious world views. Hirsto highlights the importance of understanding the contextual nature of world view experiences in learning environments. The results indicate that students who identify themselves with majority or minority groups are more dedicated to their personal world view than non-religious students and that students' experiences of the learning environment varied regarding the group they identified themselves.

The third article is by Viinikka and Ubani and also focuses on Finnish theology students, more particularly student teachers of religious education (N = 8). The study examines students' expectations of their professional development within the framework of twenty-first-century skills. The study indicates domain-dependent and independent expectations. Student teachers expect to gain religious literacy during their studies in theology, and social and interaction skills during their pedagogical studies. According to the study, skills in conducting dialogue were associated with both theology and pedagogical studies.

Eisenschmidt, Kuusisto, Poom-Valickis and Tirri's article is the fourth contribution to the special issue. It examines worldviews from the perspective of moral virtues. This is being done by studying exemplary principals (N = 4) from two neighbouring countries, Estonia and Finland. Study shows how moral virtues guide the principals' work and decision-making when they resolve critical incidents related to themselves, their teachers, students and families as well as the whole community. The participating principals most often demonstrated the virtues of wisdom and knowledge in dealing with critical incidents in their schools. In addition, humanity and courage were also distinctive virtues of the exemplary principals.

The final two articles of this special issue discuss moral education in Iran, thus providing perspectives on Islamic world views in educational contexts in their own right. First, Hedayati, Kuusisto, Gholami and Tirri investigate moral conflicts identified by Iranian secondary school students (N = 302) and teachers (N = 20). According to the analysis, the identified moral conflicts were related to teaching staff, students, parents and sensitive issues. The conflicts connected to sensitive issues illustrate how questioning the dominant world view and its practices seemed to be more acute among female students than male. Furthermore, the study indicates that, in Iranian schools, both students and teachers need moral sensitivity in order to consider the perspective of one another more carefully. This is the fifth article of the special issue.

In the sixth article, Soleimani and Lovat investigate the moral component of English-language Teaching (ELT) in Iran. According to the study, the ELT teachers (N = 30) perceive morality as intertwined with their instructional and management behaviour. The moral conflicts in teaching arose when teachers had to choose between good (moral) and bad. The study also showed that the teachers' justifications of moral decisions were highly individual, subjective and contextualised.

This special issue adheres to a view that questions concerning learning and instruction as well as religions and world views are not only integral but also intertwined in public education today. The articles of this Special Issue show how one's personal world views are constructed and challenged by the goals of the curriculum and interactions between students, teachers, parents and principals. With this special issue, we advocate the view that for public education to be relevant in the twenty-first century, we need not only educational policy and practice but also educational research and teacher education to be cognisant of purpose, value and meaning as the core of sound education at all levels.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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