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Article

Religious Literacy in National Curricula of Estonia

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Abstract: Religious literacy may be seen as a prerequisite for religious freedom. This article analyzes how the development of religious literacy is supported in the curricula of Estonian primary and secondary schools and the extent to which these schools guarantee religious freedom. We assume that developing religious literacy is not limited to the lessons of Religious Education but can also be achieved in schools in which Religious Education is not taught. We analyze the national curricula for both basic and upper secondary schools to understand how religious literacy is represented, whether implicitly or explicitly. We are particularly interested in how the competencies of religious literacy are supported in the curricula and how freedom of religion is ensured in state-funded schools. The texts are analyzed according to the core curriculum analysis method and the religious literacy model, which identifies four stages in the development of religious literacy: examining religion as a category, engaging with a disposition towards religions, building up relevant knowledge, and promoting skills to interact well in multicultural society. This analysis shows that the dominant discourse related to religious literacy in the curricula focuses on social skills for future citizens, but religious literacy itself, a vital skill for operating in the modern multicultural world, is scarcely mentioned. Instead, it is present primarily as an implicit concept, and religion is portrayed as distant both in time and in space. Thus, this approach to education contributes insufficiently to the freedom of religion needed in a contemporary multicultural society.

Keywords: religious literacy; national curricula; freedom of religion; cultural diversity



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1. Introduction

At least since the establishment of UNESCO in 1946, literacy has been considered an important guarantor of human rights that allows individuals to participate in social processes and contributes to both spiritual and economic development (UNESCO 2021). Similarly, religious literacy is considered a prerequisite for freedom of religion, as stated in Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Both the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) and the Council of Europe see quality education that includes knowledge about religions and beliefs as an important factor in fostering freedom of religion or belief (OHCHR n.d.; OSCE 2007). Accordingly, the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe has agreed that addressing religious and non-religious convictions in general education is essential for fostering human rights and democratic citizenship (Council of Europe 2008a). Similarly, the academic literature argues that religion must be discussed in the context of education, as it has become a flashpoint for public discussion (Jackson 2014, p. 14). Our article focuses on education about religion in schools.

There are profound differences in how education about religions is provided in different countries based on each country's religious composition, the structure of its educational system, its history, and the relations between church and state (Berglund et al. 2016; Franken 2021). In addition, different schools in one country may apply different policies. For example, in Estonia, there are private schools with confessional RE, municipal schools that provide comparative RE based on a religious studies approach, and schools with no special subject for dealing with religion (Schihalejev 2014). While religious literacy is usually associated with RE (Marcus and Allison 2021, p. 17), it has been argued that to be consistent

with the social needs of a post-secular society, religious literacy should not be limited to RE only, but should be a task for the whole education (Biesta et al. 2019, p. 30). This is even more urgent in countries and schools where there is no special subject for learning about religions.

Davie argues that religious literacy is most needed in secular societies with a pluralistic and multi-religious composition. Here, nuanced knowledge about religion, together with the ability to speak on issues related to religion, is a necessity rather than added value (Davie 2015, p. xi). In a pluralistic society, a lack of religious literacy may lead authorities and the media to underestimate the religious aspects of social phenomena or use stereotypes of religions to incorrectly identify the causes of situations that are only indirectly related to religion (Sakaranaho et al. 2020, p. 2). Therefore, the acquisition of religious literacy is becoming increasingly important in general education, which can help people to navigate and interact critically and constructively with diverse global and local worldviews—thereby contributing to their freedom of religion.

To improve the quality of education, OSCE suggests, among other recommendations, to “*evaluate existing curricula being used in public schools that touch upon teaching about religions and beliefs*” (OSCE 2007, p. 19). Accordingly, the purpose of this study is to ascertain the extent to which the Estonian national curricula support students’ freedom of religion by providing knowledge and skills connected to religious literacy to help them operate successfully in the modern pluralistic world. The research analyzed both the national curriculum for basic schools¹ and the national curriculum for upper secondary schools, in order to understand how and to what extent religious literacy is represented in the curricula. This article will answer the following research questions:

1. To what extent is the discourse of religious literacy (implicitly and explicitly) represented in the national curriculum for basic schools and the national curriculum for upper secondary schools of Estonia? What is the central discourse of religious literacy in these curricula?
2. Which competencies of religious literacy are supported in the curricula of formal education? What are their strengths and shortcomings in relation to freedom of religion or belief?

Before analyzing the curricula, we present the theoretical framework of religious literacy together with the educational model of religious literacy that underpins our tool for analysis. This overview helps to comprehend the multilayered nature of religious literacy, which consists of several different skills students can acquire during general education. As literacy is always contextual (Gee 2015), we briefly describe the Estonia’s religious landscape.

2. Religious Literacy

Along with attempting to achieve general literacy as a skill, researchers have studied and tried to define literacy as a concept. Literacy can be understood as the ability to understand and create written texts, but also, more broadly, as a socialization process by which one acquires competencies for coding and decoding all sorts of texts, including non-textual media, information flows, and the ever-increasing changes in one’s social environment (Biesta et al. 2019, p. 10). Literacy may also be explored in the context of a specific subject field, such as media, digital, visual, or religious literacy.

Leu and his colleagues have classified literacy as a deictic term, claiming that changes in the nature of literacy will outpace the creation of a theory of this phenomenon in line with the changes taking place in society (Leu et al. 2017). These rapid changes are facilitated by new technology, the Internet, and glocalization, a process in which global trends take place-specific forms (Robertson 2012). Other researchers have also emphasized the dependence of the meaning and content of the concept of literacy on the context, culture, and social practice in which it is used (e.g., Barton et al. 2000; Hawkins 2013; Gee 2015).

The need to approach literacy as a contextual concept is most evident in the example of religious literacy. Von Brömssen and her colleagues distinguish between four main discourses of religious literacy:

- “(1) academic rationalism, where subject-based knowledge is considered as most important, and therefore the canon in the academic subjects is the starting point
- (2) a social efficiency curriculum, where knowledge considered important for a future citizen is valued the most
- (3) a humanistic curriculum, where knowledge that contributes to the individual student’s personal development is valued the most, and
- (4) a social reconstructivist curriculum, where the social and political potential of the curriculum is emphasised” (von Brömssen et al. 2020, p. 134).

All four discourses are based on the concept of religion as situated in particular historical and geographical context of a country, but every discourse is defined by its main objective.

The academic rationalism discourse is primarily used by non-confessional approaches to education about religion, for example, in the Swedish curriculum (von Brömssen et al. 2020, p. 143). This approach is exemplified in the writing of Diane Moore, who defines religious literacy as *“the ability to discern and analyze the fundamental intersections of religion and social/political/cultural life through multiple lenses”* (Moore 2015). In addition, Moore describes a religiously literate person as one who has specific knowledge and skills, including:

“a basic understanding of the history, central texts (where applicable), beliefs, practices and contemporary manifestations of several of the world’s religious traditions as they arose out of and continue to be shaped by particular social, historical and cultural contexts; and the ability to discern and explore the religious dimensions of political, social and cultural expressions across time and place” (Moore 2014, p. 380).

She notes that it is important to understand religions and religious influences in context and as inextricably woven into all dimensions of human experience (ibid.). She emphasizes the connection between religious literacy and academic studies of religion and culture.

The primary value of a curriculum based on **social efficiency** discourse is to help students understand and communicate with people of different beliefs—this discourse values civic competencies. As an example, the model of religious literacy by Francis and Dinham, described below, is related to knowledge of the subject, but this knowledge is not the ultimate goal. Instead, it is seen as a way to cooperate in a contemporary multicultural society in which knowledge of religious traditions, the ability to find information, and critical evaluation contribute to successful engagement in everyday life and society (Francis and Dinham 2015, pp. 266–268; Dinham 2020, pp. 5–6).

The humanist discourse focuses on the ability to critically reflect on and express one’s beliefs. The purpose of learning about different religions and worldviews is to clarify and cultivate one’s own values and personal worldview and to enable individuals to engage in dialogue with a variety of schools of thought. Awareness of one’s personal worldview helps one to understand the complexity of religious phenomena. For example, one of the first definitions of religious literacy in scientific literature is *“the ability . . . to reflect, communicate, and act in an informed, intelligent, and sensitive manner towards the phenomenon of religion”* (Wright 1993, p. 47). Similar discourses can be found in later literature (Richardson 2017; Arweck and Jackson 2012); however, these authors also value religious literacy as a factor in increasing social cohesion.

The social constructivist discourse emphasizes the role of religious literacy in initiating social changes. Confessional RE highlights the internal potential of religion that enables the followers of a particular religion to contribute to making society fairer, while non-confessional education underlines this discourse when religious literacy is addressed as a factor that prevents extremism and radicalization (Council of Europe 2015; RAN 2015). The advantage of RE in the context of formal education is that it provides a neutral environment in which students can formulate their thoughts and worries and discuss different issues that are important to them. This aspect of neutrality is not always guaranteed outside of formal contexts (RAN 2018). The need for religious literacy is also emphasized when discussing international relations, communication, and diplomacy in conflict areas. It is seen as an essential tool for fostering dialogue and ensuring peace (Helsinki Policy Forum 2016; UNHCR 2014; OSCE 2019). Educators are somewhat skeptical about overemphasizing this focus because it enables a unilateral approach to religions and can cause additional tensions instead of benefits (Dinham and Francis 2015, p. 6).

In our analysis we select all the content of the curricula that is connected to any of the abovementioned discourses of religious literacy (academic, humanistic, social efficiency and social reconstruction) and determine the main discourse of religious literacy.

3. Religion in Estonia

Religious literacy always relates to the context in which it is acquired and applied. What is the religious reality that must be considered alongside global processes in Estonia? Estonia has been described as highly secular (Pickel et al. 2012) or one of the most secular countries (Ringvee 2014; Pollack and Rosta 2017).

The Constitution of Estonia stipulates the freedom of religion and belief (State Herald 1992, § 40–42). Although the proportion of religiously affiliated people in society today is small, Estonia has been religiously diverse for a long time. Since the 16th century Reformation movement, the Lutheran church has been the leading religious institution in Estonia and has influenced its culture and the mentality of its people. Since the second half of the 18th century, there has been a large Orthodox community in Estonia and a community of Old Believers who escaped to the border areas of the Russian Empire to avoid persecution. Further, Catholics, Jews, and Muslims lived in Estonia for several centuries, while several Christian denominations, such as Adventists, Methodists, and Baptists, have settled in the region since the beginning of the 20th century. According to the 1934 census, 98% of the population professed some sort of religious affiliation (78% of the population were Lutherans, 18% Eastern Orthodox Christians, 2% belonged to other Christian denominations, and 0.4% to other religions) (Riigi Statistika Keskbüroo 1935, pp. 118–121). The number of adherents dropped significantly during the Soviet regime in Estonia (1940–1991), and after the collapse of the Soviet Union, adherence to a religion, especially to Western Christianity, continued to decline slowly.

According to the latest census, 29% of the Estonian population over 15 years old considers themselves affiliated with a particular religion (Table 1). According to the European Values Survey of 2018, the proportion of people attending religious services at least once a month was 8.6%, and 19.5% of respondents said that they pray at least once a week (EVS 2020).

In addition to the range of organized religions, we should not ignore non-religious worldviews, the increasing presence of fluid and non-organized forms of religion (Uibu 2016), and individual religiosity (Altnurme 2018). Recent studies have shown that regardless of the apparent absence of interest in religion, phenomena connected to religion, such as pilgrimages (Sepp and Remmel 2020), belief in healers, or breathing techniques, have gained popularity in Estonia (Remmel and Uibu 2015).

Table 1. Responses to “Do you have any religious affiliation?” and “Please indicate your religious affiliation”. Source: [Statistics Estonia \(2013a\)](#).

Affiliation	Number	% of Total
Feels an affiliation to religion	320,872	29.3%
<i>Christianity, total</i>	<i>310,481</i>	<i>28.4%</i>
Orthodox	176,773	16.2%
Lutheran	108,513	9.9%
Baptist	4507	0.4%
Roman Catholic	4501	0.4%
Other Christian	16,187	1.5%
<i>Other religions, total</i>	<i>10,391</i>	<i>0.9%</i>
Earth believer	1925	0.2%
Muslim	1508	0.1%
Buddhist	1145	0.1%
Other religions	5813	0.5%
Does not feel an affiliation to any religion	592,588	54.1%
Refused to answer	157,216	14.4%
Religious affiliation unknown	23,888	2.2%

4. Education about Religion in the Estonian National Curricula

As one of the most secular countries in the world, Estonia does not systematically provide RE or its alternatives in all its public schools. Rather, several forms of RE are found in Estonia. Under the supervision of the Ministry of Education, RE was reintroduced as an elective subject in the early 1990s when Estonia regained its independence ([Valk 2000](#)). Today, only religious private schools may teach confessional RE, and these schools account for less than 2% of all general education schools in Estonia ([Käpp 2018](#), p. 90). In municipal and state schools, RE must be non-confessional and in accordance with the aims and approach described in the national curricula:

“religious studies do not advertise any particular church, congregation or other religious association. The optional course of religious studies is not meant to influence pupils to accept a particular worldview as the norm....but... to prepare the students for life in a pluralistic society and in a world where they will come into contact with people of different religions and world views” ([NCBS 2011](#), app. 9, p. 2; [NCUSS 2011](#), app. 8, p. 2).

The laws in Estonia today give schools the freedom to decide whether or not to provide RE. In most schools, religion is not taught as a distinct subject. In some schools, the subject may be offered as an elective, yet in others it may be obligatory for some classes (for example, for the humanities) and not for others. Studies show that in Estonian municipal schools, RE is taught mainly in upper secondary schools ([Schihalejev 2020](#), p. 3). According to data from the Estonian Education Information System ([EEIS 2020](#)) from the 2020/21 school year, only seven of about 500 municipal schools offered RE during the first stage of studies, four schools offered it in the second stage of studies, and seven schools offered it in the third stage of studies. Thus, it is safe to say that RE in Estonian municipal schools is almost absent.

One of the main arguments not to include Religious Education as a compulsory subject was that topics related to religion were sufficiently covered in other subjects, such as history and literature. For example, even if the aim of Math is not to foster religious literacy, it may still contribute to doing so. So, even though there are no courses on ethics and nearly no RE in Estonian municipal schools, the national curricula cover some content that is connected to the subjects mentioned above through subject field syllabi in different compulsory courses with cross-curricular topics (i.e., topics that are integrated into all syllabi), learning content, or other outputs. For example, the cross-curricular topic “Values and morality” at the third stage of studies states that:

“The pupils will be introduced to various world views and religions (both past and present), which is designed to support the shaping of tolerance, respect and skills of orientation in world view issues,” and “the pupils are guided to discuss topics of values and morality, to compare different positions and justify their positions with the unprejudiced, tactful, open and respectful treatment of different notions” (NCBS 2011, app. 13, p. 9).

5. Method

The empirical data used for this analysis are the general provisions, general parts, and full texts of compulsory subjects and subject field syllabi of the currently valid (entered into force in 2011) Estonian national curriculum for basic schools (hereafter, NCBS) and the national curriculum for upper secondary schools (hereafter, NCUSS). All optional courses and subjects were left out because the goal of the research is to analyze learning content that is obligatory for all general education students in Estonia. While the texts of the curricula reflect the values of the time in which they were created, we examine them in the context of today’s society and values to answer the research questions.

The units of analysis are the units of meaning that indicate content related to religious literacy, whether explicitly or implicitly, and the length of a unit of meaning varies from single phrases to lengthy descriptions. A two-step analysis was applied to the relevant units of meaning.

The first tool used in the analysis was the core curriculum analysis by Levander and Mikkola, in which relevant descriptions from the curricula categorized as brief implicit, brief explicit, extensive implicit, and extensive explicit (Levander and Mikkola 2009, p. 281).

Brief implicit units of meaning express information with a few general words and do not contain specific content or instructions for learning. These units of meaning can be illustrated with an example from the NCUSS in which one option for implementing cross-curricular topics about cultural identity in the subject field of natural sciences is “*Developing tolerance towards different ethnic nationalities and cultures*” (NCUSS 2011, app. 4, p. 5).

Extensive implicit units of meaning provide more complete information but still use general categories and no specific terminology. In this research, while implicit units of meaning consist of curricula content that supports or enables the acquisition of religious literacy, in these cases, religious literacy is not explicitly expressed but is implicitly embedded in cultural diversity. For example, the description of the subject Civics and Citizenship Education states that:

“Civics and Citizenship Education plays an important role in shaping students’ values and attitudes, such as initiative, law compliance, diligence, gender equality, civic initiative, social justice and equal treatment of citizens, respect for human rights, understanding of differences, disapproval of prejudice, sustainable attitude towards the environment, respect for cultural traditions of other nations and countries and desire to learn more about them, valuing the cultural heritage of one’s own country, realizing that people do not live equally well everywhere, etc.” (NCUSS 2011, app. 5, p. 30).

Brief explicit units of meaning use very few words about the content of curricula while explicitly using the term “religion” or other substance-specific terminology. This can be illustrated with an example from the cross-curricular topics of basic school Mathematics: “*By means of percentage calculation and statistics, pupils are able to describe the processes occurring in society in relation to the topic of the multicultural world (different nations, different religions, different social positions in society, etc.)*” (NCBS 2011, app. 3, p. 5).

Extensive explicit units of meaning are characterized by more comprehensive descriptions of curricula content (Levander and Mikkola 2009, p. 281). In this study, these units of meaning express content with terminology connected to discourse about religious literacy, as in the following description of the cross-curricular topic “Values and morality” from the subject field syllabi for Social Studies:

“Students learn to analyze values and moral norms and gain knowledge of the connections between different value systems in a historical-cultural context in connection with religion and worldviews; they reflect on personal values and moral beliefs; they learn to consider different viewpoints and opinions when planning their activities, to value diversity as a precondition of prosperity and development of society” (NCUSS 2011, app. 5, p. 5).

In the second step of the analysis, the educational model of religious literacy by Francis and Dinham (2015) was used. This model identifies four stages in developing religious literacy—examining religion as a category, engagement with disposition towards religions, building up relevant knowledge, and promoting skills to interact well in a religiously plural society. In this study, these stages were applied as analytical categories to identify different types of religious content in the curricula. After identifying both implicit and explicit content, the data were divided according to the model and analyzed using these four categories to identify the extent to which the current NCBS and NCUSS support different skills and competencies of religious literacy and to answer the research questions.

The acquisition of religious literacy entails the mastery of different skills. According to Francis and Dinham, the journey to religious literacy starts with examining religion as a **category** to define the sociological, theological, and philosophical meanings and borders of the subject while focusing on how both religious and secular aspects are characterized in the learning content (Francis and Dinham 2015, p. 267). This phase defines and delineates religion. For example, the subject field syllabus for Art subjects suggests analyzing the connection between art and religion in the following unit of meaning: *“It is important to demonstrate the interconnectivity between the art and the general way of thinking of the same era and to point out the social factors that led to changes in culture and the way of living: the impact of philosophy, religion and regimes and the development of technology and the economy”* (NCUSS 2011, app. 6, p. 12).

The next phase in developing religious literacy involves engaging with one’s **disposition** to promote the understanding of different orientations while examining the factors influencing behaviors and attitudes. In this phase, prejudices and expectations connected to the subject are considered and formulated (Francis and Dinham 2015, p. 267). Entailing a self-reflexive aspect of religious literacy, the focus on disposition supports the formation of self-perception and open unbiased attitudes towards others. Equally important is the student’s understanding of personal stances towards the subject (Shaw 2020, p. 154). This kind of unit of meaning can be found, for example, in the subject field syllabus for Social Studies, in which:

“students learn to analyse values and moral norms and gain knowledge of the connections between different value systems in a historical-cultural context in connection with religion and worldviews; they reflect on personal values and moral beliefs; they learn to consider different viewpoints and opinions when planning their activities, to value diversity as a precondition of prosperity and development of society” (NCUSS 2011, app. 5, p. 5).

To gain **knowledge** about religion, the next phase adds to the individual’s general knowledge about religions the need to examine and evaluate the cultural and historical context of the subject. Francis and Dinham describe knowledge connected to religious literacy as a *“degree of general knowledge about at least some religious traditions, and an awareness of and ability to find out about others”* (Francis and Dinham 2015, p. 266). This can be illustrated with the following unit of meaning from the learning content of the subject field syllabus of Language and Literature:

“the specifics and importance of national culture for people, hiking in one’s own area and travelling in far-away countries, diversity of cultures, beliefs and customs of different nations, how to behave in other cultural settings, hospitality, respecting other cultures and people, intellectuals as people who promote and preserve Estonian national culture” (NCBS 2011, app. 1, p. 15).

The final phase of developing **skills**, according to Francis and Dinham, relies on the previous stages of acquiring religious literacy and is used appropriately based on the context. This can be a specific situation at work or school in which a student copes with religious pluralism or any context related to spirituality in which the student must understand the religious landscape and background along with personal stances and prejudices against the subject. Context-specific knowledge that emerges from this process operates with information about religion as well as uses the different aspects of appropriate language and communication (Francis and Dinham 2015, p. 267). This can be illustrated by the following unit of meaning which represents the different skills that are part of general competencies of the subject field syllabus for Social Studies:

“Personal, Social and Health Education and Religious Studies support the understanding of value systems, the capacity to live in harmony with one’s ideas, words and feelings, having reasons for personal choices and having regard for the welfare of others” (NCBS 2011, app. 5, p. 3).

6. Results

The units of meaning which support religious literacy in the examined curricula are based on the core values of NCBS and NCUSS, which state:

“General human values (honesty, compassion, respect for life, justice, human dignity, respect for self and others) are enshrined as core values, as are social values (liberty, democracy, respect for mother tongue and culture, patriotism, cultural diversity, tolerance, environmental sustainability, rule of law, solidarity, responsibility and gender equality)” (NCBS 2011, p. 2; NCUSS 2011, p. 2).

NCBS and NCUSS indicate 207 units of meaning which express different layers of religious literacy both implicitly and explicitly (110 units of meaning in basic school and 97 in upper secondary school) (Table 2). As Figures 1 and 2 show, religious literacy is mainly supported in the subject field syllabi of social studies and foreign languages and less supported in syllabi for Mathematics, with one unit of meaning, and Physical Education, which has no relevant units of meaning at all.

Table 2. Elements of religious literacy according to the educational model of religious literacy (Levander and Mikkola 2009).

	Brief	Implicit	Extensive	Implicit	Brief	Explicit	Extensive	Explicit
	Basic school	Upper secondary school	Basic school	Upper secondary school	Basic school	Upper secondary school	Basic school	Upper secondary school
General part	2	0	2	1	2	0	1	1
Language and literature	10	8	2	1	2	0	1	0
Foreign language	26	15	8	6	0	1	0	0
Natural sciences and math	6	5	1	1	1	1	0	0
Social studies	6	18	5	3	21	20	0	0
Art and technology	14	7	2	3	0	3	0	1

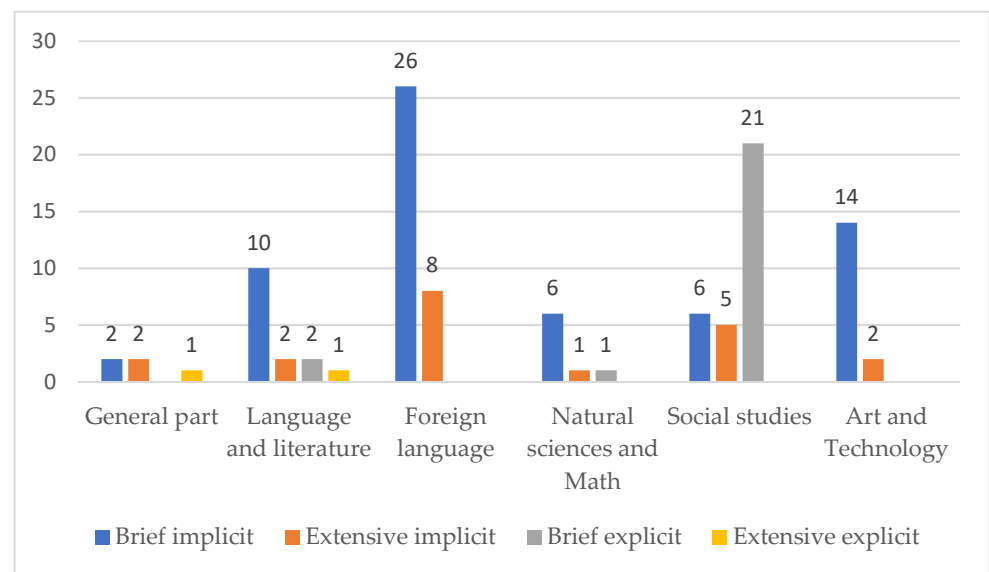


Figure 1. General provisions of NCBS and subject field descriptions for basic schools according to the categories (Levander and Mikkola 2009).

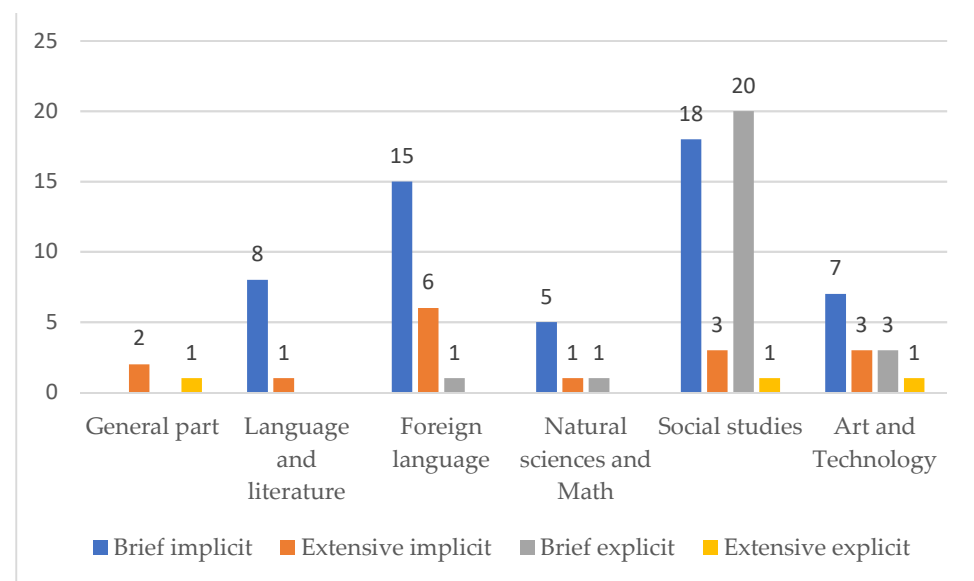


Figure 2. General provisions of NCUSS and subject field descriptions for upper secondary schools according to the categories (Levander and Mikkola 2009).

Although the number of units of meaning is large, many of them are similar (if not identical), and repetitions are found in NCBS and NCUSS, in different stages of education in the same curriculum, as well as in subject field syllabi. This can be seen for example when comparing the general competences considering culture and values that are developed in pupils according to the NCBS and NCUSS. Most of the units of meaning have differences in wording, mainly pertaining to cultural diversity, tolerance, and values.

Analyzing the units of meaning in both curricula shows no significant differences in attention to the acquisition of religious literacy for students in basic schools or upper secondary schools.

The analysis of the content of units of meaning according to the educational model of religious literacy by Francis and Dinham shows that the first step for achieving religious literacy—examining religion as a category—is the least described area in the curricula

(Figure 3), with 23 units of meaning that enable this kind of activity (13 in basic school and 10 in upper secondary school).

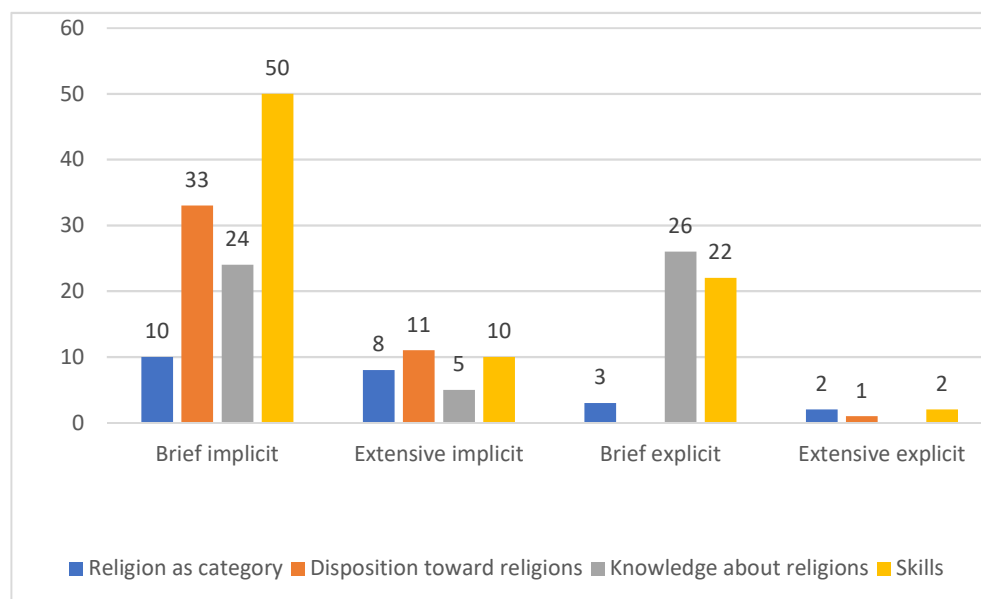


Figure 3. Elements of religious literacy according to the educational model of religious literacy (Francis and Dinham 2015; Levander and Mikkola 2009). Basic schools and upper secondary schools, shown together.

Still, although this is the least supported component of the model for religious literacy, it is the only one mentioned in every subject field syllabus of the curricula except Physical Education. In addition, it has the highest percentage of extensive units of meaning. Most of the units of meaning are implicit, developing religious literacy by raising awareness about different cultural expressions, providing connections, and comparing other disciplines, eras, and contexts.

The main emphasis is on cultural diversity (Language and Literature, Natural Sciences, Social Studies), the multicultural world (Language and Literature, Technology, Mathematics), cultural differences (Foreign Language, Technology), specifics of native cultures (Foreign Language, Technology) and integration (Language and Literature, Foreign Language, Natural Sciences, Social Studies, Technology, and Art Subjects). While basic school subject field syllabi approach religion as a part of social processes and cultural context, the syllabi for upper secondary schools address religion as a **category** only in the syllabi of art subjects when discussing the role of religion in art.

Units of meaning that support the second stage of religious literacy dealing with **disposition** can be found most often in the sections on the integration of subjects, cross-curricular topics, general competencies, description of the subject, and study activities. In the current research, these units focused on the process rather than the outcome of learning. Altogether, there are 45 relevant units of meaning in the curricula, only one of which is explicit (Figure 3).

The greatest attention toward students' disposition is paid in the syllabi of Foreign Languages, in which a connection is made between learning languages and understanding and accepting different cultures and value systems while describing various activities (developing and forming personal opinions, comparing different cultures, eliciting interest, communicating, etc.) to cultivate tolerance and cultural competence. Subject field syllabi for upper secondary school Foreign Languages describe the formation of attitudes as follows:

“Students are guided to reflect on personal values and ethical beliefs; to respect different viewpoints and to defend and justify their positions; to understand the value of diversity. Education focuses on developing critical thinking and

argumentation skills, collection and generalization of relevant information by highlighting links with different fields, previously acquired knowledge and experiences, and issues of value systems and worldviews" (NCUSS 2011, app. 2, p. 5).

There is a total of 55 units of meaning supporting the aspect of religious literacy connected to **knowledge** (Figure 3). These units of meaning describe different facts about cultures, worldviews, religions, and learning outcomes focused on relevant knowledge. Knowledge about modern societies that supports religious literacy is implicitly included in the syllabi of foreign languages. Explicit units of meanings can be found in the syllabi of Civics and Citizenship Education, in which different ethnic, religious, and social groups are examined, and church and religious movements are noted as a part of civil society. Further, the syllabus for Technology states that: *"The students learn to note the handicraft and food traditions of different countries and their connections with history, climate, religion, and cultural customs"* (NCBS 2011, app. 7, p. 10).

Skills related to religious literacy are the most frequently addressed stage of religious literacy. Altogether, there are 84 relevant units of meaning (45 in basic school and 39 in upper secondary school) (Figure 3). Although the subject field syllabi of Social Studies describe the most significant number of skills of religious literacy (16 in basic school and 21 in upper secondary school), they are mostly connected with the specific learning content of history courses when explaining different concepts or understanding and describing particular events. The main objective of teaching relevant skills is to develop tolerance and other democratic values. The syllabi for Social Studies are followed by the syllabi for Foreign Languages, which focus on valuing different cultures and the multicultural world.

This analysis of the units of meaning shows that the relevant descriptions are almost identical in the general parts of the NCBS and NCUSS. Still, one unit of meaning can express diverse skills:

"the ability to evaluate human relations and activities from the standpoint of generally accepted moral norms," "to sense and value one's ties with other people, the society, nature, the cultural heritage of one's own country and nation and those of others, and events in contemporary culture," "to respect the rules of various environments and societal diversity, the particularities of religions and nations," etc. (NCBS 2011, p. 2; NCUSS 2011, p. 2).

The units of meaning from different subject field syllabi are quite similar and declarative, and their content is duplicated in various stages of education and in different subjects.

7. Findings and Discussion

7.1. The Discourse of Religious Literacy in the Current Estonian National Curricula for Basic Schools and Upper Secondary Schools

The discourse of religious literacy can be found in the Estonian national curricula through numerous units of meaning. While the implicit content of the curricula provides possibilities—but no guarantee—to deal with the topic of religion in the classroom, explicit content gives both the vocabulary and competencies to communicate at different levels. This research shows that religious literacy is primarily supported in Estonian general education curricula through implicit means. The main concern about implicit units of meaning in the curricula is that religion can be easily overlooked in the actual educational process.

Estonia has participated in several international studies which examine how students evaluate knowledge about and dispositions towards religions they acquire from or develop through formal school education. Compared to their peers from other European countries, Estonian students disagree more that formal education provides them with knowledge about religions and teaches them to consider people with different worldviews (Kallioniemi et al. 2018; Schihalejev 2013). Considering both Estonian religious diversity and the fuzzy concept of religious phenomena, it is essential to address religious themes more explicitly than they are addressed in the current curricula. Furthermore, while preparing Estonian students to operate in the global context, one must consider the important role of religion.

For example, the Pew Research Center indicates that in the year 2020, about 82% of the world's population was religiously affiliated ([Pew Research Center 2015](#)), and the World Economic Forum associates religion with more than forty different domains, including the future of economic progress and issues connected to COVID-19 and future pandemics ([World Economic Forum n.d.](#)). Therefore, it is impossible to foster cultural and intercultural competence without including religious matters ([Council of Europe 2005](#)).

Similarly, the recommendations of the White Paper on Intercultural Dialogue by the Council of Europe identifies the importance of intercultural dialogue, together with the religious dimension of culture: *“as a means of promoting awareness, understanding, reconciliation and tolerance, as well as preventing conflicts and ensuring integration and the cohesion of society”* ([Council of Europe 2008b](#), p. 8). The same document advises integrating intercultural competencies into all curricula subjects to promote understanding and reduce prejudices through knowledge of all world religions and their history (*ibid*, p. 30).

When examining the discourses of religious literacy in the curricula, one can find humanistic, academic rationalist, and social efficiency discourses. Social reconstructivist discourse, which focuses on political competencies to reduce radicalization and make society fairer through religious literacy, is absent in Estonian curricula for formal education. The curricula mainly focus on social efficiency discourse, which is prominent in units of meaning related to core values and competencies in which different skills for operating successfully in society are valued.

7.2. *The Competencies of Religious Literacy in Estonian Curricula: Strengths and Shortcomings of the Curricula*

The curricula currently used in Estonian formal education distinguish among three categories of competencies: general competencies, subject field competencies, and competencies expected in various stages of education. The latter two are connected to particular subject fields, while general competencies are developed in all subjects ([NCBS 2011](#), p. 3; [NCUSS 2011](#), p. 3). The purpose of general competencies is to contribute to a student's ability to operate constructively as a person and a citizen—therefore, religious literacy can be seen as a part of an individual's overall competence together with specific competencies pertaining to culture, ethics, society, citizenship, self-management, and communication, which all combine to develop an ethical, well-informed and active member of a modern democratic society ([NCBS 2011](#), pp. 3–5; [NCUSS 2011](#), pp. 3–4). This section describes how the competencies of religious literacy according to Francis and Dinham are represented in the analyzed curricula.

Examining religion as a category and understanding its characteristics is crucial when promoting religious literacy because it enables us to understand the inner diversity of religions, their transformation over time, and their embeddedness within different domains. This stage is a prerequisite for unbiased opinions, complex knowledge connected to religion, and the skills to use this knowledge appropriately. Exploring religion as a category is also necessary because the term “religion” signifies very different phenomena, and religious literacy also covers non-religious convictions and worldviews ([Francis and Dinham 2015](#), pp. 259–60). To understand religion, it is also essential to examine the social, theological, philosophical, and other elements of the subject to avoid prejudices and rash conclusions resulting from poor knowledge ([Francis and Dinham 2015](#), p. 267).

Analysis of the curricula shows that this aspect of religious literacy is only marginally represented in Estonian curricula for formal education. The content of the units of meaning constitutes only a tiny part of the complex religious landscape. In the current curricula, the concept of religion is limited only to institutional religions, the exclusion of individual religion and non-institutionalized religious beliefs in today's society are disregarded.

The stage of examining one's **disposition** contributes to students' personal ideas, self-reflection, and moral development, and it also addresses sensitive topics, such as prejudices, stereotypes, and external influences on one's subjective opinion ([Shaw 2020](#), p. 157). Here, the curricula for foreign languages, based on the Common European Framework of

Reference for Languages, support students' active participation in contemporary society (NCBS 2011, app. 2, p. 2; NCUSS 2011, app. 2, p. 2). The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages promotes an action-oriented approach in language education in which different activities connected to the use of language are related to the broader social context, and language users are seen as active members of society (Council of Europe 2001). The same document describes religion as a natural part of the social environment that has a role in communication skills, existential competencies, and sociocultural knowledge (ibid.). Coherence between the Estonian curricula for formal education and the European framework for languages is visible in the chapter of NCUSS on cross-curricular topics of upper secondary schools. All descriptions connected to disposition follow the Intercultural Competence Model by Darla K. Deardorff, in which the prerequisites for appropriate behavior and communication are a respectful, open, and curious attitude, cultural self-awareness, and deep understanding and knowledge of cultures (Deardorff 2006). Elements, such as cultural self-awareness, learning about cultures, and sociolinguistics based on this competence model, are supported in the analyzed curricula, mainly in the social sciences, humanities, and the arts.

Disposition towards religions is either not addressed or mentioned only in passing in the syllabi for Mathematics, Technology, Physical Education, and Nature Sciences; in other parts of the curriculum, one finds only implicit units of meaning related to disposition. The stage of examining one's disposition has only one explicit unit of meaning, allowing educators to omit religious themes, and, therefore, the curriculum does not support students in developing their personal attitudes or becoming aware of stereotypes and prejudices towards religion.

Diane Moore considers understanding religions and their influence in context as a part of human experience to be a central concern of **knowledge** about religions (Moore 2014, pp. 379–80). The Estonian curricula support this idea in the syllabi of Social Studies when describing learning content pertaining to older cultures (Egypt, Mesopotamia, Greece, Rome, the Middle Ages) in which religion is seen as an inseparable part of society. The syllabi of history provide a brief insight into the history and central texts of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, evoking Moore's description of the religiously literate person who has an elemental understanding of history and the central texts of religions (Moore 2014, p. 380). Few contemporary descriptions are found, for example, in the syllabus of Handicraft and Home Economics. With some descriptions, the syllabi for Foreign Languages, Civics and Citizenship Education contribute to understanding the contemporary religious landscape, but this exposure is limited to general information about religions as a separate category in modern society.

Analysis of the curricula shows that explicit knowledge about religions is connected to events that happened a long time ago. The content of this knowledge does not correlate with the contemporary religious composition of society. In the syllabi of history courses, this knowledge is mainly limited to the origins of religions. Judaism is introduced in basic school in the context of the kingdom of Judah and the ancient Eastern countries in the second stage of education (grades 4–6) and Islam at the beginning of the third stage of education (7th grade) during the course on the Middle Ages. In history courses in basic school, religion and religious issues after the Reformation are not mentioned in the curriculum, while in upper secondary school, religious themes end with the conversion movement in Estonia in the first half of the 19th century.

This approach does not support students in discerning the religious dimensions of social, political, and cultural expressions across time and place and understanding that religions are internally diverse, which are the prerequisites of religious literacy according to Moore (Moore 2014, pp. 380–81).

In the syllabus of Language and Literature and the syllabus of Technology, in addition to being distant in time, religion is seen as something that is culturally distant. It is addressed only in the context of being tolerant and accepting differences. This practice does not support the definitions of religious literacy by Moore or by Francis and Dinham,

both of which emphasize the situatedness of knowledge connected to religious literacy and consider this knowledge important in comprehension of the contemporary religious landscape (Francis and Dinham 2015, p. 267; Moore 2014, pp. 383–84). Understanding this situatedness helps students to avoid misleading generalizations and to see a given statement about religion as being connected to knowledge in a particular context (Moore 2014, p. 383).

The last stage of religious literacy involves developing **skills** that are supported in the current curricula by numerous units of meaning which create, through different emphases, a sound basis for acquiring religious literacy. These skills are expressed, for example, in the NCUSS when describing social and civic competencies. Extensive implicit units of meaning expressed in the chapters of the curricula on general competencies contribute to promoting intercultural competencies, which in the broadest sense also contribute to skills related to religious literacy.

In the context of religious literacy, the strength of the analyzed curricula also lies in the explicit units of meaning in the syllabi of history courses, which give students a vocabulary to talk about religions.

However, the skills of religious literacy are considerably more specific when compared to intercultural competencies. Moore describes religious literacy as *“the ability to discern and analyze the intersections of religion with social, political, and cultural life”* (Moore 2014), which, in addition to historical knowledge that is partially covered in the curricula, also involves understanding contemporary expressions of religion in all its diversity and in different contexts (Moore 2014, pp. 387–88). Francis and Dinham highlight the contemporary aspect of religious literacy in the need to cope with the plurality of religions in society (Francis and Dinham 2015, p. 260). Units of meaning which express contemporary manifestations of religions and their intrinsic diversity are missing in the analyzed curricula for formal education.

Extensive explicit units of meaning in general parts of the curricula express respect towards religions and different ethnic groups in the context of distant cultures while emphasizing the differences in customs and practices from the student’s familiar environment. The only exception here is the unit of meaning from the second stage of studies in basic school, which describes a student learning outcome as *“name major religions represented in Estonia and describe their practices”* (NCBS 2011, app. 5, p. 31). However, there is no learning content described to support this outcome.

As in the stage of knowledge, the main shortcoming here lies in the fact that skills connected to religious literacy are expressed explicitly in connection with earlier cultures up to the Middle Ages, at which point religion is integrated into every aspect of society. During later periods, religion is mentioned in the context of conflicts (such as the Crusades) or turning points in history (such as the Reformation).

The approach undertaken by the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) for teaching about religion complies with the different definitions of religious literacy discussed above in which religion is seen as a dynamic, context-dependent phenomenon. According to this approach, to understand religion, one must obtain knowledge about the historical importance of religions together with knowledge about contemporary expressions of particular religions or beliefs (OSCE 2007, p. 42). The outcome of education about religion consists of relevant knowledge, attitudes and skills (ibid., p. 48) resulting in a tolerant and respectful attitude towards individuals of different religions or beliefs, the ability to see religious issues in the wider context of human rights, basic knowledge about the role of religions and belief systems in modern society and history, awareness of differences and similarities of different beliefs, understanding of how disrespect for religious differences may result in extreme violence, and the ability to oppose intolerance and discrimination (ibid., p. 49) to enhance the freedom of religion or belief.

Most students in Estonia have no religious upbringing, and conscious contacts with religious people are almost non-existent. About 14% of people aged 15–19 are affiliated with a religion (Statistics Estonia 2013b). Pupils themselves see school as the main source

of knowledge about religions, but at the same time, they say that they almost never speak about religion in any context (Schihalejev 2010).

In such a secular context, religious pupils are uncomfortable showing their religious identity to peers, as they may become stigmatized. Schihalejev et al. (2014) show that in Estonian schools, students were likely to agree with the statement that students who publicly express religious beliefs are bullied, and religiously observant students are especially vulnerable (Schihalejev et al. 2020). In such a context, treating religion as a category and examining students' own disposition toward religion becomes very important.

The Estonian formal education curricula address religious themes mostly in general terms. The two-step analysis of the content of the curricula described in this article shows that some measures to support religious literacy are present, such as describing the historical roots of some religions, recognizing the impact of religions on traditions, and promoting respectful attitudes towards others. The curricula do not include content which identifies religion as a diverse and dynamic reality that interacts with particular contexts. Furthermore, it omits subject matter on the misconceptions, biases, and other attitudes resulting from insufficient knowledge about different religions. Therefore, we may conclude that both explicit and implicit units of meaning connected to religious literacy from the analyzed curricula do not provide enough content to support the knowledge, attitudes, and skills to realize the aspirations of the OSCE principles for teaching about religions and beliefs in public schools, which portray religion in a broader context both in history and modern society as well as through its connection to human rights.

8. Conclusions

Religious literacy is important in any country, no matter what form of religious education it offers. The methodology of this research makes it possible to analyze curricula regardless of whether or not the local system for formal education offers RE as a separate subject.

Analysis of the Estonian curricula shows that Estonian general education implicitly contributes to students' religious literacy as a part of social efficiency discourse that focuses on knowledge and competencies that enable pupils to function in society. In addition, the curricula include humanist discourse that focuses on a student's personal development and academic rationalist discourse based on knowledge, both of which relate well to secular education.

All the elements (religion as a category, disposition, knowledge, and skills) of religious literacy are, to some extent, present in the curricula. Of these, the least attention is paid to examining religions as a category, which is an underlying skill for religious literacy that allows students to comprehend changes in religions across time, place, and cultures, as well as in non-religious worldviews and communities.

Attention to disposition connected to religions is most often expressed in the subject field syllabi of Foreign Languages, which are based on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages. Furthermore, the syllabi of Social Studies and Language and Literature express several units of meaning to develop students' disposition in the context of intercultural competencies. Content related to disposition toward religion was expressed explicitly only once, making it possible to omit activities and discussions about attitudes, opinions, and prejudices about religious matters.

Knowledge and skills connected to religion in the curricula analyzed here are associated primarily with cultures that are both historically and geographically distant. This approach pays little attention to the contextual dimension of religion and hinders the understanding that religion has any relevance in the present day. While Diane Moore emphasizes the importance of historical context when developing religious literacy, she also expresses caution about circumscribing religion to one period of time and at a specific geographical place, thus creating a perception that there is a single meaning of religious traditions, beliefs, and practices (Moore 2010, p. 13). The curricula of Estonian formal

education do not incorporate any explicit units of meaning to support knowledge-based communication about contemporary religions in situated contexts.

Analyses shows that Estonian curricula are in good correspondence with local religious composition in the sense that there are no aims related to “teaching into religion”. Still, in such a secular country, it becomes even more important to obtain knowledge about religion(s) and reflect personally on existential questions and other topics related to religious literacy, the aims related to “teaching about” and “teaching from” religion (Grimmitt 2000).

Although the content of these discourses in the curricula implicitly supports some elements for acquiring religious literacy, it still neglects several essential aspects. The main shortcoming lies in the fact that these Estonian curricula do not address religious themes and developments in a contemporary context either locally or globally, and therefore, they do not provide relevant knowledge and competencies to Estonian students for communicating and acting in a society in which religions and freedom of religion or belief are recognized as a part of individual, social, and cultural life. In addition, the examination of the units of meaning connected to religious literacy shows that Estonian national formal education curricula do not provide enough information and skills to support the freedom of religion of the students themselves during general education.

Considering the need for improving the competencies and skills for dealing with religious themes, it is important to find a way to promote acquiring religious literacy in the context of formal education. However, to improve religious literacy in the context of Estonian formal education it is necessary to develop a context-specific understanding of religious literacy, contribute to teacher preparation and elaborate the curricula. In addition, it is important to examine the level of religious literacy of students. Accordingly, as the next step, we plan to develop a research instrument and use it in researching the attitudes, knowledge, and skills of Estonian students related to religious literacy.

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Notes

- ¹ The Estonian school system is divided to basic and upper-secondary education. Basic education is a mandatory minimum of general education and it is divided into three stages: stage I—grades 1–3 (approximately ages 7–9); stage II—grades 4–6 (ages 10–12); stage III—grades 7–9 (ages 13–15). This is followed by three years of optional general secondary education at the upper secondary school level.

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