



Literature review of themes in Religion and Worldviews education that could inform curriculum development and pedagogy in Victorian schools.

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INTRODUCTION

In the increasingly diverse and interconnected world of the twenty-first century, traditional approaches to the teaching of religion to school students have been questioned in many countries which share a Western, predominantly Christian, cultural tradition. A move away from confessional Religious Instruction to broad comparative Religious Education/Religious Studies/General Religious Education has been fundamental to curriculum development in western nations. A further conceptual shift is evident in scholarly literature and Government reports exploring the idea of Worldviews education as a productive way forward. It is worthy to note that in the following literature review, the word ‘worldview’ and ‘religion’ is mainly brought and discussed, while we acknowledge there are vast scholarship addressing same ideological and ontological matter with different lexicons such as ‘faith’ or ‘spirituality’. Furthermore, these debates and scholarship are mainly emerged and expanded from the UK and the western countries, where Christianity was the main religious positioning.

This literature review provides a synthesis of research evidence in support of the provision of Religion and Worldviews education in schools, taking into consideration the value to students and society. It considers complex, international, contextual issues, noting the contested nature of the subject area in each jurisdiction. The review offers the following themes for consideration in the development of a Worldviews syllabus in Victorian schools:

1. **Conceptualising worldviews:** Defining the concept of worldviews and determining similarities and differences between religious and non-religious worldviews is challenging.
2. **Personal worldviews:** A worldviews approach requires the inclusion of students’ personal worldviews in classroom discussion.
3. **Wellbeing, inclusion and self-understanding;** Attention to student well-being, inclusion and self-understanding is contested.

4. **Importance of context:** Contextual differences necessarily impact the provision of Worldviews education and the selection or exclusion of content.
5. **Social cohesion:** Social cohesion is an urgent but contested rationale for the study of worldviews.
6. **Freedom of religion and human rights:** Freedom of religion and human rights issues provide challenges in secular colonial legacy contexts.
7. **Teacher knowledge:** The development of teacher disciplinary knowledge and education is needed, both in pre-service education and in ongoing professional learning.

1. CONCEPTUALISING WORLDVIEWS

Defining the concept of worldviews and determining similarities and differences between religious and non-religious worldviews is challenging. The term worldviews has proven challenging to define. Common to all definitions is the understanding that the term refers to the way in which a person understands the world and their place in it. Jackson's overview of scholarly writing from the Netherlands (van der Kooij et al., 2013; McKenzie, 1991; De Jong, 1998; Vroom, 2003; Miedema, 2006) concludes a worldview could be provisionally defined as "a view on life, the world and humanity". Jackson points out that by this broad definition all religions would be regarded as worldviews but not all worldviews would be religious. Humanism, Rationalism and Atheism, for example, are worldviews but they are not religions. Consequently, religions would be a specific subset of worldviews (Jackson, 2014, p.70).

The *Final Report Religion and Worldviews: the Way Forward A national plan for RE*, produced by the Commission on Religious Education (CoRE), established by the Religious Education Council for England and Wales, observes that the worldview of an individual is both influenced by and influences their beliefs, values, behaviours, experiences, identities and commitments to action (CoRE, 2018, p.4). In exploring the significance of studying religions and worldviews, Freathy and John propose four "Big Ideas". Firstly, there are no uncontested definitions of the terms worldview and religion. Secondly, positionality is crucial. Our view of religions and worldviews is fundamentally influenced by geographical, temporal and cultural context and our sense of identity. Thirdly, the study of religions and worldviews is intrinsically multi-disciplinary and involves diverse methodologies. Finally, the study of religions and worldviews is relevant to an understanding of the dynamics of the contemporary world. It also fosters transferable skills such as critical thinking (Freathy & John, p.13). Like Freathy and John, Lipiainen, Halafoff, Mansouri and Bouma emphasise the criticality of context when developing educational strategies for religions and worldviews education, arguing that it is not feasible or desirable to seek to develop one approach for implementation across a range of countries and contexts. They do note the value of sharing ideas across countries and systems (Lipiainen, Halafoff, Mansouri & Bouma, 2020, p.394).

Adding a nuance to understanding what is meant by worldviews, Van der Kooij, de Ruyter & Miedema argue that a distinction needs to be made between organised and personal worldviews. They define an organized worldview as an established view on life that includes common “sources, traditions, values, rituals, ideals, or dogmas”. A personal worldview can be more “eclectic and idiosyncratic” (Van der Kooij, de Ruyter & Miedema, 2017, p.174).

Jackson contends that organised worldviews answer existential questions, provide moral values and seek to provide meaning for their adherents. They seek to influence thoughts and actions manifested in moral engagement with the social and natural world. Personal worldviews also provide meaning and involve moral values, but they do not necessarily include a metaphysical dimension (Jackson, 2014, p.71).

Van der Kooij, de Ruyter and Miedema argue existential questions are a “conceptually necessary” component of worldview, whether religious or not. Such questions, they say, distinguish worldview from “other views on life, the world, and humanity”, such as party-political ideologies. Van der Kooij, de Ruyter and Miedema undertook a review of scholarly literature (2016) through which they determined six types of existential questions that were common to all definitions of worldview. These are ontological questions referring to the nature of existence, cosmological questions regarding the origin and nature of the universe and the place of human beings in it, theological questions referring to the existence and nature of a divine being/s, teleological questions about the meaning and purpose of existence, eschatological questions concerning death and beyond, and ethical questions examining concepts of good and bad (Van der Kooij, de Ruyter & Miedema, 2017, p.174).

All religions represent institutional worldviews but as Lipiainen, Halafoff, Mansouri and Bouma (drawing on the work of Valk, 2017b; van der Kooij, de Ruyter & Miedema, 2013; Ammerman, 2014; Valk, 2010; and Woodhead, 2017), explain, personal worldviews can be related to and draw from institutional worldviews. Often though, personal worldviews are quite independent from organised worldviews and can be extremely complex. They are self-defined and can simultaneously combine elements of diverse religious, spiritual and non-religious worldviews (Lipiainen, Halafoff, Mansouri & Bouma, pp.392-393).

Reflections and considerations for conceptualising worldviews

Findings show that the term ‘worldviews’ is complex, and definitions in the research literature incorporate a range of perspectives. A framework for strengthening world views education should consider a definition of ‘worldviews’ in reference to education in Victoria which reflects the mandated curriculum and major stakeholders.

2. A WORLDVIEWS APPROACH REQUIRES THE INCLUSION OF STUDENTS' PERSONAL WORLDVIEWS IN CLASSROOM DISCUSSION

Traditionally in Western education systems, the predominant focus of Religious Education in schools has been comparative and phenomenological, where students are presented with information and knowledge about a range of religious traditions. A shift towards a worldviews content and pedagogy encompasses learning from, not just about, religious and non-religious worldviews and traditions. This approach lends itself to an examination of worldviews through the lens of students' own 'life-worlds' and ethical and existential questions (Åhs et al., 2016, p.208).

Putting the student at the centre is not a new idea. In 1987, Grimmit proposed a distinction between learning about and learning from religions. He understood learning from religions to mean what students could learn about themselves from their engagement with religious traditions. Such encounters, he argued, could foster students' reflections on their own existential questions and could potentially influence their life views and decisions (Teece, 2010, p.94).

Aligned with this goal of aiding the development of each student, the *CoRE Final Report* concludes, "It is one of the core tasks of education to enable each pupil to understand, reflect on and develop their own personal worldview". The Report authors see the "explicit, academic study of worldviews" as essential in what they believe is a whole school responsibility. Understanding the history, expression and influence of various worldviews facilitates a more sophisticated understanding of one's own worldview and the worldviews of others (CoRE, 2018, p.5). Reflecting on the multicultural and multifaith societal context of schooling in Canada, Volk and Tosun write, "Exploring one's beliefs and values (one's worldview) requires a journey into one's inner territory into one's heart, soul and mind (*Knowing Self*) ... *Knowing Self* requires *Knowing Others*, imperative in an increasingly global world" (Valk & Tosun, 2016, p.105).

Reflections and considerations for personal worldviews:

Students' personal worldviews and student perspectives on worldviews education impact on their experiences of this aspect of the curriculum. Including students' personal worldviews can support learning environments that are inclusive, support critical thinking and reflection, and are relevant to students' lives.

3. Attention to student well-being, inclusion and self-understanding is contested.

Numerous studies seek to understand prejudice against religiously minded students (Moulin, 2016; Rymarz & Graham, 2006; Laffan & Meehan, 2021). This is important in the context of a secular society where students under-report religious identities for social reasons (Laffan & Meehan, 2021) and especially where prejudice impacts social status, inclusion and, thus, student well-being. Local cultural acceptance of religiosity may be more influential than multi-faith religious education (Ipgrave, 2012). However, understanding of the influence of religion and worldview on individuals is prominent in syllabus descriptors internationally. For example, Studies of Religion (NSW) seeks to understand religion's "influence on human behaviour"; Birmingham's Agreed Syllabus program "is designed to be inclusive for all children across our super-diverse city enabling each one to be respected and understood"; South Africa's year 10 Religion Studies program seeks to understand "religions from the point of view of the adherents".

There is an argument that inclusion is not enabled by approaches to teaching about religions which begin by discussing external differences such as rituals, buildings used for worship and doctrines. Such things, de Souza, drawing on Huxley (1945) *The perennial philosophy*, states are exoteric. They promote a sense of 'us' and 'them'. Believing that "all humans seek transcendence" empathy is fostered through commonality, she argues. Beginning with the esoteric, "the metaphysic of a divine Reality at the core of being; it is the spiritual...face of religion..." connectedness is fostered. De Souza believes teaching which address both the esoteric and exoteric, "may lead to a change in consciousness where respect for and acceptance of the Other is paramount..." (de Souza, 2011, p. 40).

Personal development remains a feature in some syllabuses that seek to develop critical self-awareness. Birmingham students are encouraged to develop "24 dispositions, or values ... [that] were created by [religious and non-religious] conference members and have been agreed unanimously". This perhaps responds to the UK's 1988 Education Act stipulation that non-religious schools must provide "spiritual development" alongside religious education (Moulin, 2016, p.231). A more pastoral tone is evident in Newfoundland and Labrador's Religious Education syllabus, in which "students will be expected to demonstrate an appreciation for personal search, commitment and meaning in life" and "grow religiously, spiritually, and morally".

Newfoundland and Labrador's concern for students' spiritual growth is at odds with the lean toward comparative religious studies in Quebec. Boisvert explains Quebec's stance with reference to the speed of secularisation and its history as a particularly religious culture, likening it to the Irish experience in which Catholicism was once near universal but has been widely rejected in the space of a generation (Boisvert, 2015, pp.380-2). The study of Ethics and Religious Culture with an emphasis on the historic *cultural* influence of Catholicism in

Quebec puts some distance between a secular contemporary reality and a seemingly uncomfortably religious past. Such differences point to the competing interests of pedagogy and local history's influence on contemporary politics in the development of any Worldviews syllabus. Some syllabuses respond to issues of student wellbeing, inclusion, self-understanding and personal development but historical and political concerns figure in the extent to which syllabuses engage with these issues.

Ethnographical research in the UK undertaken through the project, *Does RE Work? An analysis of the aims, practices and models of effectiveness in Religious Education in the UK* (2007-2011), leads Lundie and Conroy to raise a significant problematic issue evident in some approaches to the teaching of multiple religions and worldviews in the classroom. They introduce the terms “entoleration”, which they define as encouraging a “sympathetic and transformative encounter with others’ beliefs”, and “intoleration”, which they define as a form of indoctrination which “risks eliding both difference and encounter in the service of a predetermined aim of nurturing uncritical tolerance” (Conroy & Lundie, 2015). In intoleration, they report that “essentialised readings of religions abound, where differences are relegated to the levels of the facile or the exotic” (p.288). In introducing this material, we also note the problematic nature of the words “toleration” and “tolerance”. While not the way Lundie and Conroy use them, both words can be received as meaning to “put up with” the other, rather than to accept and value them as persons. Being told one is tolerated has obvious implication for wellbeing and a sense of belonging in the classroom.

Given the importance of self-knowledge, Bourdieu’s concept of habitus, suggested as a helpful alternative term to worldview by Cooling, encapsulates inner dispositions which influence perceptions of, and actions in, the world. The ontological as well as the cognitive dimensions of being human are thus recognised (Cooling, 2019).

Reflections and considerations for wellbeing, inclusion and understanding:

Worldviews education is inherently values based, and the language that is used in curriculum documents, discussions and tasks can impact on students’ sense of wellbeing, inclusion and self-understanding. Worldviews education can send powerful messages to students about how others might perceive and accept their identities.

4. Contextual differences necessarily impact the provision of Worldviews education and the selection or exclusion of content.

A comparative study of Worldviews education reveals important contextual differences. Each region operates under legislative frameworks arising out of different historical religious contexts. We have here focused on regions that share aspects of Victoria’s socio-economic status and/or colonial Christian past, foregrounding the analysis of the Victorian curriculum

that will form a later part of the research project. Some of the syllabuses are for compulsory primary and secondary education and, in the absence of such, others are for senior secondary elective subjects only. While this limits comparisons around resources and classroom activities, it does allow for comparison of the rationales articulated by each syllabus and the range of Worldviews each syllabus covers.

The syllabuses examined include subjects incorporating Worldviews and General Religious Education in New South Wales, Canada (Newfoundland and Labrador, and Quebec), South Africa, the UK (Birmingham), Finland and Singapore. In New South Wales, Studies of Religion (stage 6) includes Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam and Judaism, while a module on the Nature of Religion and Beliefs includes “Australian Aboriginal beliefs and spiritualities” and a module on Religion and Non-religion includes Agnosticism, Atheism and Humanism. The syllabus title Studies of Religion (rather than Studies in Religion) attempts to make the non-confessional stance clear: religion in NSW schools is approached from the outside, not the inside. In Newfoundland and Labrador, the K-12 Religious Education syllabus includes Aboriginal Spirituality (Innu, Inuit, Mi’kmaq), Bahá’í Faith, Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, Judaism, and Sikhism. Senior secondary subjects are available in World Religions and in Ethics and Philosophy, which includes “the interdependence of ethical behaviour and philosophical and religious thought” and “the connectedness of all creation” (presupposing a theological or philosophical position despite non-confessional objectives). In Quebec, the K-12 Ethics and Religious Culture program includes “secular expressions” alongside Catholicism, Protestantism, Judaism and “Native spirituality” but with some reference to Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism and mention of other religions “depending on the reality and the needs of the class”. South Africa’s Life Education for junior secondary students includes study of Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism and African religions, while senior secondary students choosing Religion Studies learn about the major religions and Atheism, Agnosticism, Humanism and Materialism. Former British colonies with large populations of British-descent—Canada, South Africa, New South Wales—each include secular worldviews and Indigenous religions or spiritualities. In Birmingham, the Agreed Syllabus for Religious Education includes nine religions represented locally: “Bahá’i, Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, Jainism, Judaism, Rastafari and Sikhism, and established non-religious worldviews such as Atheism, Humanism and Secularism”. In Finland, senior secondary students may opt for Worldview Studies or Religion, which includes Evangelic-Lutheran, Orthodox or Catholic Christianity, Islam, Judaism and “other religions”. In Singapore, students in Character and Citizenship Education “understand Singapore’s racial and religious diversity”. In every jurisdiction, there is debate about what content is to be included and therefore, by implication, what is to be excluded from curricula. The variety of religions and worldviews included in particular jurisdictions, the debates behind these decisions (e.g., controversy around Humanism’s influence in the UK syllabus) and, indeed, the different subject titles point to the axiom that debates about education are so often debates about politics and society. In the context

of religious studies, this raises the question of whether the study of religion can be about more than politics and society.

In this age of global migration, the move from school-based provision of confessional education toward critical study of worldviews, religion and belief has responded to demographic and socio-political changes that made the teaching of one religious worldview no longer contextually appropriate. For example, in Birmingham, UK, an Agreed Syllabus is revised by representatives of faith communities every five years. This responds to the Education Reform Act of 1996, which requires the syllabus to “reflect the fact that the religious traditions in Great Britain are, in the main, Christian whilst taking account of the teaching and practices of the other principal religions represented in Great Britain”. In Quebec, the move away from the privileging of Christianity through denominational schools was supported in legislation by the 1997 Amendment to the Constitution Act and the 2005 law enabling “implementation of a common ethics and religious culture program”. In both these jurisdictions, Christian religion was once an assumed part of the curriculum because the church and society were closely identified: the Church of England is ‘established’ in the UK and Catholicism was once near universal in Quebec. The situation in Australia is historically quite different.

In Australia, critical study at secondary school level exists alongside, and in contrast to, forms of optional religious instruction in public (usually primary) schools delivered by volunteers under teacher supervision. For example, in New South Wales, Special Religious Education or Special Education in Ethics (NSW Education Act 1990, section 32) permits instruction by approved providers within the classroom, whereas Victoria’s Ministerial Direction 145 permits Special Religious Instruction by approved providers outside class time for a maximum of one hour per week where a Principal agrees to the provision on school grounds. The practice of Special Religious Instruction, introduced in the mid-20th century, began expanding to faiths other than Christianity only in the 1990s. The persistence of optional religious instruction and the slow introduction of Worldviews and General Religious Education arises, at least in part, out of the perception in Australia that religion is private and not a subject of critical study. This, in turn, developed in response to the mitigation of colonial-era sectarian (Catholic-Protestant) conflict via the exclusion of religious studies at the establishment of the universities of Sydney and Melbourne: religion was separated from publicly funded academia (Handasyde, 2024).

Nevertheless, in what can be seen as a precursor to twenty-first century concerns around social cohesion and good citizenship in relation to Religion and Worldviews, in nineteenth-century Victoria a believed intrinsic link between Christianity and moral behaviour led to an argument for Christian education as a contributor to social harmony. In 1833, the Governor of New South Wales (which included the Port Phillip District, later Victoria) proposed the inclusion of non-denominational Christian education in all government schools. Sectarianism and a fear of the loss of distinctive denominational schooling prevented the implementation of this

proposal. The Education Act of 1872 proclaimed public education in the state to be “Secular, Compulsory and Free”. Arguably, this was a decision to prevent extreme sectarian influence, not to exclude teaching about religion (Burritt, 2020, pp. 6-7). The difference between “secular” and “secularist” is to be noted here: the separation of church and state is mandated, but the eradication of religion is not.

The reality of the Education Act of 1872 was to separate private religion and public education with the stipulation that “[i]n every State school secular instruction only shall be given, and no teacher shall give any other than secular instruction in any State school building”. Nevertheless, until Victoria’s 2006 Education and Training Reform Act (2.2.10 (2)) the teaching of General Religious Education was not expressly permitted in public schools, and not taken up until 2016 when VCAA provided the three-page document “Learning about world views and religions” (VCAA, 2016).

Signaling a move toward greater awareness of the role of faith in the public square, the 2008 Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians recommended a curriculum enabling students to “understand the spiritual, moral and aesthetic dimensions of life”. The Abbott government’s 2014 Review of the National Curriculum Final Report reiterated this recommendation *without* linking understanding of spiritual dimensions with social cohesion and well-being (cf. Melbourne Declaration, 2008, pp. 4 & 9), but *with* the added goal that students “better recognise the contribution of Western civilisation, our Judeo-Christian heritage” (Donnelly & Wiltshire, 2014, Recommendation 15). As Halafoff noted, the prioritisation of Christianity risked social inclusion and failed to represent the lived reality of students’ diverse worldviews (Halafoff, 2015, p.376). However, a “campaign” of submissions to the Review requesting a “more balanced and objective treatment of Christianity and the debt owed to Western civilisation” (Donnelly & Wiltshire, p.159) was influential, reflecting a conservative and evangelical stance on the preservation of Christian influence that has developed since the late 20th-century numerical decline in church attendance.

The 2014 Review’s emphasis on Judeo-Christian heritage thus allies itself with a growing conservative Christian literature that seeks, defensively, to reassert Christianity’s significance within the nation state and to claim the nation’s ongoing colonial “debt” to Christian Western civilisation (Handasyde, 2024). It is a position that springs from historical and ongoing anxiety over the churches’ loss of influence. This is quite different from the assumption in the UK and Canada (Barnes, 2020; Boisvert, 2015) where a relatively confident Christianity has traditionally been included within public schools but is now part of a general education about various religions and worldviews to which students increasingly subscribe.

Reflections and considerations for importance of context:

As society changes over time, so too has worldviews education, which is rendered differently in different national contexts. Victoria's Indigenous history, cultures and peoples, as well as its multicultural, multifaith and plurilingual citizenry, will be important to a contemporary and contextualised enactment of worldviews education.

5. Social cohesion is an urgent but contested rationale for the study of worldviews

Principles of social cohesion frequently underlie the provision of worldviews and general religious education in syllabuses internationally. In most jurisdictions, both principles begin with knowledge and appreciation of the diversity of worldviews. In NSW, the subject Studies of Religion aims to convey to students "that each religious tradition has its own integrity and contributes to a well-ordered society". In South Africa, Religion Studies "leads to the recognition, understanding and appreciation of a variety of religions within a common humanity, in the context of a civic understanding of religion and with a view to developing religious literacy". In Quebec, the objectives of the Ethics and Religious Culture program are "recognition of others" and "pursuit of the common good". Contribution to society is further emphasised in those syllabuses where worldviews are incorporated under studies in citizenship, e.g., Singapore, and where they are approached via a comparative religion methodology, e.g., Quebec, South Africa, NSW.

Criticisms of the comparative approach are two-fold. The first concern raised by religious adherents is that the comparative religion approach avoids questions of ultimate truth and becomes a study in relativism in which all views are equally valid and, potentially therefore, none are worth distinguishing or valuing in and of themselves (Boisvert on Quebec, p.388). Countering such criticism, Newfoundland and Labrador, for example, explicitly aim to examine "similarities" and "the unique qualities each living belief system offers to its followers" and acknowledge and reflect on the students' own situatedness. Self-reflection offers an essentially personal rather than social response, developing over time in and out of the classroom, and, as Jackson notes, students' perceptions regarding various truth claims will be influenced by more than classroom experience (Jackson, 2004, p.170).

The second concern then follows that relativist approaches instrumentalise religion for the higher purpose of socio-political security. This is evident in, for example, the Council of Europe's preference for the term "the religious dimension of intercultural dialogue" where intercultural dialogue is the higher purpose (Jackson, 2020, p.214). It is also seen in writing about syllabus development: for example, in the UK, "breaking down ignorance and developing individuals who will be receptive of the other... is vital for the fruition of our vision for a fairer, more cohesive society" (Butler-Sloss, 2015, 4.24; see Barnes p.150 for counter discussion of Butler-Sloss). Religious understanding for the purpose of security is a designation that may be acceptable to an established church (Boisvert, 2015, p.392) but less

so to those worldviews in which social change and separation from the state are championed or which are apprehensive about their continued existence. The idea that the study of worldviews may assist social cohesion and therefore political stability depends on how worldviews are presented in the classroom. However, claims that religions are not accurately or robustly represented are widespread in the literature on UK syllabuses (see list in Moulin, 2016, p.231), and potentially threatening aspects of religion are often avoided (Butler-Sloss, 2015, 2.15).

While the objective to gain knowledge and appreciation of the diversity of worldviews effectively legitimises religion in the public space, which is in itself significant in rapidly secularising societies such as Australia and Canada, relativising and instrumentalising effectively act to neutralise the perceived threat of destabilisation that some worldviews may represent to particular societies and economies. This neutralising effect explains both resistance to worldviews education by some religious adherents and the timing of the introduction into school syllabuses of worldviews education (beyond the once-dominant Christianity). The development of Worldview and General Religious Education syllabuses followed the increase in global intercultural migration in the 1960s and 70s that changed the religious make-up of western societies. It gathered significant momentum and urgency following the rise of religious extremism in the late 1990s/early 2000s, especially the events of September 11, 2001 (Jackson, 2020, p.215; Laffan & Meehan, 2021, p.441; Halafoff, Lam and Bouma, 2019, p.381; Soules, 2023, p.1). This is rarely explicit in syllabuses internationally, and its omission attracts criticism in the UK for the “sanitised” focus on worldview’s positive contribution to society and a corresponding downplaying of terrorism’s religious justifications or its violations of human rights (Butler-Sloss, 2015, 2.15).

Reflections and considerations regarding social cohesion: As it is important to define worldviews education, so is it vital to consider its purposes/s. A framework, or principles of world views education in the Victorian context will need to address the possible tensions between world views curriculum enactment for social cohesion and diverse students’ voice, identity and authentic experiences (see above).

6. Freedom of religion and human rights issues provide challenges in secular colonial legacy contexts.

Tolerance for religion and religious people in rapidly secularising societies is often an implicit goal of Worldviews and General Religious Education syllabuses, expressed as “recognition of others” (Quebec) or “equal respect” (Birmingham). In the Council of Europe’s *Signposts* (Jackson, 2014), learning about religion is framed as an aspect of intercultural education which is, in turn, essential to education about human rights, freedom of expression and freedom of religion. Article 18 of the United Nations’ Universal Declaration of Human

Rights affirms “Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his [sic] religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance”. With apparent awareness of the particular issues around the legacies of colonialism in its national history, the South African syllabus is the only one to mention Human Rights education explicitly. Other nations such as Australia also need to consider the legacies of colonialism and its implications for human rights in the provision of Worldviews education. Selection and prioritisation of content in the classroom will be significant in developing resources that address the needs of students in local contexts. As Jackson acknowledges, a religiously diverse classroom may present teachers with conflicting human rights among students requiring complex discussions (2014, p.82).

The rights of parents to have their children exempted from Worldviews and General Religious Education has been hotly debated in the UK, Europe and Canada, often on the grounds of freedom of religion (e.g., Lundie, 2018), and partly because a right of withdrawal from confessional religious classes had existed historically. When the aim of the syllabus is allied with principles of tolerance, social cohesion and human rights, commentators are not sympathetic to the right of withdrawal (e.g., Butler-Sloss, 2015; Jackson, 2014). They point to the need for education around tolerance when parents request student withdrawal from modules on Islam in particular (Lundie, 2018, p.1), despite the conflict between compulsory education and principles of freedom of conscience (Barnes, 2020, pp.158-61).

Some commentators question the effectiveness of education on worldviews and religion in the cause of tolerance and human rights, perhaps because education is not the only factor in the development of tolerance and social cohesion. In an early study on NSW Studies of Religion, Malone argues that “simply learning about a religion is not sufficient to change attitudes” (Malone, 1998, p.13), but also notes, as an examiner in the subject, “a marked increase in the level of understanding of religious issues in Australian society” in the first three years of the subject. Jackson points to the slow work of developing an “understanding of the grammar” of religion, interpretive skills and their value in building self-awareness among students (Jackson, 2004, p.169). Responding to the emerging field of studies in the prevention of violent extremism, Halafoff, Kim and Bouma claim that inclusive approaches to Worldviews education may mitigate the effects of youth alienation and, therefore, of vulnerability to violent extremism (Halafoff et al., 2019).

Implications and considerations for freedom of religion and human rights: Safety when expressing worldviews, through both personal and collective actions is dependent on others' respect for diversity and the protection of people's right to practice their faith. Consideration will need to be given to how teachers develop pedagogical approaches that enable them to support different world views within a classroom, whilst at the same time protecting the rights and safety of individuals (more below)

7. The development of teacher disciplinary knowledge and education is needed, both in pre-service education and in ongoing professional learning.

In critical reviews of international Worldviews and General Religious Education syllabuses, teacher education and preparation is a frequent concern. Moulin points to at least six UK-based studies where religious adherents believe that the teaching “does not represent religious traditions accurately or fairly” (Moulin, 2016, p.231). Other studies express concern about teacher neutrality (Boisvert, 2015, p.387). Still others point to the poor quality of teaching and its influence on the reception of the syllabus or on teachers' self-doubts about the delivery of the subjects (Jackson, 2014, p.24; Freathy & John, 2019, p.18). Quality teacher training, it is agreed, is a significant factor in achieving the goals set out in Worldviews and General Religious Education syllabuses and must be provided if any syllabus is to succeed (Barnes, 2020, p.152; Malone, 1998, p.17; Butler-Sloss, 2015, 4.16; Jackson, 2020, p.219).

The effectiveness of religion and worldviews education programs is significantly dependent on the quality of teaching. A 2010 UK government White Paper entitled *The Importance of Teaching* noted that “nothing makes more difference to the progress and attainment of any child or young person than good teachers and good teaching” (Freathy & John, 2019, p. 18). Many teachers of religion and worldviews are not specialists in the discipline and have limited content knowledge. Freathy and John argue that a recognition of the “changing nature and purpose” of Religious Education is essential in addressing the issue of teacher preparedness and capacity. They specifically differentiate between the aims of religion and worldviews and those of confessional RE/RI, the latter involving the spiritual formation of students in a particular faith tradition. Further, Freathy and John argue the need for both initial and continuing teacher professional learning in both disciplinary knowledge and academic methodologies. Closer links between schools and universities are one important way they suggest this could be facilitated (Freathy & John, 2019, p.20).

In discussing the need for programs on religious literacy and worldviews education, Lipiainen, Halafoff, Mansouri and Bouma emphasise the importance of being aware of “the lived and complex superdiverse realities of young people”. This awareness, they argue, must be reflected in policy, curriculum and teacher education (Lipiainen, et al., 2020, p.392). Through their research, they advocate for better support for teachers to develop worldviews literacy and to

“facilitate discussions on these hot topics of intersecting and competing rights claims” (Lipiainen, et al., 2020, p.397). Acknowledging the real-world challenge of engaging with religion and worldviews in the classroom in its recommendations, the CoRE Final Report signals the importance of teacher subject knowledge and pedagogical skill. The Report authors assert, “Religion and Worldviews is a complex and potentially sensitive subject and requires highly skilled and knowledgeable teaching” (CoRE, 2018, p.37).

The CoRE Report authors go on to say that, from their research and from surveys conducted by the National Association of Teachers of RE (NATRE), it is clear that many teachers in England and Wales lack confidence in teaching RE. This lack of confidence the authors maintain, is the result of “inadequate training and a lack of subject knowledge” (CoRE, 2018, p.5). Research has clearly linked teacher subject knowledge to student learning outcomes. As the Report states, “Teachers cannot teach pupils what they need to know or address pupils’ misconceptions if their own subject knowledge is lacking” (CoRE, 2018, p.5). As Lipiainen, Halafoff, Mansouri and Bouma observed, classroom discussions about religions and worldviews can be contentious, as different positions on significant and potentially divisive topics are articulated. The Report points out the need for teachers to have the capacity and confidence to teach such topics “sensitively and empathetically” (CoRE, 2018, p.8). Reflexivity may be important here in building teacher confidence and sensitivity and in overcoming negative attitudes to religion among teachers. As Flanagan notes, “aiding teachers to know who they are...making conscious that which is unconscious, becoming *worldview conscious*, contributes to their ability to be reflexive, effective teachers” (Flanagan, 2020, p.321).

A crucial conclusion of the Report is the link between effective teaching of Religion and Worldviews and both initial teacher education (ITE) and continuing professional development (CPD) for in-service teachers. This finding, emphasising the essential provision of high quality CPD, was based on evidence provided to the Commission by educators and discussed in previous reports such as *The All Party Parliamentary Group on Education, RE: the truth unmasked – the supply of and support for religious education teachers*, Religious Education Council of England and Wales (CoRE, 2013, p.8).

Implications and considerations for teacher knowledge: There is a significant gap in Initial Teacher Education (ITE) and continuing professional development (CPD) curricula to support teaching worldviews in schools. Any recommendations for teaching worldviews education must include support for ongoing ITE and CPD provision, which supports teachers to examine their own worldviews, perspectives and commitment and consider the ways in which they will enact worldviews education in diverse classrooms.

Conclusion

This literature review has taken an international view to provide a synthesis of research evidence exploring the complex contextual, ideological and operational issues inherent in the provision of Religion and Worldviews education in schools. The review provides compelling evidence that Worldviews is a subject of importance to students and society but that it is contested, and jurisdictional social, cultural and historical factors need to be considered in the development of any Worldviews education syllabus.

The review highlights the challenge of defining worldviews and the importance of including students' experience, as well as organised religious and non-religious systems and traditions. The influence of contextual differences is seen as an important insight from the literature examined. Likewise, the importance of social cohesion is seen as an urgent but contested rationale for the study of Worldviews. An intrinsic link is evident between the goal of social cohesion and issues of freedom of religion and human rights, which can provide challenges in secular colonial legacy contexts with multicultural and socially diverse populations. Internationally in such contexts, the relationship between worldviews education and student well-being, inclusion and self-understanding is a complex challenge. Finally, the review emphasises the crucial element of teacher disciplinary knowledge and specific pedagogical skill required for successful worldviews education. This is to be addressed through pre-service education and rigorous ongoing professional learning.

In taking a wide view of issues and syllabuses in nations with historical and social similarities, the review finds that conceptual understandings of Worldviews education need to be considered if effective programs are to be developed and implemented in Victorian classrooms. At the same time, consideration needs to be given to the selection of content for study and to teacher education. The development of a Worldviews education programme in the context of Victorian schools also demands that we understand key stakeholder needs and expectations. The project will explore the perspectives of teachers and principals, students and parents in order to provide a careful analysis of the Victorian education landscape and its needs in the light of international findings in Worldviews education. Through this next stage of empirical research data will be made available to highlight factors which are perceived to be barriers and those which are seen to enable effective Religious and Worldviews education in Victorian schools.

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