

Critical dimensions of ethical competence in intercultural religious education: An analysis with special regard to three Scandinavian curricular arenas

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The central theme in the discussion of how education about religion can, and should, be developed in pluralistic societies concerns challenges and opportunities involving intercultural religious education (RE). One example is Robert Jackson's report *Signposts*, commissioned by the Council of Europe, in which various aspects of intercultural competence are captured and made visible regarding a religious didactic context. Here, different dimensions of what can be described as 'ethical competence' appear to be central. In this article, the interpretive approach, strongly connected with Jackson, is considered to be in need of a development of a theoretical framing of forceful strategies for handling ethical challenges taking place in multicultural, multireligious and multi-confessional classrooms. It is argued that such strategies will depend on a careful analysis of the concept of *ethical competence*. A theoretical platform for the argument is presented with reference to James Rest's analysis of ethical competence, which is shown to be relevant to an examination of how the concept of ethical competence can contribute to the development of strategies for teaching intercultural RE. As a basis for this examination, the Danish, Finnish and Norwegian syllabuses for compulsory school RE are analysed regarding how they express conceptions of ethical competence. This selection shaped the curricular arena of the investigation as being non-confessional, whilst simultaneously, more or less explicitly, resting on a shared historical Protestant anchorage. This twofold interpretation is shown to allow for an analysis of ethical competence, in relation to which an identification of certain prerequisites for developing strategies for teaching intercultural RE is possible.

Contribution: In this article, the development of ethical dimensions of global competence within RE is analysed with regard to three Scandinavian syllabuses, highlighting the perspectives of Jackson's interpretive approach. Carried out with reference to Rest's four-component model of morality, the analysis contributes to research on intercultural RE, an area which fits in the scope of the journal.

Keywords: Ethical competence; Intercultural religious education; Nordic syllabuses; Non-confessional teaching on ethics; Rest's four-component model of morality.

Introduction

The central theme in the discussion of how education about religion in school can, and should, be developed in pluralistic societies concerns challenges and opportunities involving intercultural religious education¹ (RE) (e.g. Jackson 2004, 2014; Leganger-Krogstad 2013; Nesbitt 2004; Schreiner 2014, 2016; Skeie 2010). Various authorities and organisations have published a range of supranational policy documents, focusing on a need to identify intercultural competences that could be developed in different areas, for example, in RE, as this is conducted in primary and secondary schools.

The well-known *White Paper on Intercultural Dialogue*, published in 2008 by the Council of Europe, highlights various dimensions of a 'political culture valuing diversity' (Council of Europe 2008a:25) and identifies three areas – 'democratic citizenship, language and history' – with regard to which 'the capacity for reflection and the self-critical disposition necessary for life in culturally diverse societies' is presented as expressing the core of intercultural competence (Council of Europe 2008a:29). The 'religious dimension' of intercultural dialogue is discussed with reference to the *San Marino Declaration*, the approach (Council of Europe 2008a) of which is formulated as:

1. I will use the abbreviation RE below.

Note: Special collection entitled Ethics, education and social justice, sub-edited by John Klaasen (UWC).

Those holding nonreligious world views have an equal right to contribute, alongside religious representatives, to debates on the moral foundations of society and to be engaged in forums for intercultural dialogue. (p. 23)

The *White Paper* can be perceived as sketching a general historical frame of reference for the council's later publications on intercultural issues (Schreiner 2016). A more specific historical keystone for such issues focusing on a 'religious dimension' is *Recommendation CM/Rec (2008) 12 of the committee of ministers to member states on the dimension of religious and non-religious convictions within intercultural education*. Amongst a range of more or less detailed recommendations for intercultural RE, especially four will be of interest in the present context, all of them presented as 'objectives of an intercultural approach concerning the religious and non-religious convictions dimension in education' (Council of Europe 2008b). 'Education should', the Council of Europe (2008b) writes, 'develop intercultural competences through':

- promoting communication and dialogue between people from different cultural, religious and non-religious backgrounds
- promoting civic-mindedness and moderation in expressing one's identity
- addressing the sensitive or controversial issues to which the diversity of religions and non-religious convictions may give rise
- developing skills of critical evaluation and reflection with regard to understanding the perspectives and ways of life of different religions and non-religious convictions.

The reason for extracting these four recommendations is that they will be relevant to the critical discussion developed in the following. A publication that has received considerable attention in recent years is Robert Jackson's *Signposts – Policy and Practice for Teaching about Religions and Non-Religious World Views in Intercultural Education*, published in 2014 by the Council of Europe. In chapter 1 of this book, it is stated that one of the publication's intentions is 'to be of encouragement and assistance in discussing and making full, practical use of the Council of Europe's 2008 recommendation' (Jackson 2014:13). As will be shown below, perspectives on the recommendation are largely elaborated with regard to the interpretive approach, closely associated with Jackson. A salient theme in the discussion concerns values regarding democratic dimensions of intercultural dialogue in RE in school (Jackson 2014).

The premise for the following discussion is that the dialogical method, which is elaborated with regard to ethics education conducted within intercultural RE, whilst in many ways constructive, ought to be complemented by certain analytical dimensions. A prerequisite for such a complementation, which appears to have been rarely examined in the literature, seems to be a careful analysis of the complex concept of ethical competence, carried out with the intention of developing a multidimensional RE within a democratic frame of reference.

The aim of this article is to contribute to such an analysis by examining some analytical tools which seem to be important

in the formulation of a dialogical method for developing ethical competence within an intercultural RE context.

Research methods and design

The investigation starts with an examination of which ethically relevant competences are in focus in Jackson's (2014) interpretive approach, as elaborated with regard to intercultural RE in *Signposts*. These competences are discussed with regard to the recommendations that, according to the description of the Council of Europe, should play an active role in the development of intercultural competences. A tentative disconnection between the two sets of competences will be identified, and a platform for the development of an ethical-pedagogical approach to bridge this gap will be outlined.

It will be argued that such an approach must be based on certain ethical and philosophical considerations, and that such considerations, if they are to be of universal relevance, cannot be biased towards either religious or secular contexts or convictions. Given this condition, it seems relevant to examine the prerequisites for the formulation of an ethically and philosophically anchored dialogical method for the development of ethical competence within intercultural RE, with regard to RE contexts that are described as 'non-confessional'. The distinction between non-confessional and confessional RE is highlighted and discussed with reference to three Scandinavian curricular arenas, and the RE syllabuses belonging to them are analysed, with a focus on conceptions of ethical competence.

The last step in the examination consists of an explanatory analysis of which consequences could be expected with regard to the designing of a dialogical method for the development of ethical competence within an intercultural RE context.

The interpretive approach

Jackson writes that the interpretive approach is concentrated on three key principles related to learning about religions: how religions are portrayed or represented to learners (representation), how religious language and symbols are interpreted by learners (interpretation) and how learners respond to their learning about religions (reflexivity) (Jackson 2014:36).

Representation is said to take place on three levels – individuals, groups and religions (Jackson 2014:36f) – and it is also on these three levels that various interpretations of religious language and symbols can be identified. Amongst various individuals, groups and religions, there is a range of interpretations of terms, concepts and symbols affiliated with religious arenas. Some of these will express differences between, and also within, certain religious contexts. The key aspect regarding interpretation, according to the interpretive approach, is that such differences are not to be taken as reasons for starting conflicts, or for treating with disrespect people representing other views and convictions than those one holds oneself. Rather, the strategy, according to Jackson (2014), ought to be:

[T]o use one's current understanding as a starting point in making an imaginative leap, in order to make sense of what another is explaining, even if the learner's world view is very different from that of the person, group or tradition being studied. (p. 37)

Finally, the third key principle, focusing on reflexivity, refers to the development of an ability to both empathise with the various religions studied in RE and distance oneself from and critically reflect on not only the convictions and positions represented by others but also, first and foremost, those which are embraced by oneself. It is a matter of 'self-awareness', with the focus directed towards 'one's own current view and prejudices, and learning how to examine and challenge these' (Jackson 2014:38). Values associated with other religions are to be compared and contrasted with one's own, and considerations regarding what such study may lead to when it comes to learning from other individuals, groups and religions are presented, examined and analysed (Jackson 2014:38).

According to Jackson (2014:39), the principles can 'be expressed in terms of knowledge, skills and attitudes required to develop intercultural competence'. An extensive list offering examples of knowledge, skills and attitudes is presented. Briefly summarised, these examples can be said to highlight the knowledge and understanding of concepts, practices and beliefs in religions; skills such as listening to and interacting with people from other religions, and exercising empathy and multi-perspectivity; and attitudes such as openness to people from different religions and cultures, willingness to suspend judgement and tolerate ambiguity, and valuing religious and cultural diversity; and flexibility in cultural and communicative behaviour (Jackson 2014:39f.).

Now, at least on a superficial level, these examples of knowledge, skills and attitudes seem to harmonise with the four recommendations presented in the *White Paper* as keystones for the development of intercultural competence. On the other hand, there is a reason to raise questions about the key principles, such as they are elaborated in the present context, as framing intercultural competence in RE contexts. To what extent, one may ask, can the examples of knowledge, skills and attitudes anchor intercultural competence in RE on ethics? Certainly, these examples seem to contribute to the framing of basic guidelines or rules for RE in which different beliefs, concepts and symbols are highlighted. But such a framing, however important it may be, does not itself carve analytical tools for handling controversy and conflict in the multicultural, multireligious classroom. It builds a visionary structure for how dialogical, intercultural RE ought to be designed and conducted, but there are few clues to be found regarding strategies for taking the further step towards an ethical-pedagogical analysis of which turn such teaching can, and ought to, take, when representatives of different perspectives and beliefs experience themselves as rivals, with no interest in or ability for openness, mutuality, multi-perspectivity or interaction.

Not least when it comes to ethical issues, this seems to be a quite acute arena to approach. Religious convictions can be the foundation for strong ethical claims regarding, for example, issues of life and death, gender issues, love, sex and relationships, and human rights. *Signposts* contains a chapter on 'human rights issues', but the democratic communicative dimensions discussed in this chapter, however, seem to be in need of conceptual anchoring if the strategies that are presented are to be forcefully implemented and practised.

Ethical competence in intercultural religious education

As is well known, in many national curricular contexts education on ethics and values is integrated into RE (Alberts 2007; Jackson 2014:69; Rothgangel, Skeie & Jäggle 2014; Schreiner 2016). This is a fact to keep in mind when intercultural teaching-learning processes are discussed. Students have the right to be introduced to the ethical theory as well as moral practices related to various religions and life views. But what is to be highlighted, and exercised, is not only the communicative competences which may be seen as necessary prerequisites for an open and empathic dialogue in the multicultural, multireligious classroom; if such a dialogue is to be more than an arena where students, for example, with regard to controversial issues, learn about various beliefs and traditions, and listen to each other with mutual respect, it seems important that the educational process rests on some idea about what it means to be 'ethically competent' (cf. Cooper & Menzel 2013).

Let me put this reservation another way. As Jackson (2014) developed the three key principles of the interpretive approach with regard to intercultural RE, with the intention of being 'of encouragement and assistance in discussing and making full, practical use' of the Council of Europe's recommendation on 'the dimension of religious and non-religious convictions', he used a strategy which seems to guide many other official descriptions of what the concept of intercultural competence means.

One recent example of this is the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's (OECD 2018) recommendations regarding schools' 'promoting of global competence' by:

- providing opportunities to learn about global developments
- teaching students how they can develop a fact-based and critical worldview of today
- equipping students with the means to analyse a broad range of cultural practices and meanings
- engaging students in experiences that facilitate intercultural relations
- promoting the value of diversity.

These 'promoting' dimensions of a global competence seem in many respects to harmonise with the conception of intercultural competence, which lays the foundation for Jackson's (2014) interpretive, dialogical approach to

intercultural RE. And here, as in Jackson's (2014) case, there is reason to complain about a lack of clarification, and of a deepening, concerning what kind of competences may be required when students are practising a valuing of diversity and an active engagement in intercultural relations.

Let me be clear about what this complaint is about. I am not going to criticise the general formulations of dimensions of intercultural competences stated by either Jackson (2014) or the OECD. I believe some of them are formulated so generally that it seems hard to realise exactly what kind of conceptions, approaches and actions they refer to; however, I believe these ambiguities, at least in principle, can be further elaborated on and explained. Moreover, there seems to be a need for critical discussion regarding whose voice and whose perspective are given space and power when the concept of intercultural competence is described in official economic and educational organisations, and in research produced within a Western European outlook. This article is itself written within such an outlook and therefore shares the limitations that could be assigned to the thoughts it critically examines. Consequently, the claims that could be proposed must be balanced with regard to these contextual circumstances, which is of course not to say that they do not have relevance outside the sphere where they, as well as those which are examined, are maintained.

Now, what I am asking for is clarification as to what kind of competence underlies all the ethically relevant examples and dimensions of intercultural, dialogical education and especially RE, that are stated, primarily within the frames of Jackson's (2014) interpretive approach. These examples and dimensions illustrate, I would say, a range of communicative and deliberative competences – that is to say, competences for intercultural dialogue occurring under mutual respect, within the frames of democracy. At the centre of such a conception lie the issues of values and ethics, which are in focus: partly because RE, involving teaching on ethics, highlights questions on right and wrong, good and evil, and rights and responsibilities; and partly because such a focus aims not only to bring forth factual and theoretical knowledge about various positionings and convictions, but also for ethical and moral development amongst students. This double aim anchors a need for the development of something more than communicative and dialogical competence. More precisely, I will claim, this need should be understood as a need for a clarification of the concept of ethical competence, which could lead to a deep understanding of how intercultural competence within RE may be interpreted, imparted and practised, not only in multicultural, multireligious classroom arenas but also on a general societal level.

Mapping a theory-based competence structure

One way to go in order to develop a conception of ethical competence, which could anchor intercultural RE on ethics, is to focus on an existing theoretical model, capture its objectives and relate these to intercultural educational issues, themes and perspectives. The model used here is James

Rest's well-known four-component model of morality. The components in question have sometimes been interpreted in the literature as criteria for moral, progressive development (cf. Rest et al. 2000). In other sources, they are rather perceived as referring to 'processes thought to be independent and necessary contributors for moral behavior' (You & Bebeau 2013:1).

What seems clear is that Rest himself regards the model as representing a 'Neo-Kohlbergian approach' (Rest et al. 2000), whereby Kohlberg's developmental 'stages' in young people's moral development have been opened up to also allow for studies examining developmental 'processes' whereby not only individuals on the micro-level but also groups and societal communities on the macro-level can be investigated according to a cognitive-developmental model (Rest et al. 2000:383). In the present context, I will focus on the individual level.

The four components which Rest identified as making up a processual moral development are moral sensitivity, moral judgment, moral motivation and moral implementation (Rest 1986).

Moral sensitivity refers to the ability to discern situations which could count as morally relevant as well as situations that may be problematic and challenging, and also to identify which persons would be affected by various actions that may be perceived as preferable or not. To make moral judgments means to express more or less substantiated positions regarding which actions, or which strategic approaches, seem to be preferable and justified, given the identified circumstances. Moral motivation is defined with regard to an intention and ability to make possibly justified decisions regarding which action could be judged to be morally right. Finally, moral implementation refers to the ability to persevere, to stand by decisions one has made although there may arise obstacles and problematic challenges – obstacles and challenges which should be faced and treated, rather than neglected or forgotten (Rest 1986; You & Bebeau 2013).

Rest's (1986) four-component model offers an interpretation of the concept of ethical competence. In the present context, I will not comment on what I find to be quite instrumental applications of the model, published, for example, in research contexts in which the aim is to use it as a quantitative rather than qualitative basis for measuring ethical competence (cf. You & Bebeau 2013). Neither will I discuss in detail the possible interpretations of the model and its four components. My sole reason for introducing it is to offer an example of how the concept of ethical competence may play a role in the deepening of intercultural RE teaching on ethical issues. And there are, certainly, alternative theoretical models for constructive analysis of the concept of ethical competence that would be interesting and fruitful to test as possible platforms for the development of intercultural RE on ethics and values.²

2. Tuana (2007) presents a relevant alternative.

Rest's theory of ethical competence and intercultural religious education on ethics and values

In what sense would it be possible for Rest's (1986) model to contribute to the development, and deepening, of Jackson's (2014) conception of intercultural RE on ethics and values? The answer seems to be that the four components making up Rest's conception of ethical competence may shape a platform with regard to which the knowledge, skills and attitudes listed by Jackson (2014) can obtain a theoretical foundation which supports a forceful and, simultaneously, nuanced use. In this way, the Council of Europe's recommendations quoted above may also gain an in-depth and theoretical framing.

Moreover, such a platform seems generally necessary for schools to verbalise and make transparent in order to be able to offer students workable tools for developing ethical competence. Being offered such tools could be claimed to be a democratic right, as it seems to represent an important step towards the individual's possibility to contribute to social cohesion and make a difference in human relations, for himself or herself as well as others. In this sense, the relevant educational arena for an analytical, constructively developmental focus on ethical competence is one where issues of powerful knowledge (Young 2008:2013) and social justice have to be kept vividly alive.³

If a demand in democratic society is that citizens, as active and responsible moral agents, engage and contribute to the common good, then there is an obligation to structure education so that it could offer a breeding ground for the growth and development of such an engagement and responsibility.

Jackson's list: A critical review

As stated above, the three key principles which Jackson (2014) claims are in focus in the interpretive approach to intercultural RE, and the knowledge, skills and attitudes he mentions as concrete characteristics of such an education seem to play an important role in the identification of the basic structural dimensions of a platform for developing a dialogical, intercultural education on ethics and values within RE contexts. However, this is not enough for the framing of democratic, dialogical and deliberative teaching-learning processes, in which the focus is not exclusively directed towards abilities to partake in intercultural communication. Something important, not to say foundational, is missing here. In order to engage in such communication in which ethical issues are critically and constructively discussed and penetrated, students must be offered support in identifying and using analytical tools, which could help them to anchor their communicative abilities in a relevant and transparent theoretical framing. They have a democratic right to learn to master these tools, for example, with regard to questions and

³Because of limited space, I have to leave the question on specification of 'differentiated knowledge' in this context uncommented (cf. Young 2008).

subjects around which ethical issues and themes are examined and debated. This means that the communicative abilities relevant to highlight in teaching on ethics in RE contexts, which Jackson (2014) includes on his list, must be theoretically grounded and embraced if it has to develop such an ethical competence, which seems to be a prerequisite for the exercising of intercultural relevant knowledge, skills and attitudes. As they now are presented, they can be perceived as expressions of communicative and deliberative competences, which certainly can be seen as significant dimensions of intercultural competence – but without being grounded within a well-reasoned theoretical framing in which ethical core competences are analysed and developed.

Non-confessional religious education arenas

I will illustrate this argument with regard to three Scandinavian curricular arenas that could be described as 'non-confessional', although to varied extents. One reason for this is that the concept of ethical competence must be approached as a universally relevant concept, being theoretically framed and applied in practice without being rendered an exclusive affiliation to either 'religious' or 'secular' educational contexts.

If ethical-pedagogical tools are considered important to offer students within teaching on ethics, this is a strategy that should be maintained regardless of the educational context in which it is conducted. Such education can be part of RE or secular education, where religious contextualisations and references are left out (cf. Rothgangel et al. 2014). It may be that intercultural competence can find various expressions within such different educational forms and structures. However, insofar as these expressions focus on an understanding of ethical concepts and a dialogical interaction regarding analyses and discussions of ethical issues, a universal and non-biased examination of the substantial prerequisites must take place within transformative and transparent teaching-learning processes.

This seems to be a strategy which is important to develop, considering what Kittelmann Flensner (2015:64) emphasised, namely that 'social, ethnic and religious pluralism and diversity have a great impact on the RE-classroom all over the world, regardless of whether it is a confessional or non-confessional RE-classroom'. In non-confessional RE classrooms, existential and ethical issues are to be highlighted, analysed and discussed without any specific tradition, belief or belief system being sanctioned or transmitted as 'true' or 'objectively justified'. The aim is to offer students a theoretical and practical platform, in relation to which knowledge about the pluralist society, multicultural and multireligious as it is, can be developed. In order for children and young people to develop intercultural competence for an active and knowledgeable democratic citizenship, such knowledge is foundational (cf. Schreiner 2016; Skeie 2010).

One fundamental dimension of this development is ethical competence. Such competence must be in focus in all education: it constitutes a foundation that, independent of educational context, represents a basis for anchoring those communicative and deliberative competences which make up the daily collaboration and interaction within intercultural RE. By examining some examples of non-confessional educational RE arenas, one may shape a basic structure for interpreting how ethical competence – perceived as a universally fundamental, and religiously and secularly non-biased, ability which students have a democratic right to grasp and develop in theory as well as in practice – can be described and promoted.

General curricular context

In this section, I will present an analysis of descriptions of ethical competence that can be found in the Danish, Finnish and Norwegian syllabuses. They represent an interesting variation of dimensions of non-confessionality in a Scandinavian context.

The arena for the following examination, using the terminology of Goodlad and Su (1992), is an institutional policy level, but certainly curricular descriptions and principles regarding ethics and ethics education on this level may correlate and even collaborate with their parallels at a teaching and an experiential student level, according to a rich variety of patterns that may be most interesting and valuable to analyse. Such an approach seems to harmonise with an apprehension of curricula as attending the role, not exclusively as formal policy documents but as representing and expressing societal conceptions of how knowledge ought to be organised with regard to the responsibility of schools for teaching and communication (Sundberg 2007).

It should also be emphasised that the syllabuses in question, even if they could in one sense or another be described as being the signum of being non-confessional, must be seen in the light of a confessional history. Looking at the educational history of the Scandinavian countries, the school's twofold task of teaching and nurturing has had its ideological basis in policy documents in which a Lutheran Christian anchorage, more or less explicitly, has been hegemonic (Rothgangel et al. 2014). There are relevant perspectives to highlight if one wants to take an extended historical trip into the depth of Lutheranism and societal education; however, this is not possible in the present context.

To take a brief look, in an interesting article entitled 'Lutheranism and the Nordic states', and with reference to the church historian Jørgen Stenbæk, the Danish researcher Mette Buchardt has discussed the Lutheran idea of 'three holy orders of society, ordained by God', that is to say 'the priesthood, marriage and worldly magistrate' (Buchardt 2017:2). Buchardt (2017:2) describes that this conception of society is formulated as 'a governing estate, a teacher estate and a house estate'. All three estates are thought to be organised 'in a hierarchy of parent–children relations', which

means that 'in the teacher estate the clergy and school masters were the parents, and the subordinates their children' (Buchardt 2017:2).

For most people today, such a conception of society is, of course, hard to understand, questionable and even irrelevant. As is well known, secularisation and a growing pluralism have further given rise to the questioning of any singular prioritisation of a cultural heritage expressed in Christian, that is to say Lutheran, terms.⁴ An axiom which is common to all three Scandinavian curricula is that teaching in compulsory school should be non-confessional (Rothgangel et al. 2014).

There are various traces of a confessional heritage in Scandinavian educational policy documents. The Finnish RE, for example, has been characterised as presenting a 'weak confessional model', which, as pointed out in Luodeslampi (2007) and commented on by Ubani and Tirri (2014), states that 'students attend different lessons according to their own religious affiliations and that the content especially in primary education reflects the religious tradition in question', whilst at the same time 'it does not include devotional or faith formation aims' (Ubani & Tirri 2014:108).

Another, although perhaps more implicit, sign of confessional tendency is found in the Norwegian RE syllabus (Utdanningsdirektoratet 2015), which states:

The subject shall teach knowledge about Christianity, other world religions and philosophies of life, and ethical and philosophical themes. It shall also teach the significance of Christianity as cultural heritage in our society. (p. 2)

And in the Danish arena, despite being described as 'non-confessional', RE on the primary and secondary levels is called *Kristendomskundskab*, officially translated as 'Christian Studies'; although, as stated in Buchardt (2014:49), the direct translation of *kundskab* would rather be 'knowledge about ...'.⁵

Philosophical context

The analysis of descriptions of ethical competence with regard to Rest's four-component model is carried out within a philosophical context in which an overarching aim for the need to highlight such competence in education is promoted.

According to my approach here, the essence of ethical competence cannot be restricted to formal criteria, or represent either atomistic or essentialist conceptions. Rather, it seems we are dealing with something more complex: conglomerates of abilities, skills and competences which can take various forms in different contexts, at the same time as they can be combined in almost endless ways (cf. Cooper & Menzel 2013; De Schrijver & Maesschalck 2013). Rest's four-component model, for example, represents

4.Regarding the Finnish RE, it should be noted that not only Lutheran but also Orthodox tradition plays a visible role. Possible implications of this are, however, not an issue of importance to interpret in the present context (cf. Ubani & Tirri 2014:113).

5.On the high school level, the subject is called Religion.

various analytical and normative dimensions of ethical competence expressed as moral sensitivity, judgement and motivation, and action-competence in terms of moral implementation. These can all contribute to a holistic conception of ethical competence in which different combinations of relevant abilities, skills and competences can be designed.

Accepting that 'ethical competences' is not to be interpreted in an essentialist way, one must admit that it will be untenable to pursue a task according to which the aim of a study of 'ethical competences' is to identify 'pieces of competence' which cannot be the object of interpretation – and negotiation. A non-essentialist apprehension of 'ethical competence' here, with influence from Aristotelian tradition, refers to a position according to which the task of identifying abilities and skills in the arena of ethics and ethics education is understood not as an intention to confirm or disconfirm the existence of unequivocally measurable competences, but rather to find signs of abilities and skills that connect to the overall ethical aim of contributing to a good life and a good society. Aristotle's *phronesis* comes into focus, and opens up for a broader and more creative view of what 'competence' in an ethical arena might mean: not to delineate and apply presumably summative abilities and skills, assessable according to formal criteria, but to develop formative contributions to a society and a human community where *eudaimonia*, happiness or welfare, is the realisable ideal of individuals' life together with their fellow humans (Aristotle 2002; Nussbaum 2013). It is also important here to mention a reminder of the highlighting of ethical competence as part of a 'powerful knowledge' process, in which students' democratic right to be able to grasp and develop this competence is respected.

There is always reason to look for more than formal attributes, claimed to cover the meaning in total. A phronetic approach makes room for the notion that the important skill in the arena where contributions to a good life and a good society may be made is the ability to make wise judgements in each specific situation that meets the moral subject. It is not a matter of deterministic, or even preconditioned, action. It is a moral and existential response made right in the flood of challenges and possibilities, falling back on serious experience of, and reflection about, what really matters when humans come together, in their shortcomings, and with their capability to do good (Aristotle 2002; Nussbaum 2013).

Specific religious education syllabus contexts: Short introductions

Each of the Danish, Finnish and Norwegian RE syllabuses has its own logical and contentious structure, and it is important that these structures are made transparent when analyses of certain competences, for example, in an ethical arena, are carried out.⁶

6.The examination in this article is restricted to syllabuses for compulsory school.

The name of the Danish RE subject may be taken to indicate a confessional platform, but the teaching in *Kristendomskundskab* is explicitly stated to be non-confessional (cf. Buchardt 2014:49). The 'competence areas' for the various classes include descriptions referring to a demand that teaching focuses on Christian, European and Danish cultural contexts (Undervisningsministeriet 2018:7), whilst global perspectives simultaneously play a prominent role (Undervisningsministeriet 2018:13).

Hobel (2002:21) describes *Christian Studies* as 'one among the other secularised subjects'. The content of the competence areas, in which 'Biblical stories' and 'Christianity'⁷ make up two of four headings, might give the impression that this comment does not capture the core of the subject, but this is wrong. The two other headings are 'Life philosophy and ethics' and 'Non-Christian religions'. Considering this, and the fact that RE teaching is generally described as non-confessional and critical, the comment seems, at least to a significant extent, justified.

As mentioned above, the Finnish RE syllabus has been characterised as representing a 'weak confessional model' as it does not promote devotional teaching, although students receive instruction in the affiliations to which they belong. It is explicitly stated that activities, teaching and education based on a certain worldview or pedagogical principle 'must follow the general goals of education and the goals set for teaching', and that the teaching should not 'bind the students to a basic or pedagogical view that underlies a certain worldview or pedagogical principle' (Opetushallitus Utbildningsstyrelsen 2014:94). This statement indicates an interpretation according to which the core content and the pedagogical form for teaching in the subject have significant affinities with those characterising non-confessional education, although the teaching is conducted in religiously affiliated classrooms.

The basic structure of the five RE syllabuses⁸ for Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism is mainly the same, and the teaching is prescribed to promote the general seven comprehensive competences in Finnish school: the ability to reflect and to learn; cultural and communicative competence; everyday competence; multiliteracy; digital competence; working life competence and entrepreneurship; and the ability to participate, influence and contribute to a sustainable future (Opetushallitus Utbildningsstyrelsen 2014:99ff.).

Cultural diversity is emphasised as a richness, and according to the basic guidelines for Finnish education, teaching should 'support students' cultural identities and encourage them to actively participate in their own cultural and social communities and also interest them in other cultures' (Opetushallitus Utbildningsstyrelsen 2014:15). 'An educated person strives', it is stated, 'to act properly and to respect himself, his surroundings, and other people' (Opetushallitus Utbildningsstyrelsen 2014:15).

7.All translations from Scandinavian languages were carried out by the author.

8.The secular subject *Livsåskådningskunskap* is not included in the examination.

TABLE 1: Descriptions of ethically relevant competences.

RE Syllabuses	Sensitivity	Reasoning	Motivation	Implementation
Danish RE syllabus	Knowledge of values, norms and behaviour in ethical issues (Utdanningsdirektoratet 2015:11). Express oneself about the importance of choice of faith for human actions and interpretation of life (Utdanningsdirektoratet 2015:17). Knowledge of ethics and moral practice in an interpersonal perspective (Utdanningsdirektoratet 2015:15).	Express oneself on the religious dimension based on fundamental issues of life and ethical principles (Utdanningsdirektoratet 2015:13). Reflect on ethical principles and moral practice in interpersonal relationships (Utdanningsdirektoratet 2015:15).	Account for the connection between ethical principles and moral practice in everyday life and in religious issues (Utdanningsdirektoratet 2015:13).	Have basic insight into the treated religions and conceptions of life perceptions and value representations, and skills in dealing with them (Utdanningsdirektoratet 2015:17).
Finnish RE syllabus	Think ethically and realise what it means to take responsibility for oneself, one's group, the environment and nature (Utdanningsdirektoratet 2015:135).	Insight into ethical thinking within the religion being studied and within other religions and life views (Utdanningsdirektoratet 2015:247). Thinking about ethical issues (Utdanningsdirektoratet 2015:136).	Identify and express one's feelings and opinions, and practise identifying the feelings of others and respecting the opinions of others (Utdanningsdirektoratet 2015:135).	Develop emotional skills with regard to dimensions of understandings of 'a good life', for example, children's rights and holistic well-being (Utdanningsdirektoratet 2015:136). Act responsibly and fairly (Utdanningsdirektoratet 2015:136).
Norwegian RE syllabus	Use the United Nations' Convention on the Rights of the Child to understand children's rights and equality, and be able to find examples of this in the media and on the Internet (Utdanningsdirektoratet 2015:6).	Lead a simple dialogue about conscience, ethical rules of conduct and values (Utdanningsdirektoratet 2015:6). Reflect on ethical questions related to interpersonal relationships, family and friends, forms of cohabitation, heterosexuality and homosexuality, youth culture and body culture (Utdanningsdirektoratet 2015:19).	Give an account of the concepts of ethics and morals, and use ethical analysis with a point of departure in basic ethical ways of thought (Utdanningsdirektoratet 2015:10). Discuss and elaborate on ethical choices and current themes in local and global society: social and ecological responsibility, technological challenges, peace work, and democracy (Utdanningsdirektoratet 2015:10).	Cite the rule of reciprocity and be able to put this rule into practice (Utdanningsdirektoratet 2015:6). Talk about respect and tolerance, and counteract bullying in real life (Utdanningsdirektoratet 2015:6).

Finally, the Norwegian RE syllabus⁹ also emphasises cultural richness and the value in students representing a variety of religions, life views and philosophies coming together in school and RE, a meeting place for dialogue under mutual respect (Utdanningsdirektoratet 2015:2). Teaching in RE – in Norway called *Knowledge of Christianity, Religion, Philosophies of Life and Ethics* – should, according to the curriculum, promote 'the significance of Christianity as cultural heritage in our society', and for this reason 'about half of the teaching time of the subject will be used for Knowledge of Christianity' (Utdanningsdirektoratet 2015:2). Generally, 'knowledge of religions and philosophies of life, and the function these have as traditions and as actual sources of faith, morals and understanding life, are central themes in the subject' and are to be treated in teaching that is 'objective, critical and pluralistic' (Utdanningsdirektoratet 2015:2). '(R)espect for religious values, human rights in general, and the ethical foundation of all human rights' are stated as a foundation for RE (Utdanningsdirektoratet 2015:2).

Teaching should promote oral as well as writing skills, and the ability to read, experience and understand written texts, all of which are examples of 'basic skills' (Utdanningsdirektoratet 2015:4).

Identified ethically relevant competences

In Table 1, some descriptions exemplifying ethically relevant competences are presented.

The Danish, Finnish and Norwegian RE syllabuses all emphasise an intercultural, objective and critical education in religions, ethics and values, whilst simultaneously making

⁹The Norwegian syllabus is presently the subject for a revisionary work.

space for a national cultural awareness of Christian belief and tradition. The contextual philosophical-pedagogical approach can be described as phronetic, insofar as in the dialogical arena where RE teaching is conducted, sometimes on controversial issues, a focus may be said to be the ability to contribute to a good life and a good society, and to make wise judgements in each specific situation that meets the moral subject.

Consequently, there is a good reason for characterising identified RE competences with regard to Rest's four-component model, with the aim of identifying a theoretical platform for an elaboration of a multidimensional conception of ethical competence, as this may be perceived with reference to the three Scandinavian syllabuses.

It should be noted that the competences listed in Table 1 constitute a selection, and that more examples can be found in the syllabuses. Furthermore, the borders between the four collections are not absolute. Rather, they can be seen as membranes between complex, multidimensional competences, relevant to an elaboration of the concept of ethical competence.

Now, Rest's four-component labels make up a conceptual framing within which the ethically relevant competences identified in the syllabuses can be given a theoretical anchoring, which makes it possible to formulate not only an ethical pedagogical platform for intercultural education on ethics but also a purpose that opens up for a deepened as well as broadened understanding. Ethical competence is not exclusively describable in terms of specific oral, writing and reflective skills. These skills must be related to each other and discussed in light of the holistic conception of a phronetic educational approach, in which the main aim is to offer inspiration, knowledge and analytical, normative and action-

directed tools for individuals and groups to contribute to a good life for oneself and others, and thereby to a good society.

Rest's four components run the risk of playing a distant role on an ethical meta-level if they are not related to concrete practical verbalisations of competences that are perceived as important to highlight in education on ethics and intended to offer opportunities for students to engage in teaching-learning processes with the aim of developing ethical competence. On the other hand, such verbalisations would be at serious risk of lacking depth and a coherent context if the complexity of the concept of ethical competence was not formally and contentiously structured and carefully analysed in order to make significant contributions in the holistic, multidimensional competence arena. Theory must be integrated into practice, and vice versa.

Consequences for a critical reading of the *Signpost* conception of religious education intercultural education

The examination of the three syllabuses reveals a rich collection of ethically relevant competences, described with regard to the context of intercultural RE, intended to be objective and critical. They refer to a need for conceptual awareness of, and an existential sensibility for, what is going on in the field of ethics. As such, they contribute to an elaboration of a multidimensional conception of ethical competence, anchored within a theoretical framing and with visible practical relevance. The theoretical anchoring suggested in the present context is Rest's four-component model.

The collection of competences seems to fit quite well into the intercultural RE competence arena that Jackson (2014) developed – although some of them seem to be more concretely defined than those found in *Signposts*. This means that the need for theoretical contribution to an anchoring of the concept of ethical competence, applicable in RE, seems to be relevant to Jackson's (2014) dialogical approach as well.

Moreover, such a contribution should also be emphasised as consolidating the democratic right of students to be offered opportunities and tools for the development of ethical competence, for example, when controversial issues are debated. This right is to be understood in relation to a 'powerful knowledge strategy' whereby relevant conditions and criteria should support participation in education on ethics as transparent and pervious for all students. The theoretical model inspired by Rest should be seen as one forceful example of bringing this strategy to the fore, stating that moral sensitivity, reasoning, motivation and implementation make relevant and comprehensible competence dimensions universally visible and possible to understand and develop.

Conclusions

This study has shown that non-confessional RE can be an arena where students, regardless of their personal beliefs or existential affiliations, may be offered objective analytical tools for understanding and developing a multidimensional concept of ethical competence. Through the interpretation of the three Scandinavian syllabuses, it has also become clear that the presence of cultural contextual framing, such as a Lutheran-Christian one, does not necessarily challenge reasonable demands for RE teaching to make room for religious as well as secular voices and views in discussions on ethical issues. Last but not least, the foregoing discussion regarding Rest's four-component model, with relevance to the interpretive approach elaborated in *Signposts*, has made visible the need to build a theoretically transparent and deepening platform for the development of ethical competence within a democratic intercultural RE context.

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Author's contributions

O.F. is the sole author of this research article.

Ethical considerations

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Data availability statement

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

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