Leading School with Diverse Worldviews: Finnish Principals’ Perceptions

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to find out what kind of worldviews Finnish principals identify in their schools and the kind of lived realities of worldviews that are affecting schools from the perspective of school leadership. The issues were considered using a wide worldview framework, which includes religious and non-religious worldviews and focused on the lived realities of worldviews. Seven principals in basic education were interviewed, and the resulting data were analysed using both inductive and deductive content analysis methods. According to the results, diversity and a plurality of worldviews was emphasised in the schools, principals identifying a total of 30 different worldviews including both religious and non-religious worldviews. The lived realities of worldviews were separated into four categories; worldviews in school practices, the neutrality of schools, visibility of individuals’ worldviews, and worldviews education. The principals’ role and responsibility in accepting actualisations were emphasised and there were differences in how principals considered and accepted the visibility of worldviews in schools.

Keywords

Principals, Worldviews, Diversity

Introduction

This study aims to create a wider understanding of the diversity and complexity of worldviews and their effects on school leadership in Finnish basic education. Diversity, including diversity of worldviews in Finnish society has increased and has become more visible in recent decades. Even though Finland is still a relatively homogeneous country, since the 1990s diversity has increased in Finland faster than in other European countries (Furseth 2018; Sahlberg 2015; see also Official Statistics of Finland 2019). For instance, based on Official Statistics of Finland (OSF) (2018), the number of children with foreign backgrounds has doubled over the last ten years, and the diversity of population is particularly apparent in the Helsinki capital area (OSF 2019). The diversity and complexity of pupils, as in Finnish society in general, have become more visible in the school context, and school leaders have had to face the reality of this in school practices (Sahlberg 2015; see also Rissanen 2019). The role of the principal is very central in Finnish schools, and ultimately they are responsible for the ongoing practices in schools. Principals have a high degree of autonomy concerning issues relating to all kinds of diversity, and the principal’s role is crucial when considering how different worldviews can be actualised in schools. Previous studies show that worldviews are visible in Finnish schools, and they are affected by the kind of school leadership given. However, there is a need to understand what worldviews principals identify in schools, and how those lived realities affect school leadership (Jantunen et al. 2020; Lipiäinen et al. 2020a). The majority of research concerning diversity and leadership in schools comes from North America, and there is a true need for Nordic and European research as the societies and therefore educational contexts, school structure and educational administration in these European countries are very unique (see e.g. Merchant et al. 2012). A previous study of principals’ diversity strategies shows that Finnish principals often have a ‘religion-blindness’ strategy when it comes to religions in schools, meaning that religions are accepted but are to all intents and purposes invisible in the school context (Rissanen 2019 p. 8). In view of this lack of information about worldviews and their lived realities, we have formulated the research questions in this study as follows:
1. What kinds of worldviews do Finnish principals identify in their schools?
2. What kind of lived realities of worldviews affect schools from the perspective of school leadership?

The issue of worldviews in Finland and other Western societies is complex and their affect in education need reconsideration. There are many ongoing global phenomena that have contributed to changes in the worldview landscape. Taylor has proposed a secularisation hypothesis, which is based on the notion that a country becomes more secular the richer and more industrialized it becomes (Taylor 2007). The effects this has include the individualisation of religions (e.g. Jackson 2014; see also Sinnemäki et al. 2019), the separation of religion and politics, and the decline of ‘packaged’ religions (Bouma 2017, 139, 131). However, religions are not disappearing from democratic politics and phenomena such as transnational migrations, increasing globalisation, and multiculturalism are not diminishing. This causes religions and other worldviews to engage even more in public issues and politics (Casanova 2006; Pew Research Center 2018). Berger has argued (2014) that globalisation causes pluralism at two levels: religious pluralism and religious and secular pluralism. Moreover, Woodhead (2016) adds to Berger’s paradigm a deeper kind of pluralism, ‘de-differentiation’, which includes a plurality inside the religious or non-religious worldviews, because the ‘no religion’ group is also internally diverse (see also Bouma 2017; Furseth 2018). According to Casanova (2006, 2009), in an increasingly plural society, the focus should be changed from secularisation and the decline of religion to the new forms that religions are assuming at the individual, group, and societal levels. To capture this diversity and plurality, it is more relevant to focus on the practical, lived dimension of worldviews (see also Ammerman 2016; Furseth 2018; McGuire 2008).

Supporting all kinds of diversity is one of the main goals of Finnish education (NCCBE, 2014). It has also been pointed out that in the Finnish context alongside of supporting a diversity of worldviews, schools have a role to play in preventing violent ideologies and radicalisation. Intercultural understanding and countering violent extremism have become among the main foci of many Western governments, most notably in Europe, as part of its re-oriented diversity policy (Council of Europe 2008). International terrorist attacks and increased nationalistic movements in Finland (Pew Research Center 2018) have led to the need to prevent violent ideological extremism and radicalisation in the Finnish school context too. According to a recent study of the Ministry of the Interior, religions are one of the targets and enablers of hate speech, and schools have a crucial role in encouraging pupils to be tolerant, respectful and caring, and to transmit values such as equality, justice, and diversity (Ministry of the Interior 2019a, 2019b). In addition, the National Action Plan for the Prevention of Violent Radicalisation and Extremism (Ministry of Interior 2016), emphasises the active role of schools in “the fostering of inclusion and well-being of all individuals within the school community” (Niemi et al. 2018b, see also Benjamin et al. 2020). Principals are fundamental in creating an equal and safe teaching and learning environment for everyone (Dinham 2016), and the role that they and other educators play in preventing violent ideologies is highlighted. One important aspect is that educators themselves take note of their preconceptions, use self-reflection concerning their own worldviews, and have a working knowledge of a range of different worldviews (Vallinkoski et al. 2019).

**Framework of Worldviews**

In this study, worldview is defined in a broader sense than the mere separation into religious and non-religious worldviews. Hence, religions and non-religious worldviews such as humanism are both seen as a subclass of worldviews (Vroom 2006). A worldview is a vision or a set of presumptions for life (CoRe 2018; Miedema 2017; Naugle 2002; Valk 2017; Vroom 2006). All worldviews consist of existential questions and beliefs, meanings of and about life, moral values, and frameworks for thinking and acting (Van der Kooj et al. 2013). Worldviews are divided into two groups: organised
worldviews, which include all world religions but also non-religious belief systems such as humanism and atheism, and personal worldviews, which are individuals’ views and ideas about life and the world (Vroom 2006; Van der Kooij et al. 2013). A personal worldview can be linked, or based on some organised worldview, but it is more complex and eclectic. For this reason, it is more purposeful to consider worldviews on an individual rather than a collective level (Benjamin and Kuusisto, 2015; Kuusisto and Kallioniem 2014).

Both organised and private worldviews are culturally bound (Vroom 2006) and therefore it is vital to consider them in their lived contexts. The complex, dynamic and lived aspects of worldviews have also been emphasised in other studies (Ammerman 2014, 2016; Hannam 2018; McGuire 2008). Within this complex framework, worldviews at schools need conceptualising and understanding in a more intersectional way, enabling different dimensions of critical considerations. These dimensions are, for example, power positions in Finnish society as well as the social context, including the historical, intellectual and political context and the effects that they have on individuals’ identities and worldviews (Collins and Bilge 2016). Moreover, the emphasis on individuals’ rights and the importance of defining and improving their own worldviews concerns schools and creates a need to understand more the lived realities that worldviews have in the school context (see Lippiäinen et al. 2020b). Our own study focuses on identifying worldviews and worldview actualisations, including its complex and lived realities.

**Worldviews in Finland and in Finnish Schools**

Alongside increased diversity, the landscape of worldviews in Finland has changed from Christianity towards a more secular society that emphasises more individual and rational values. However, the Lutheran Church has a powerful history in Finland and other Northern countries, and religion, especially Lutheranism, still affects the nation in many practical and ideological ways. Even though Finland is legally a secular state, it is evident that many so-called Finnish values and social structures are based on Lutheran values (Sinnemäki et al. 2019). In practice, Lutheran and Orthodox Churches still have a special status in Finnish society, especially in schools; Finnish schools, for instance, still follow the Christian calendar and its celebrations (Malkavaara 2017). Poulter et al. (2017, 57) describe Finnish society as a ‘secular Christianity’, in the sense of its Lutheran roots and secularism. When considering nominal membership, 69.83% of Finns are affiliates of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland, 27.39% do not identify with any religious community, and other religious affiliation percentages are low; Greek Orthodox at 1.11%, Jehovah’s Witnesses at 0.31%, and Islam at 0.29% of the population (Vipunen 2018). Even though the diversity of nominal worldviews among Finnish citizens is comparatively low, Finnish society and Finnish religiousness have changed significantly over the past decade. Evangelical Lutheran Church membership has decreased in Finland rapidly and the number of religious ‘nones’ (religiously unaffiliated) has increased. It is worth noticing that these kinds of nominal records usually compile statistics related only to official registered religious communities, which does not give a complete idea of worldviews in all their complexity in Finnish society. For instance, according to a Pew Research Center report (2018), 54% of Finns define themselves as ‘neither religious nor spiritual’, and 58% agreed that they seldom or never attend religious services. In addition, Illman et al. (2017) point to new kinds of spirituality, which are not linked to organised religions. People feel that they can have spiritual leanings without the need for institutionalised religion. It can be said that in Finland we have an example of Berger’s (2014) twofold pluralism (religious pluralism and religious and secular pluralism). In addition, Finland represents Woodhead’s (2016) pluralisation within religion, especially within the Lutheran Church.

The Lutheran Church has a clear impact on Finland’s highly regarded education system. Education has always been an integral part of Finnish culture and society (Sahlberg 2015), and Lutheran values,
such as equality, the idea of lifelong learning, and structured organised teaching, have been among the explanations for the success of the Finnish education system (Niemi and Sinnemäki 2019). Traditionally, there are close collaborations with churches during the school year, for instance at Christmas and Easter, and the dominant traditions are visible in school contexts (Niemi et al. 2014). Lutheran religion also has strong roots in the Finnish curriculum and its development (Niemi and Sinnemäki, 2019). The National Core Curriculum for Basic Education (NCCBE) defines all kinds of diversity (including diverse worldviews) as a value, a resource and a richness (NCCBE, 2014). However, it is also noted that in practice powerful national hegemonies, including Lutheran values and a non-changing idea of Finnishness, has had an effect on the kinds of diversity that are tolerated and fostered in schools in practice (Niemi et al. 2018b).

The Finnish school system is consistent throughout Finland, and almost all Finnish citizens go through the same education and follow its traditions and values. There is a long tradition of public schooling, and basic education (7-16-year-olds) is compulsory and free for all pupils. There are only a few private schools including religious schools in Finland, and all are required to follow the National Core Curriculum. The curriculum includes a structured so-called ‘own religion’-based worldview education approximately one hour per week at every grade. Pupils are separated to attend one of 13 different worldview education subjects, including religions or alternative secular ethics education.

_**Principals’ role in Finnish Basic Education**_

In Finland, principals are without exception qualified teachers who possess an academic degree and have on average 20 years of teaching experience. The required qualifications for principals in Finland are a Master’s degree, the teacher qualification of the relevant form of education (e.g. basic education, adult education, etc.) and adequate work experience as a teacher. In addition, a degree in educational administration in accordance with the criteria approved by the Finnish National Agency for Education, education administration studies organised by the university, or sufficient knowledge of education administration acquired in another way is required (Asetus opetustoimien kelpoisuusvaatimuksista 986/1998; Finlex 986/1998; Taajamo et al. 2015). As there are a variety of options for principals’ qualifications, Finnish principals do not have a uniform educational background or professional training. In addition, traditionally the studies required to qualify as a principal do not include objectives about diversity, values or worldviews, but emphasise administrative competence and knowledge of legislation. Principals’ job descriptions vary depending on the municipality. The municipality’s service regulations define how decision making is organised in liaisons between local educational authorities and schools (Finnish National Agency for Education 2013). Leadership has been shown to matter in the school context on many levels. Principals have a strong impact on teaching and learning in the school’s everyday life by affecting teachers’ and students’ operating environments (Dinham, 2016).

The National Core Curriculum for Basic Education (2014) emphasises pedagogical leadership as the core of principals’ work in Finland. Leadership actions regarding teaching and learning of both individuals and the school community in collaboration with many stakeholders are referred to as pedagogical leadership. Broad-based pedagogical leadership builds from setting goals and constructing a shared value basis in school communities as well as a communicated vision and strategies. In the Finnish context it involves technical, human and pedagogical leadership (Lahtero and Kuusilehto-Awale 2015). In Finnish education policy distributed leadership is considered an essential prerequisite for broad-based pedagogical leadership (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2013). It is also worth noting that school leadership is always contextual (Ladkin 2010) and therefore generalising leadership, in this case the principals’ experiences, are not adequate. The relation of educational leadership to societal changes has also been examined in other Nordic countries. The research suggests that leadership competence, such as knowledge, skills and attitudes,
need attention and re-evaluation as schools are increasingly culturally diverse (Andersen 2014; Merchant et al. 2012).

**Data and Methods**

The study began with six pair interviews (N=12), which were held in summer 2019. All the interviews took from 44 min to 60 min, and the interview material was analysed using inductive and deductive content analysis (Cohen, Manion, and Morrison 2018). The studies showed that worldviews are visible in schools, they are part of school leadership and the principal’s work, and there is a need to research and identify worldviews and their actualisations in the school context (Jantunen et al. 2020; Lipiäinen et al. 2020a). These factors determined the research questions of this study.

The data of this study consist of semi-structured individual interviews (N=7) with principals engaged in basic education. The interviewees were selected by sending emails to all principals working in Helsinki, Finland’s capital. Chosen principals presented different areas in Helsinki, and participation was voluntary. Helsinki was chosen as the research field because of its comparatively plural population. For instance, one-half of Finland’s population with a foreign background lives in the Helsinki area (OSF 2019). All principals had previously been teachers, and had worked as a principals from one to 26 years. Both genders were represented, five of them were female and two male. The schools provided education at grades 1-6 or 1-9, and they had one to three principals each. Table 1 gives detailed information about the principals, their working years, and their schools. In order to guarantee the anonymity of interviewees, we do not give specific details about the principals’ education, gender, qualifications, or school size. All principals, however, had a Master’s degree, usually in Education, and they were qualified in educational administration.

Interviews were conducted in spring 2020, and they lasted approximately an hour each. All interviews were implemented as remote interviews on account of the global circumstances. The global COVID-19 situation affected the data gathering, and it was a challenge to obtain research permission from the city of Helsinki. The permission included limitations on the number of interviewees and the durations of the interviews as it was required that the interviews should not interfere with principals’ work in any way. The interview material was 434 min in total, including both pair interviews and individual interviews.

The themes and interview questions of this study were formed based on the pair interviews. Interviews covered three themes; pupils’ worldviews, teachers’ and other school workers’ worldviews, and worldviews education. Relating to the first research question, we added the theme ‘conceptualisations and identifications of worldviews’ to the interviews. The principals were informed about the four themes beforehand, and themes were discussed in the same order in all four interviews. A semi-structured interview was chosen because it gave a possibility to add questions and adjustments in the middle of the interview. During the interviews, the researchers asked more detailed questions to ensure and clarify understanding. All interview data were recorded and transcribed verbatim and subsequently analysed. The Finnish quotes were translated into English by the researchers. The data was analysed in 2020 by using inductive and deductive content analysis methods (Cohen, Manion, and Morrison 2018). The answers to the first research question were found to be more deductive because of the predefined framework of worldviews, and the answers to the second question were more inductive.

**Results**
Identified Worldviews

As stated earlier, the focus of this study was to investigate (a) what kind of worldviews Finnish principals identify in their schools, and (b) what kind of lived realities of worldviews affect schools from the perspective of school leadership. The first research question concerned the worldviews that principals identify in their schools and its results are presented in this paragraph. The deductive content analyses covered all the identified worldviews, which were present in the schools in practice, excluding for instance parents’ worldviews. It is obvious that these worldviews affect pupils on an ideological and practical level; however, the scope of this study was to create a wider understanding of the principals’ perceptions for those worldviews that they directly encounter at schools. Overall, principals describe their schools as having a diverse range of worldviews. Many of them described schools as ‘having everything’, meaning worldview diversity, even though it was more difficult to identify these worldviews.

‘Let’s say we have everything you can find. We have all the religions and those subcategories and then we have different kinds of non-religiousness.’ (003)

‘We have all kinds of worldviews and I would say everything and also variations and intermediate forms of worldviews.’ (005)

The worldviews were broadly linked with the cultural issues that the schools have. Principals described their schools as multicultural or monocultural, and this correlated with the range of worldviews. Those who said that their school was multicultural also provided more worldviews. In addition, some worldviews were found to be more visible than others, and principals were not sure if they could identify all the worldviews by name. Overall, 30 different worldviews were found in the data. A more detailed list of all the worldviews can be found in Table 3. The identified worldviews could be divided into two main categories, namely religious worldviews and non-religious worldviews. However, these categories were ambiguous and it was not clear to which of these worldviews, for instance, Buddhism or the ‘White worldview’ belonged. Principals also identify non-existing worldviews, such as ‘extremism’, without connecting it to any existing worldview:

‘We have these extremist types, then we have Islam, Lutheranism.’ (002)

The mentioned religious worldviews were, for instance, Christian religion, Islam and Hare Krishna. Different religions in Christianity were noted, such as Lutheran religion, Orthodox, Catholicism, but Islam was seen as a general term and was not separated into different denominations. In contrast to that, the personal dimensions of worldviews were found when principals separated many fundamental religious worldviews or ideologies from organised religions. For example, the Islamic worldview was described as ‘deeply Islamic’, or ‘Islamic extremism’. These descriptions also affected the principals’ attitudes towards the worldview. For instance, more radical worldviews were not as acceptable as the secular or invisible ones. This kind of categorisation into more fundamental and more liberal was also identified when explaining the plurality of Lutheran religion and Orthodoxy.

Non-religious worldviews were also mentioned in every interview. Named non-religious worldviews included atheism and humanism. Nationalistic worldviews, such as the Nordic Resistance Movement, ‘White Power’ and Finnish People First were mentioned, and it was argued that these more extreme positions had increased in recent years. However, these were not said to be very visible yet among pupils or school workers. Three of the seven principals identified ideologies related to climate change and ecology as worldviews:

Researcher: ‘What kind of worldviews do you have in your school?’
‘Religious worldviews, and then, of course, we have worldviews related to climate change and ecology and sustainable development. [...] This climate change causes discussion, sure it is a bit different than religion but after all there are those who are more or less involved in it as an ideology.’ (001)

**Lived Realities of Worldviews from the Principals’ Point of View**

The second research question concerned the worldviews’ lived realities in schools. According to inductive content analysis, four main categories were found; worldviews in school practices, neutrality of school, visibility of individuals’ worldview, and worldviews education. The categories and their general content are presented in Table 2. Categories including their subcategories are presented, and examples of each of them are presented in the following paragraphs.

**Worldviews in School Practices**

According to the principals, worldviews’ lived realities were actualised in many ways at schools. Based on our analysis, four subcategories were found (see Table 4): (1) symbols and signs (2) school lunches, (3) celebrations and Finnish calendar and (4) practising religions. First, principals argued that worldviews were concretised at schools with all kinds of visible symbols and signs, including religious and nationalistic symbols such as jewellery or scarfs. Visible signs were easy to notice and name. None of the principals mentioned any limitations relating to them when speaking of the children’s or adults’ right to wear symbols or signs at school. Second, worldviews were actualised in school lunches. In Finland, hot school lunches are provided to all pupils as a part of the school day. Each school cafeteria offers a range of different foods according to a wide variety of religious, health-related or cultural issues, all free of charge. All the interviewees mentioned certain limitations in school lunches and fasting relating to worldviews. Third, worldviews were noted at schools through celebrations and traditional events on the Finnish calendar. Principals mentioned different kinds of celebration that took place during the school year. Based on our analysis, principals define comparatively different things to be religiously neutral during the celebrations, and the principals’ role in approving or not approving certain elements as a practice of religion or not was highlighted.

Fourth, principals mentioned that worldviews were actualised in school practices when speaking about practising a religion at schools. First of all, principals were in agreement that pupils and employees can practise their own religion, albeit within certain limitations as far as the curriculum was concerned. However, the interviewed principals did not specify what it means to be able to practise one’s religion within the limits of the curriculum. The Finnish National Board of Education does not provide any guidance about the religious practice of teachers and other school staff. Religious practising can happen if it does not disturb the pupils’ school day and it is acceptable that teachers and other stakeholders practise their religion within the limits of the curriculum and the teaching arrangements. This means that it depends on the principal how the possibility for religious practising is arranged during the school day for pupils, teachers and other school personnel.

**Neutrality of Schools**

When speaking of school neutrality, schools were strongly seen as part of society. Even though the majority of principals did not define their school as having any specific major worldview, none of them defined their school as neutral. One principal described the situation as follows:

‘Schools as an institution have already taken a stand when they have defined what are the worldviews we teach and what not.’ (007)
Two principals argued that schools should turn towards a more humanist ideology and keep neutrality as a goal; however, they argued that neutrality per se could not be achieved. The school’s worldview and ideological atmosphere was seen as a mix of individuals’ worldviews and ideologies, and therefore it was difficult to evaluate the atmosphere as a whole. One example of this is teaching. Principals pointed out that they cannot be responsible for every teacher’s teaching and it is impossible to evaluate if teaching is neutral or not. Finnish teachers have high autonomy and there is public trust in teaching, which means teachers can choose their materials and methods themselves. In addition, there is no inspection system in Finnish schools unlike in many other countries (Niemi et al. 2018a). Principals described their teachers’ autonomy as follows:

‘I would say our school can be described as pretty neutral. Sure we have different teachers and we do not know if teaching is actually non-confessional as it should be.’ (005)

‘It [teaching] needs to follow the curriculum but teachers do have pedagogical freedom. It is interesting that I do not know if it is neutral or not. Teachers and children have been assigned to certain classes, but I do not know what happens after that.’ (006)

One principal criticised neutrality as a goal in Finnish society on account of its impossibility. The principal argued that secularity as an option with religious worldviews did not mean neutrality, and therefore it was not a goal that should be sought. More emphasis should be placed on reaching a situation where all the worldviews were equal:

‘A secular state is not a neutral state. Even if non-religiousness was the norm it does not mean that worldviews are in an equal position. My opinion is that there has to be an inclusiveness between worldviews so that every worldview can be visible.’ (004)

In some interviews, principals mentioned difficulties in defining what elements in everyday school life are related to culture and what to religions or other worldviews. However, they agreed that Evangelical Lutheran religion’s role as a central part of Finnish culture is inevitable, and that affects neutrality.

**Visibility of Individuals’ Worldview**

The third subcategory of worldviews’ lived realities considered the visibility of individuals’ worldview in the school context. Principals emphasised that all pupils and their worldviews were equally important, no matter what those worldviews might be. Pupils’ worldviews and their practice were seen to be more acceptable than those of teachers because of the teachers’ official roles. Principals considered that the teacher’s primary role was to be a professional teacher who was able to adjust his/her work in accordance with the demands of teachers’ professionalism. Principals felt that the teacher’s personal worldview should be disregarded if it ran counter to the official norms or values of the school.

‘One very strong issue is that pupils should be accepted as they are with all the values and everything. […] Schools need to support the development of pupils’ religiousness and non-religiousness. There should not be a judgment that some would be more important than others. […] But if a teacher has strong individual views which are contrary to general views, s/he needs to consider that those views are a private matter. S/he cannot bring them here.’ (002)

The notion that schools had official norms and values, and that there was of an existing ‘general worldview’ was repeated in the interviews. If teachers’ or pupils’ actions were contrary to the general worldview, they were not considered acceptable. Such restrictions applied, for instance, to values and
issues within the curriculum that were related to Finnish culture. Principals pointed out that their schools did not present any specific worldview; there were, however, still some norms and ideological limitations which teachers needed to follow.

Worldviews Education

When leading schools which had diverse worldviews, principals pondered the school’s role as an educator in the middle of diverse worldviews. All principals agreed that worldviews education is important in schools; however, six of seven principals considered that separating worldviews into individual subjects was not the best way to organise worldviews education. The majority of Finnish principals agreed that there should be one worldview education subject for all pupils in Finland (Tainio et al. 2019). They argued that it was evident that education should not be left to religious communities or families, and that worldviews education had a role to play in public education. Worldviews education at schools was seen as a way of preventing violent extremism and radical ideologies:

‘Preventing radicalisation is very important. It is not only linked to Islam for Orthodox extremism has also increased. So schools and official worldviews education play a crucial role in moderating these issues.’ (003)

In addition, the role of schools as enablers of dialogue and respect for others was considered vital. Schools were seen as places where communities emerged regardless of individuals’ different worldviews. The principals’ role was to emphasise the impartiality and equality of worldviews in schools.

Discussion

The focus of this study was to investigate what kind of worldviews principals identify and what kind of lived realities these worldviews have in schools from the principals’ point of view. In the answers given to the first research question about identified worldviews, it was found that the majority of principals argued that their schools were diverse when it came to worldviews. However, identifying and naming worldviews was seen as difficult, which is a logical response considering the plurality and complexity of worldviews. The list of identified worldviews in this study confirms the complexity, plurality and diversity of worldviews. Previous research shows that especially young people have complex, albeit shallow (Åhs et al., 2019; Kuusisto and Kallioniemi 2017), dynamic, and non-linear worldviews (Helve 2015). It is certainly difficult to identify something which is not clear to the pupils themselves, and therefore plurality itself has been emphasised in our study. The diversity of worldviews has previously been seen as a narrow concept, relating only to the separation of religiousness and non-religiousness, and Woodhead’s de-differentiation (2016), which presents a deeper plurality within worldviews, is being adapted into Finnish society and into principals’ perceptions. The principals in our study identified diversity as a strong feature current worldview in their schools. However, among the worldviews that principals identified, principals’ perceptions were more negative towards fundamental worldviews, and more liberal worldviews were more easily accepted.

With respect to the second research question about worldviews’ lived realities, principals argued that there were official norms and values, a ‘general worldview’, which limited the expression of individuals’ worldviews. It is worth noticing that based on this study, it is not possible to define this general worldview; however, it is evident that some general worldviews do exist. One way to understand this intersectional issue is to consider the power positions in Finnish society and the way they affect individuals’ identities and worldviews (Collins and Bilge 2016). Previous research shows
that Finnish principals have been observed to have ‘religious-blindness’ concerning the role that religion plays in education. This means in practice that principals tend to concentrate on the individual’s uniqueness by avoiding cultural aspects or on similarities that support new common group identities by excluding the importance of diversity (Rissanen 2019, 8). This kind of new common group identity was also found in this study. In addition, none of the principals defined schools as neutral, all agreeing that the history of Christianity affected worldviews and their actualisations nowadays. Hence the notion that Finnish society is an example of ‘secular Christianity’ (Poulter et al 2017, 57) was supported by this study and explains the principals’ ideas of the general view in society. The Finnish National Core Curriculum, has been shown to represent powerful national hegemonies (Niemi et al. 2018b), and this can be seen as problematic if principals follow the curriculum without being aware of its potential limitations and biases.

The role of worldviews education in preventing violent extremism was noted in this study, and all principals agreed that religious education should not be left only to religious communities. Schools’ role in creating dialogue between worldviews and increasing tolerance towards other worldviews was highlighted, which is in line with the previous research (Niemi et al. 2018b). Since worldviews is a specific topic in Finnish basic education, it is natural that worldviews actualisations should be discussed in these classes. However, worldviews in the school context need to be considered without linking them to worldview education. This is because the worldview education class that a pupil attends might be in contradiction to the pupil’s own worldview. (Kavonius and Ubani 2020.)

Principals were more accepting of pupils’ rather than teachers’ lived dimensions of worldviews. Principals emphasised the pupils’ right to have a visible worldview in all the cases. In contrast to this, teachers’ worldviews were always considered through the teachers’ professional role, and therefore they were seen as more limited. The neutrality of teaching in this segregating education model was a problematic issue, consequently principals argued that they could not guarantee the neutrality of teaching. As the pedagogical freedom of teachers is emphasised in Finland (Niemi et al. 2018a), this can also be seen as problematic because the principals interviewed were not completely aware of the teaching that happens in classrooms and whether it is ideologically biased or not. There is a need for further research on teachers’ worldviews and the possible biases in their teaching. This study raises the question whether the principals’ role in creating an equal and safe teaching and learning environment can be achieved in practice, even though they are responsible for doing so.

This study has a number of limitations and the results are not generalisable without taking into consideration the context of the study. The study was implemented in Helsinki, which is culturally more diverse than other parts in Finland. The low number of participants is a drawback, although a range of different dimensions were produced. The Finnish public education system is also unique, including the high autonomy of teachers and principals. However, this study provides important information about worldviews and their lived realities in Finnish basic education by focusing on practical everyday school life and the role of principals in leading schools. More research is needed to explore principals’ perceptions about the ‘general views’ of society, as well as the way in which teachers’ worldviews can affect their teaching. It would also be interesting to study how different worldviews are actualised and to see whether they occupy equal positions in the classroom context by using video material for instance. The different power positions in Finland and its school system would also require a deeper kind of understanding and further investigation.

Acknowledgements

Declaration of Interest Statement

References


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Tables

Table 1. Background information about the principals and their schools

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<th>Work experience as a principal</th>
<th>School size</th>
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Table 2

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1. School practices
   Worldviews actualisations in school practices. For a more detailed list, see Table 4.

2. Neutrality of schools
   Neutrality of schools, its purposefulness and realism to achieve neutrality.

3. Visibility of individuals’ worldview
   Pupils’, teachers’ and other school workers’ right and limitations to express their own worldview in schools.

4. Worldviews education
   The role and significance of schools in worldviews education. Organizing worldviews education.

Table 3. List of identified worldviews

- Orthodoxy
- Deeply Islamic
- Worldviews related to climate change
- Small Christian movements
- Catholic
- Humanism
- Those who are to some extent Lutheran but are not believers
- Orthodoxy of the Moscow Patriarch
- Islam
- Extremism
- Secular but follows the Christian traditions
- Fundamental Islam
- White Power
- Islamic but follows Christian celebrations
- Nazism
- Really Christians
- White worldviews
- Worldviews related to sexuality
- Finnish People First
- Pentecostalism
- Ecology and sustainable development
- Near to Evangelical Lutheran
- Those without Religion
- Buddhism
- Atheism
- Evangelical Lutheran
- Hare Krishna
- Jehovah’s Witnesses
- Worldviews related to food
- Nordic Resistance Movement

Table 4. Subcategories of worldviews actualisations in school practices

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