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Framework for Islamic education in Muslim minority countries: experiences from Finland

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ABSTRACT

Finland has garnered considerable global attention for having one of the world's best education systems. As a secular Nordic country, Finland has seen the number of Muslim students interested in Islamic education (IE) almost triple over the past few decades. This article examines IE within the Finnish National Education System (FNES), focusing on the construction of IE in Finland and its curriculum. Examining IE as a form of minority education, this study also explores Finnish IE teachers' perceptions of religious moderation in heterogeneous Muslim classrooms. The findings show that IE is allocated the same curricular weight as majority religious education; designing such curricula—with varying emphases on “introduction” and “understanding” content across different levels of comprehensive schooling—requires close collaboration with religious communities and municipal governments. Furthermore, teachers addressed debates over Islamic denominational differences among students by fostering a consensus-based, non-denominational approach to Islam. These findings carry theoretical implications for developing a representative model of IE. The study further contributes to IE policy discussions by emphasizing student development over administrative concerns.

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Introduction

Finland's education system has long received international attention after receiving recognition from the *Programme for International Student Assessment* (PISA) as the country with the best education system in the world in 2000, 2003, 2006, and 2009 (MOE, 2009). This achievement is remarkable given Finland's relatively low cost of education, comparatively short school hours, minimal homework, and notably light assessment criteria, which involve no formal inspection system or excessive supervision; despite this, the country has nonetheless attained education quality that is recognized as among the best in the world (Reinikainen, 2012).

Since then, Finland has been admired by ministries of education, researchers, teachers, universities, and other stakeholders worldwide because of its remarkable outcomes (Dervin, 2013; Niemi et al., 2016). For example, the BBC, the world's oldest news broadcasting institution with offices in London, calls Finland an ‘educational superpower’ based on an international survey conducted in 57 developed and developing countries worldwide (BBC, 2007). Beginning at the level of basic education, Finland has received considerable praise across various education rankings. In addition to PISA, the OECD has hailed

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Finland as a 'top performer in education', using it as a pilot case for most of its education policy governance indicators (Rinne et al., 2004).

Despite these educational achievements, an important question remains underexplored: what is the actual position of Islamic education (IE) in Finland? The Finnish Muslim population has grown from 10,596 in 2012 to 22,261 in 2022 (Statista, 2023). According to the Islamic Council of Finland (SINE), the governmental authority established in 2006, approximately 10% of Finnish Muslims are currently registered with religious organizations, the majority of whom are of Russian Tatar Muslim descent (Finnish Institute of International Affairs, 2008). This indicates that Muslims constitute Finland's fastest-growing religious minority, expanding at roughly three times the rate observed in other Nordic countries. In other words, the contemporary demographic profile of Muslims in Finland can be divided into three groups. First, the Tatar Muslim minority has been settled for generations, representing the first native-born generation of Finnish Muslims, predating the country's independence (Butters & Utriainen, 2025, p. 6; Leitzinger, 2006, pp. 246–249). Second, Muslims have arrived in Finland as international immigrants since the 1990s. This is a heterogeneous group coming from various countries in the world, such as Somalia, Syria, Iraq, Turkey, the former Yugoslavia, Afghanistan, and Iran (Martikainen, 2020a). Third, there are Finns who converted to Islam, whose children have likewise been raised as Muslims, following in their parents' footsteps (Pauha & Martikainen, 2022). This reality shows that the number of Tatar Muslims and Finns who converted to Islam is smaller than the number of Muslim immigrants who came to Finland. This demographic growth has made Islam one of the religions explicitly considered in Finnish national policy, and over the past decade, religious education – particularly Islamic education – has become an important topic of debate. Nationwide, the number of Muslim students enrolled in Islamic education courses in comprehensive schools has doubled, rising from approximately 5,400 to around 9,400 – an increase of roughly 4,000 students within five years that has made Islamic education an increasingly prioritized component of the Finnish national education system (FNES).

Finland has 13 distinct curricula for religious education (RE). However, the substance of these curricula is not designed to serve the interests of each religion individually, but rather functions as supplementary knowledge; by contrast, the national core curriculum is designed to support students' pedagogical development within their own culture and learning environment (Vitikka et al., 2016). The Islamic education curriculum, the first to be officially recognized by the state, was created in 2006 by the Finnish National Board of Education to strengthen Muslim students' sense of identity as they interacted and learned alongside their peers (Finnish National Board of Education, 2006).

This research examines IE within Finland's national education system by analyzing the construction of IE and the curriculum employed. We also highlight Finnish Islamic education teachers' perceptions of, and responses to, religious moderation among teachers of different religions. This study pursues three research objectives: (1) the construction of IE in Finland, (2) the IE curriculum within the FNES, and (3) IE teachers' perceptions of religious moderation in Finnish schools. A total of ten teachers ($N = 10$) working in comprehensive schools in Helsinki and Espoo were involved in this study. The construction of IE in Finland draws on the history of Russian Tatar Muslims and three Muslim groups – Shia-Ja'fari from Iran, Sunni-Shafi'i from Somalia, and Sunni-Maliki from Morocco – alongside the broader demographics of Finnish Muslims in the modern era amid a Lutheran and Orthodox Christian majority, all of which have shaped how Islamic education is positioned within the FNES. The FNES Islamic education curriculum, meanwhile, is allocated the same curricular weight as majority religious education, and its design requires the involvement of religious communities and municipal governments to calibrate the relative emphasis placed on 'introductory' and 'understanding' content across different levels of comprehensive schooling. Finally, Finnish Islamic education teachers' perceptions center on navigating denominational differences among Muslim students by fostering a shared consensus on Islam that informs their teaching.

Between 2018 and 2025, the proportion of students enrolled in IE increased significantly. According to Statistics Finland, the share of students studying IE in primary schools grew by 2 percentage points relative to students studying Orthodox Christianity, while the difference was 1.3 percentage points in lower secondary schools. Despite this growth, Lutheranism remains the dominant religious subject (77% in primary school and 82% in secondary school, averaging 86.1%), followed by Ethics (Secular) at 8.5%, IE at 2.5%, and Orthodoxy at approximately 1.6%; the remaining 0.8% comprised non-religious subjects

and 0.5% other religions (EARS, 2021; Tara, 2025). In other words, Islam is currently the third most widely studied religion in comprehensive schools in Finland, particularly in Helsinki, Espoo, and Uusimaa, the regions with the most intensive study of Islam.

The above facts demonstrate a lack of empirical data and prior research on IE and its position within the FNES. This study addresses these gaps, particularly regarding how IE is constructed and the IE framework within the FNES. Furthermore, IE teachers' perceptions of religious moderation – a dimension of inclusivity and equality in Finnish education that is rarely studied – remain insufficiently examined. This research contributes to the model and operation of IE in Finland, offering a potential framework for IE in Muslim-majority countries as well.

This study foregrounds these three areas of focus within the context of Finland's Muslim minority. More than 95% of children educated in state primary and secondary schools receive religious education in their own faith tradition, and IE is increasingly taught in the Helsinki metropolitan area (Sakaranaho & Rissanen, 2021a). As a result, the IE framework remains rarely discussed by experts, positioning this study as a foundation for future frameworks. Finland's success in managing IE, despite being a non-Muslim country with a predominantly Lutheran and Orthodox Christian population, offers a promising model for Muslim-majority countries. Furthermore, IE in Finland is currently a topical issue, given the broader and often fraught development of religious education across Europe, where secular states are frequently unwelcoming toward Muslims.

Methods

This study examines the IE framework within the context of Finland as a country with a Muslim minority, investigating IE-related documents within the FNES since the country first officially recognized IE. As a research method, document analysis constitutes an intensive form of inquiry into a particular phenomenon, event, organization, or program. Document analysis forms part of an ethnographic study exploring teachers' beliefs, contextual factors, and practices in the learning process and curriculum (Bowen, 2009, p. 29). Some of the documents include the *National Core Curriculum for Basic Education* (NCCBE), *National Core Curriculum for General Upper Secondary Schools* (NCCGUSS), *Compulsory Education* from FNAE, and the document *Islamin uskonnon opetussuunnitelman perusteet peruskouluun ja lukioon 3/430/95*. These three documents capture how IE is positioned in the national curriculum structure and religious freedom policy in education. In addition, interviews with 10 teachers working in comprehensive schools in the Finnish capital and Espoo were conducted to highlight how they respond to religious moderation among teachers of different religions. The sampling technique is based on the principle of purposive sampling (Ahmad & Wilkins, 2025). The ten IE teachers were selected according to specific criteria aligned with the target corpus. All were practicing IE teachers holding a master's degree. Interviews were conducted online via Zoom for efficiency and lasted approximately one hour, using open-ended, semi-structured questions. We grouped the questions into two clusters: (1) identity and background, and (2) denominational diversity and consensus on Islam. Participants agreed to be anonymized to preserve the neutrality and plurality of their responses regarding the sustainability of religious education in Finland. This fieldwork lasted approximately 11 months. The data analysis procedure is presented in Figure 1.

In the first stage, three research questions were formulated to guide data collection: the construction of Finnish IE, the Finnish IE curriculum, and IE teachers' responses. These three questions framed a corpus comprising three collected documents and interviews with ten IE teachers. After the data were collected, we reduced and grouped them into two categories: (I) the IE category within the FNAE, and (II) the MV (Moderation View) category in learning. We analysed both categories before deriving the study's formal findings (the Finnish IE framework).

This study commenced on 25 March 2023, following receipt of ethical clearance from the research institutions. Data confirmation was conducted in mid-August 2023, and the study concluded on 13 September 2023. The researchers obtained verbal consent from all informants prior to any data collection. Verbal consent was chosen to facilitate the interview process, as research permits had previously been secured from the informants, who had already agreed to participate.

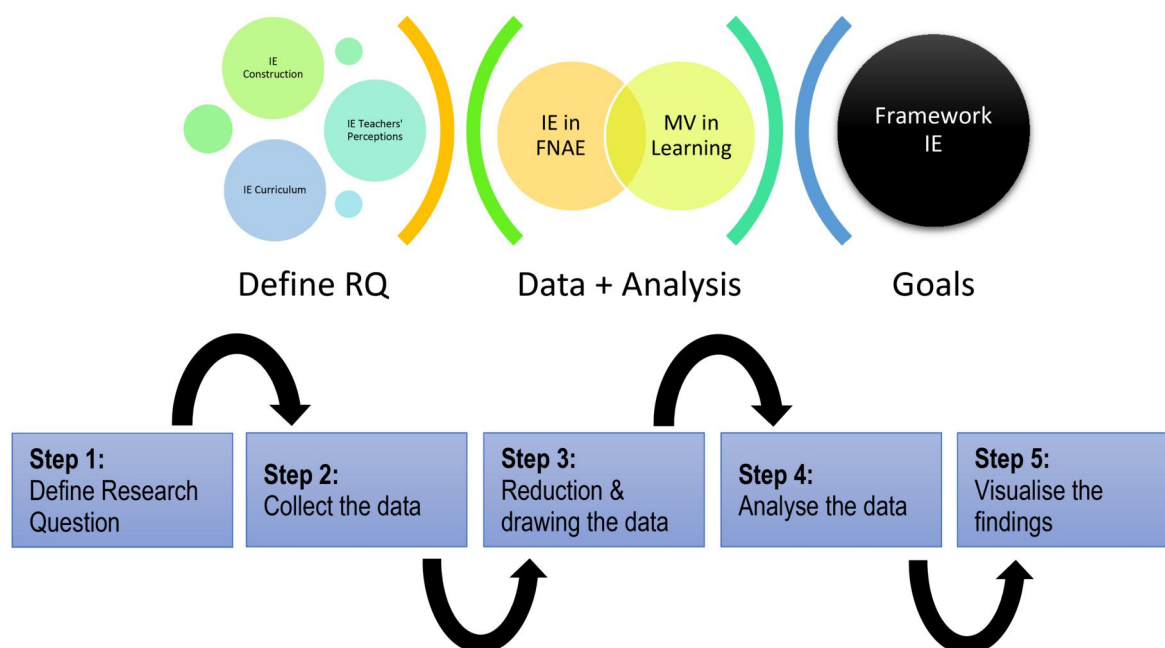


Figure 1. Data analysis procedure.

Conceptual framework

Before comprehensively discussing the IE framework in Finland, a country where Muslims constitute a minority, this study first outlines its essential theoretical foundations, organized into five conceptual strands:

1. IE in the Nordic context

This is worth examining because Finland is a member of the European Union, where Muslims constitute a minority, and the country has also been repeatedly ranked as having one of the best formal education systems in the world. In Finland, 95% of students attending public elementary and secondary schools are required to receive religious education, including IE, as part of the national curriculum, and the number of students attending IE classes has steadily increased over the past few decades, particularly in public schools in the capital, Helsinki. However, scholars have engaged in considerable debate over the practice of IE in Finland, which tends to favour ‘*General Worldview Education*’ over religious education. This has significant consequences for the learning content, process, and expected quality of IE (Sakaranaho & Rissanen, 2021b).

In recent decades, European education policies have shifted toward more accommodating treatment of religious minorities, with the state providing space and active support for religious minorities to participate in national education. Muslims were previously regarded as the minority religious group with the greatest potential to participate in European education; as IE became a significant issue, state schools began integrating it into their curricula. The number of students participating in IE increased accordingly, and the state began accommodating the interests of Muslim groups within the national educational administration hierarchy. This was the case in Finland, where IE gained constitutional recognition and Muslim involvement in internal regulation expanded, making IE one of the pillars of Finnish state identity (Sakaranaho, 2019a). This phenomenon resembles developments in other European countries, such as Ireland, where the state similarly accommodated Muslim interests in national regulation and integrated IE into the curriculum of state schools. Such multilevel governance of religious diversity positions minority civil society actors as agents of social change (Sakaranaho, 2018).

European civil society and governments have grown more open to Islam, regarding it as an important component of national identity. Across various settings and levels, IE in Finland has become increasingly appealing, as it is taught from the perspective of connectivist learning theory – an approach that

integrates religious material with collaborative learning between general subjects and the sciences. During Ramadan in particular, many people in Finland draw on this period to deepen their understanding of Islamic teachings and practices (Butters & Utriainen, 2025). This reality reflects a common ground between the social need for religion and the social cohesion fostered by state policies that accommodate religious minorities. One dilemma facing religious minority groups, however, lies in the complex policy processes that municipal education directors must navigate in governing local minority education (Hannus, 2025). Social cohesion likewise emerges within IE classrooms, where differing learning settings foster intra-religious cohesion, inter-religious cohesion, and commitment to the wider community. These three forms of cohesion are strengthened when IE lessons are understood as interpretations or expressions shared by teachers and students from heterogeneous religious backgrounds alike (Rissanen & Sai, 2018).

Despite these conceptual complexities surrounding IE in Finland, it is worth noting that the country adheres to secular principles while continuing to accommodate the interests of religious minorities. An instructive comparison can be drawn between IE in Finland and Iran: whereas Finland operates within a liberal context, Iran is governed by an Islamic state ideology, and this difference shapes how IE subject matter is influenced by each country's prevailing ideology. Analysis of national curriculum documents reveals that Iranian educational institutions emphasize policy-based spirituality, whereas Finnish institutions are grounded in social considerations and rational reasoning (Khalili et al., 2022). This suggests that the IE framework in Finland is constructed through an integrated understanding in which Islamic content is linked to both state ideology and scientific reasoning. In other words, IE in Finland is shaped by state involvement in accommodating the interests of religious groups in developing the IE curriculum.

2. IE teachers' perceptions of religious moderation in Finnish schools.

Van Es et al. proposed that religious moderation in IE in Muslim-minority countries is a paradigm for viewing Islam that is neither too far to the left (radical) nor too far to the right (liberal). In the context of Muslim-minority countries, religious moderation is a binary framework of 'radical' versus 'moderate', built on the active role of Muslim minorities in upholding and adapting this binary framework to their paradigm (van Es et al., 2021). In Islam, religious moderation is called *wasatiyyah*. Integrating *wasatiyyah* into IE in European countries is a new insight that can strengthen students' social integration in secular and pluralistic societies (Muslih, 2025). This means that teachers must position themselves as moderate both in their theological understanding of Islamic thought and in their conduct amid the secularism of European society. In this role, IE teachers act as agents of Islamic tradition, introducing Islamic rituals, traditions, and values to students. Research on IE in Finland over the past decade has focused on intercultural contributions and cultural responsiveness, both of which prioritise equality and respect for interfaith diversity, thereby linking IE materials to specific issues concerning religious diversity. In Finland, IE is regarded as an institution for shaping young Muslim identities: students are educated to understand their religion while simultaneously cultivating a sense of national belonging and cultural attachment to the country (Putkonen & Rissanen, 2026).

3. Multicultural education (ME).

The theoretical basis of ME lies in analyzing IE in Finland as a progressive vehicle for a pedagogical model that instils spiritual values and respect, tolerance, and diversity of ethnicity, culture, religion, and gender. ME theory is urgently needed by a global society increasingly aware of cultural and social diversity. Although ME is not directly embedded in schools' internal administrative systems, it carries significant implications beyond the academic environment, fostering a learning climate that is conducive to and maximally supportive of students. A key challenge facing today's racially tense, pluralistic societies is the effect of intensifying geopolitical tensions (Young et al., 2026). A further issue concerning ME is intersectionality as a critical lens for understanding pluralistic societies within a country. The persistent gap stems from sectoral egos and ethnic and/or religious dominance, which fragment national identity – underscoring why an ME lens is essential for understanding this global phenomenon (Scheffers, 2026).

ME is typically implemented by countries with Muslim minorities, and the European Union has been a key region in developing ME, given that most of its member states are secular. The global paradigm of ME within the European Union reflects a distinctive segmentation: targeting young people, EU countries have produced a series of agreements – including the Geneva Recommendation, the European Community directive, and the Dublin Resolution and Recommendation R (84) 18 – that explicitly address intercultural and interethnic respect. Several of these European resolutions call for authentic intercultural teaching in schools, in which language teachers and teachers of minority cultures play a central role in promoting ME (Culp, 2025; Leurin, 1989). However, ME's standing in Europe has not been entirely stable: during the first two decades of the twenty-first century, ME came under criticism from both civic-integration advocates and right-wing populists. In practice, ME continues to operate where it is protected by binding institutional actors and laws, as well as by the depoliticisation of the issue within party systems – indicating that the persistence of ME is shaped by party politics tied to national governance dynamics (Westlake et al., 2025).

4. Minority rights in religious education.

This issue is salient in Muslim-minority countries, particularly where it intersects with questions of identity. Racial differences within society become a complex issue once the educational rights of minority groups are framed through a multicultural lens and curricula are designed accordingly. The right to religious education for Muslim minorities sits at the intersection of multiple facets of identity, giving rise to what has been termed 'intersectional othering'. This shapes how Muslim minorities secure equitable educational rights from the state and how they must maintain their religious identity amid prevailing secular trends (Anwar & Sim, 2025). Minority rights in education constitute a crucial issue triggering a broader global identity crisis. The image of Islam in the West tends to foreground its 'radical' rather than its compassionate dimensions: each time a suicide bombing occurs, the peaceful image of Islam is shattered, further complicating the issue of educational rights for Muslim minorities. State security measures that restrict Muslims from developing a fuller understanding of their own religion (Buck, 2008) consequently trap them in this predicament. A further reality of minority rights in education is that this issue has become a major driver of efforts to institutionalise an international framework for the protection and fulfilment of religious minority rights (Ghanea, 2012). By contrast, in a Muslim-majority country such as Indonesia, the fulfilment of minority rights in education is regarded as a pillar of the state, which officially recognises all religions and the rights of their adherents. The government has addressed this issue through Article 12 of the 2003 National Education System Law, which grants all students the right to receive religious instruction in their own faith, taught by teachers of the same religion. In practice, however, religious minority rights are still often compromised in Indonesia when broader social norms fail to align with this legal commitment (Raihani, 2016).

5. Study of the IE curriculum in Muslim-minority countries

In the European context, the infiltration of political pedagogies – which frame the presence of religious minorities as bound up with national identity – shapes curricula, which are consequently designed with the politics of the religious majority in mind. In Germany, IE is government-funded and confessional in structure; in the UK, the IE curriculum is non-confessional; and Nordic countries such as Finland implement a combination of both approaches (Sahin, 2021). In this context, IE redefines ethnic and religious boundaries within national and regional politics. Maximising the benefits of preserving distinctive characteristics often leads to the instrumentalisation of education for both majority and minority religions. Within this context, conceptions of citizenship vary widely and are continually contested and reconstituted. Public and private educational institutions represent their respective religious communities within the student body, collectively affirming that educational institutions serve as sites for the formation of plurality (McAndrew et al., 2010).

IE in Finland is shaped by five interrelated dimensions – its construction, teachers' perceptions of IE, multicultural education (ME), minority rights in religious education, and curriculum – which together inform the IE framework and the perspective on moderation developed in this study. This article seeks

to construct an IE framework that is as representative as possible, with the aim of contributing broadly to IE development in both Muslim-majority and Muslim-minority countries worldwide.

The existence of the Finnish Muslim minority among the Lutheran and Orthodox churches

Finnish Muslims constitute a religious minority. No official figures exist regarding their exact number, but according to the Pew Research Center, approximately 2.7% of Finland's population is Muslim (Pew Research Center, 2018). The Finnish government has yet to confirm this figure officially. The Yearbook of Muslims in Europe estimates that approximately 110,000–120,000 Finnish Muslims belong to 46 legally registered Muslim communities, and that these adherents hold the same legal standing¹ as adherents of Lutheranism and Orthodoxy, Finland's two majority religions (Scharbrodt, 2021). Meanwhile, Statista, a German digital data and intelligence platform, reports that 22,261 people identified as Muslim in Finland.

The presence of Muslims in Finland dates back to the late 19th century, when Tatar Muslims from Russia began settling in the country, then still a Grand Duchy under the Russian Empire (1809–1917). After 1917, Tatar Muslims were free to choose their citizenship and established Muslim communities in urban areas such as Helsinki in 1925 and Tampere in 1943 (Sakaranaho, 2006, pp. 225–230). Regarding *madhhab* groups, around 25–30% of Finnish Muslims are adherents of the Shia-Ja'fari group originating from Iran (Konttori & Pauha, 2019, pp. 238–239). The remainder are Sunni-Shafi'i groups originating from Somali families, the Maliki group originating from Morocco, and the Hanafi school of thought from Egypt, Pakistan, and Bangladesh (Al-Sharmani & Mustasaari, 2022, p. 52; Martikainen, 2020b, p. 43). A wave of Sunni-Shafi'i adherents from Somalia and Shia-Ja'fari from Iran came to Finland in 1960, and they officially registered as a religious group association in 1987 (Pauha, 2020).

This demonstrates that the presence of Finnish Muslims is integral to the nation's identity, reflecting a triangular relationship between religion, power, and national identity. Drawing on a parallel case, Cui and Li frame this as a symbiotic historical correlation with a nation's modernisation process: Islam in non-Muslim countries can serve simultaneously as a source of social conflict and political division, and as a foundation of national identity (Cui & Li, 2025). From this perspective, the legalisation and institutionalisation of the nation's power structure become crucial pillars of state legitimacy and social integration, with Islam functioning not only as a religion but also as a significant element of government politics. This illustrates how the tension between religion and the transformation of the modern state shapes the dynamic framework of national governance, positioning Islam and the state as a macrocosmic centre of regional geopolitics within a broader, more integrative configuration. A deeper understanding can be drawn from the perspective of Islamic education, as seen in Central Asia, where the Jadid movement embodied this triangular relationship by treating Islamic educational reform as a vehicle for state evolution and autonomy. The Jadid movement shaped the trajectory of political thought and democratic ideals in the region and ultimately developed a form of IE that offers valuable insight into twentieth-century state formation (Auanasova et al., 2026). The presence of Tatar Muslims in the Grand Duchy of the Russian Empire during the 19th century, together with the existence of distinct Islamic denominations (Shia-Ja'fari, Sunni-Shafi'i, Sunni-Maliki) that were later officially registered as religious group associations once Finland gained independence, reflects a religious politics that recognises Islam as part of the country's historical identity. Islamic education is therefore crucial in bridging the gap between religious interests and the political interests of the state.

Like adherents of the Lutheran and Orthodox churches, Tatar Muslims also received the same rights and, in 1925, were registered as a religious community. This was followed by other migrant Muslim groups, such as Sunni-Shafi'i from Somalia and Shia-Ja'fari from Iran, who came to Finland around 1960 and registered officially as a religious group association in 1987 (Pauha, 2020). Finland was one of the first countries in Europe to recognize the Muslim community and protect it under the authority of official state law, following Austria, which had done so earlier in 1906; Belgium followed later, in 1974 (Bastenier, 1988, pp. 139–140; Hallenberg, 1996, p. 28). Poland followed, where Tatar Muslims took part in a wave of Muslim migration in 1939 and formed the Muslim Religious Union association (Górak-Sosnowska, 2011, p. 28; 64). Włoch found in his report that Muslims in Poland faced little discrimination, since Tatar Muslims had long lived there in harmony with the country's predominantly Catholic

population. A more recent and pressing issue, however, is Islamophobia, which has contributed to the formation of a more exclusive Muslim identity (Włoch, 2009). As in Poland, the presence of Tatar Muslims in Finland is not seen as a threat to the religious freedom of immigrants but rather as a minority group similar to Protestant Lutherans and Orthodox Christians.

In this light, several European countries, including Finland and Poland, regard Muslims as part of their national history, viewing Islam as a component of national identity rather than as a threat. Islamophobic rhetoric surrounding various forms of Western-directed terrorism has nonetheless heightened suspicion of Islam in some contexts; for example, the failed 'Grand Mosque of Finland' project of 2015–2017 resulted partly from such rhetoric, producing a setback for religious freedom that affected the wider Finnish Muslim community (Mykkänen, 2026). Such incidents nonetheless remain the exception rather than the norm: more broadly, Islamophobic rhetoric has had little significant impact in Finland, which has developed a comparatively favourable position for Islam among European secular countries. Constitutional guarantees of religious freedom protect Islam in Finland through grassroots social engagement and an inclusive culture. Religious communities have a discursive space in which to demonstrate their contribution to the state, evidenced by their involvement and voice in constitutional and policy matters, particularly in the formulation of FNES policies. Fundamental principles affirm religious understanding in schools, although respect for majority-religion students restricts the display of certain symbols. Meanwhile, the IE learning approach focuses on integrating local culture with Finnish identity, preventing Islam from being perceived as a foreign entity. Accordingly, Finland's comparatively low level of religiously motivated crime supports its reputation as a relatively safe European country for Muslims.

From this point of view, multiculturalism is nothing new for Finland; at the beginning of the twentieth century, the country was arguably more 'multicultural' than it is today. Nevertheless, Finland's socio-political landscape has changed considerably over the past century, with significant implications for the formation of its Muslim communities. It therefore makes sense that the roots of Finland's Muslim population can be traced to the historical turning points outlined above. Finnish citizens articulate history as part of their national identity; once the state was formed, religion was incorporated into the constitution. Social groups have continually renewed this relationship in step with the latest developments in religion amid broader social change, remaining actively engaged with the state. Schools, accordingly, continue to teach religious education, with Muslim students receiving as full a provision of IE as possible.

Position of IE in the Finnish National education system (FNES)

The school system in Finland stipulates '*one school for all*' (Zilliacus et al., 2017). This means Finland relies primarily on public schools, with only a small number of religious-based private schools. FNES differs from other Nordic countries in that religious communities play a notably strong role in primary education, which meant Finland could not simply set the Muslim community aside; instead, it involved them in embedding religious education within the FNES. Currently, 20 Finnish schools are officially recognized by both the government and their respective Muslim communities (Kallioniemi & Ubani, 2016). This is a form of full state involvement in religious education, where religious communities are involved in designing curricula for their own children. The state then validates their designs and uses them as national guidelines. We refer to this reality as the *state-involved model*, where the state and communities act as 'legitimate partners' in designing Islamic education curricula. This model ensures that the religious lessons they learn align with their faith and local cultural traditions. The state-approved curriculum serves as national legitimacy, ensuring that every citizen of a religious faith has the right to receive their own religious education. This format is an approach that aims to balance the state's responsibility in education with the rights of religious communities to educate their citizens according to their religious beliefs.

The Finnish government implements the basic education system as 'compulsory education', which begins with one year of preschool education and starts when children are six years old. Primary education starts at the age of seven and ends at the age of sixteen. Primary education implements a single system that includes nine grades where grades 1–6 are taught by the same class teacher in most subjects, and grades 7–9 are taught by different subject teachers (FNAE, 2018) (See Figure 2).

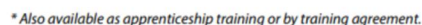


Figure 2. Education system in Finland.

Finnish primary education has attracted international attention for over a decade, with international assessments consistently ranking Finland among the world's top-performing education systems. Notably, unlike many other countries, Finnish children begin compulsory schooling relatively late, at age seven, preceded by one year of pre-school education starting at age six. School hours are comparatively short, homework is minimal, and national-level examinations are rare. Consistent with this, the Finnish Ministry of Education and Culture does not readily grant permission to establish private schools or schools run by foundations or NGOs; as a result, more than 95% of children are educated in state or municipal primary and secondary schools. This is based on the principles of the Nordic countries (Sweden, Denmark, Iceland, Finland, and Norway), which strongly emphasise the provision of universal public education and a strong concern for social equality. Therefore, the privatisation of education carried out by private schools is limited as much as possible to avoid profit-making and arbitrariness in education (Dovemark et al., 2018). Basic education in these Nordic countries can be understood through two key principles. First, public provision and equality ensure equitable access to education for all students, regardless of their socio-religious background. Second, restrictions on educational privatisation are necessary to prevent commercialisation and unchecked autocratic control that could otherwise produce educational inequality. Together, these principles aim to preserve religious education as a public right rather than a commodity, thereby preventing social segregation among students and teachers.

In the last decade, efforts to establish Muslim primary schools have increased. However, several problems are challenging to resolve evenly. The government has implemented the Religious Freedom Law 453/2003, and the Islamic education curriculum is designed to involve the Muslim community. Finland follows a rather unusual model of the religious education system. All registered religious communities have the right to:

religious education by the religion they profess and believe in.

This is contained in the Basic Education Act 1998, Section 13, Amendment 454/2003. However, this religious education does not include religious practices taught in schools, such as carrying out prayers in the school environment (Ziebertz & Riegel, 2009, p. 63). The aim is to prevent insults to religious values

and practices in schools, leading to social disparities (Keränen-Pantsu & Rissanen, 2018, p. 19). To date, in the National Core Curriculum for Basic Education, religious education is positioned as:

RE (especially IE) supports the growth of students who become community members to understand the meaning of democracy and the scope of global society. (NCCBE, 2023)

Such practices strongly indicate moderation in religious learning to foster a sense of justice. The prohibition of religious symbols and worship rituals in public spaces is a practice in most secular European countries (Ferrari, 2012; Ivaldi, 2025). Similarly, the implementation of *laïcité* which prohibits religious symbols in public spaces and supports state support for religion, is a practice. Highly restrictive *laïcité* often marginalises religious groups while simultaneously promoting cultural uniformity under the guise of neutrality (Cesari, 2025). Drawing from this corpus of IE in Finland, we argue that embracing minorities with a mission of pluralism amidst diversity can strengthen solidarity and democratic principles, transforming religiosity into a civic resource while constructing the ideals of Finnish democracy.

The goal of RE is achieved through learning at school about their respective religions without carrying out religious practices in the school environment. Students and teachers are free to dialogue about their religion and study their religious rituals textually. Meanwhile, religious practices are carried out outside the school environment, at home or in places of worship. The parameters for the objectives of implementing Islamic education are outlined in the Basic Education Act, which states:

Primary education providers must provide religious education (Lutheran, Orthodox and Islamic) by the religion adhered to by students with the criteria of adherents of the majority religion. (Finlex Data Bank, 1998).

Religious identity and public control have long been intertwined issues. These issues place religious history as a key element of national identity and ultimately exert tight control over public space. We will examine this phenomenon using the restrictive policy of *laïcité* in France, using David Miller's theory. His main claim is that minority religions are used as a justification for a 'strategy of privatisation' (Miller, 2016). The most absurd reason is when such privatisation, under the pretext of religion, restricts human rights and liberal principles, equating them with local culture. This first pretext does not apply to IE in Finland, and the state has dismissed this absurd argument. Secondly, local cultural expressions appear to have defeated liberal principles, and the state demands that these identities emerge in the public sphere. Although in practice, this is still limited to certain matters, such as religious rituals in schools, the values and understanding of these identities must be expressed in the public sphere through a democratic society. After analysing IE in Finland, Miller's key elements are insufficient to analyse his perspective on this issue. We conclude that although the state recognises the historical presence of Muslims in Finland, they have the right to express their religious identity in the public sphere to a certain extent. These boundaries are much broader than Miller believed. They arise from the pressures of the majority religion, the type of public space, and considerations of what people need in that public space, including the need for a space where they can comfortably and freely express their religion.

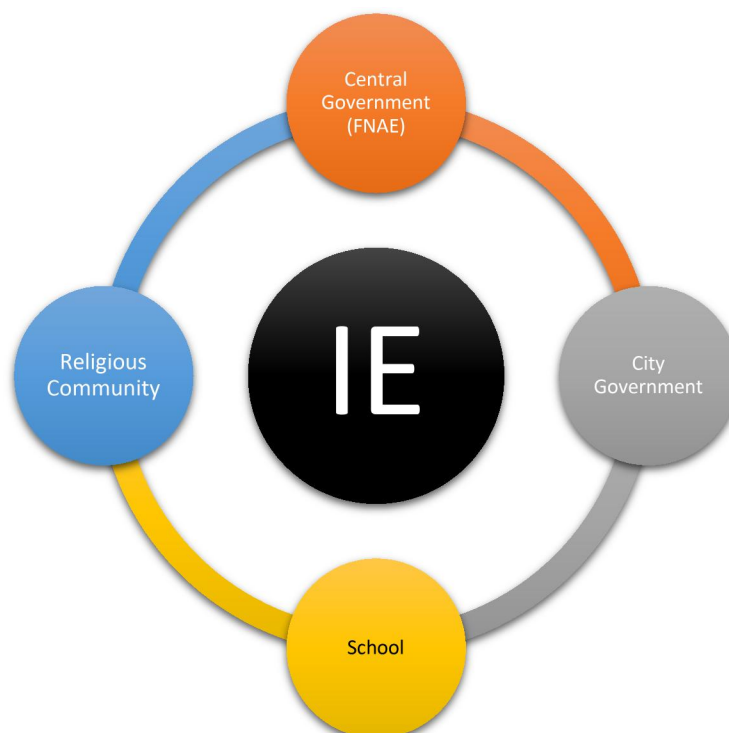
For example, in practice, the municipal government permits Lutheran church students to join students from Orthodox Christianity or Islam if their numbers have reached three areas in the Municipality. However, for students belonging to minority religions in the Municipality, the municipal government is obliged to permit them to hold events for their respective religions if there are at least three students in the Municipality who are members of that religious community. Apart from RE, city governments are also obliged to provide ethics education, referred to as *elämäkatsomustieto*² (Finlex Data Bank, 1998, p. Section 13; NCCBE, 2023, pp. 213–219). Because two-thirds of the population of Finland are adherents of the Lutheran church, in practice, Lutheran students dominate schools in Finland. The distribution of religious subjects taken by students varies according to their religion. For *elämäkatsomustieto* or Ethics Education, it was 6%, while for Islamic subjects, it was 2.2% (see Table 1). Religious subjects receive one hour per week at the basic education level.

In Finland, the curriculum and syllabus for IE and other religious education are developed cooperatively between each religious community and the National Education Council. However, the Finnish government took over teaching, evaluation and quality control (Davie, 2000, pp. 90–91). This is a unique

Table 1. In Finland, Choice of religion or ethics subjects in primary and secondary education 2018.

Elective subjects	Grades 1–6	Grades 7–9	Grades 8–9
Evangelical-Lutheran	86,1%	89,1%	Religion: 0,6%
Christian-Orthodox	1,6%	1,5%	
Islam	2,5%	2,2%	
Ethics	8,5%	6%	
Other religions	0,5%	0,5%	
Atheist	0,8%	0,6%	
Total	100%	100%	

Source: (Vipunen, 2019).

**Figure 3.** Involvement of four parties in preparing the IE curriculum in Finland.

education system where the state controls RE in a country and guarantees the quality of religious education for all multicultural students.

Structure of the IE curriculum at FNES

The Finnish National Education Agency (FNAE) curriculum regulates RE for all religions in Finland. The preparation of the curriculum in this country goes through a long negotiation process involving various parties, including each religious community, city government, schools, and the FNAE (see Figure 3). The newest curriculum in 2019 involved religious teachers representing their respective religions, including Islam. To compile this IE curriculum, a working group (WP) consists of two teachers at each school in each city. Here, the Finnish government provides an open space for religious communities to participate in developing religious curricula and take an important part in teaching in schools, and this has been going on for the last few decades. In Finland, the RE is Sunni and Shi'ite (Kallioniemi, 2018; Rissanen & Sai, 2018).

For example, in 2005, FNAE published the latest All Religion Curriculum. Currently, 13 religious curricula (including IE curricula) are officially approved for *comprehensive* and high schools. The number of religious curricula has doubled since the implementation of the religious curriculum in 2005. Apart from Lutheranism, Orthodox Christianity, and Islam, other religious curricula are formed, such as Adventism, Christianity, Bahá'í, Buddhism, Judaism, Krishna and small groups of Baptists such as *Herran kansa ry*.

There is also a Latter-day Saints curriculum (Sakaranaho, 2006, p. 356). The Finnish government, through the FNAE, categorizes religious education into two clusters: (1) the conventional cluster, which contains religious rituals and religious practices in the classroom, which is referred to as *uskonnon harjoittaminen*, and (2) the theological cluster, which contains the teaching of other religious ideas and prohibits carrying out religious rituals in the classroom (Pyysiäinen, 2000, p. Bab VIII). On this occasion, in the FNES system, IE is included in the second cluster, and religious education is demonstrative in the pedagogical sense to introduce students to the teachings of the religion they adhere to, but not to be practised in the school environment.

The starting point for developing an IE curriculum as minority religious education is the *National Core Curriculum for Basic Education* (NCCBE), intended for public and private religious schools in Finland. The latest NCCBE policy in 2014, IE, emphasizes Finland's cultural heritage, woven through the interaction of different cultures (multicultural) (Ubani et al., 2021). Multiculturalism in Finnish IE aims to develop a religion-friendly cultural identity in the global (European) community. Students must master 'cultural literacy' about their country, religion, and the cultural values held by society (FNAE, 2018; Sakaranaho, 2019b, pp. 23–26).

We analyse this structure as part of the moderation agenda within the FNES system to accommodate diversity, although IE is allocated to the second cluster (theological cluster), where learning is demonstrative-pedagogical and limited to introductions without religious rituals in the classroom. This division has sparked serious debate, as the first cluster (*uskonnon harjoittaminen*) is given the freedom to perform religious rituals and symbols in public spaces. Protests were filed by the second cluster, which is completely restricted, while *uskonnon harjoittaminen* is granted the right to practice religion in public spaces. Some public schools then implemented *uskonnon harjoittaminen* only outside the school environment as a form of fairness to the second cluster. Although *uskonnon harjoittaminen* does not violate the human rights of others in the workplace or school environment, the restrictions on IE in public spaces have received little opposition. Despite the debate over the restrictions in both clusters, the religion practised by its adherents is not coercive, so most religious rituals are carried out outside the school environment.

In the basic education system, students are taught local culture and a combination of religious curricula based on directions from the NCCBE. This direction is called the National Core Curriculum (NCC).

Figure 4 shows that the curriculum of each municipality in Finland is obliged to direct learning and school assignments in more detail towards local culture. If necessary, the local curriculum can also be revised according to the developing local culture so that learning can adapt to local cultural trends. The aim is that the curriculum is not rigid and functions as a dynamic driver in contextual learning. The framework steps appear in Figure 4. In Finland, these are known as 'Transversal Competencies', skills that can be used in various situations. These competencies cover three areas: support for learning, assessment, learning environments, and working methods. These three are included in core processes such as learning objectives, content, and assessment criteria. From this, multidisciplinary learning modules are formed that successfully develop students' motivation and joy of learning, as well as the knowledge and skills needed in life. In practice, students with these preferences can create a school culture highly conducive to conceptualising learning and its underlying values.

NCC emphasises local cultural practices to foster students' nationalism from an early age. Environmental education, as NCC's working method, teaches students to understand their surroundings in everyday life, such as family, neighbours, friends, and relationships. Exploration of the environment is truly taught so that students feel motivated to attend school and enjoy learning. In this phase, students reflect and discover their best selves by cultivating the knowledge and skills needed in life. Here, NCC accommodates these students' strengths in learning by dividing the learning content and methods into three grade and age areas.

The IE curriculum, aligned with the core structure of the NCC, is organized by grade level according to students' age. In grades 1–3 (ages 7–9), IE content centres on 'Islam from the perspective of each individual and family'. This framing allows IE to be taught without conflicting with the multiculturalist vision set out by FNAE, and it progressively expands from 'Islam from the perspective of each individual and family' to 'Islam from the perspective of Europe and the wider Muslim world', while also addressing Islam's influence on culture, art, and technological development. In the following three grades (4–6, ages 10–12), IE material covers the history of Islam, Qur'anic interpretation, and Islamic traditions. In

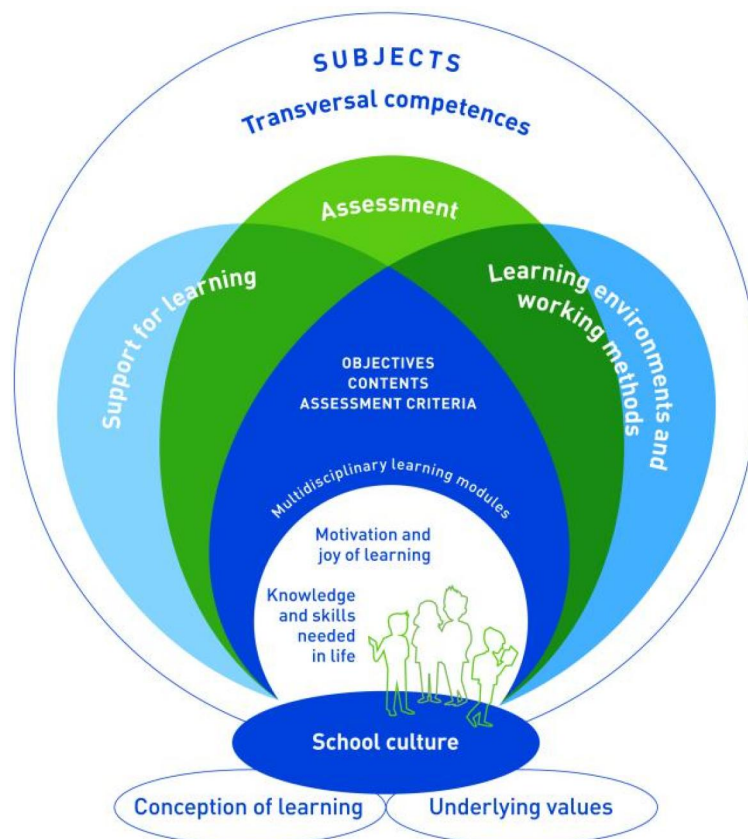


Figure 4. The National Core Curriculum (NCC) was developed with input from Finnish Culture and Religious Values.

grades 7–9 (ages 13–15), IE content becomes more concrete, addressing attitudes and behaviours associated with ‘Islamic diversity’ and movements toward tolerance and openness to modernization and political developments (NCCBE, 2023, pp. 232, 427, 705) (see Table 2).

In the supporting content area, general RE is provided so that students understand religions other than those they adhere to, referred to as ‘general views about the world of religions’ material. This material begins by looking at religion from the perspective of the worldview that students encounter and hear during their studies. In grades 3–6, students are taught about the Christian, Jewish, and Protestant worlds and how they relate to Islam. While in grades 7–9, they learn about other major religions. In the third area, the IE curriculum reflects daily life, human values, and how human rights are respected, especially regarding religious life. Apart from that, Islam teaches how to live a good and socially ethical life in this third area. This focuses on how students interact socially with other people and position themselves as good religious believers. The focus is on inter-religious dialogue, which does not prioritize religious exclusivity, encouraging radicalism and intolerant content (see Table 2).

We analyse these three areas according to the needs and abilities of students in each age group. In the first area, children aged 7–9 are in a phase of intense exploration of their surroundings; they are rarely compelled to simply accept knowledge, and their character at this age tends toward curiosity and exploration. Teaching Islam from the students’ own perspective, while simultaneously guiding their religious understanding, ensures that their view of religion aligns with this world of imagination and exploration – here, family and community involvement matter more than in the other two phases. Ages 10–12 mark a phase in which students strive to recognise and understand what they are learning; more substantive content is introduced, such as Islamic history, Qur’anic interpretation, and variations within Islamic tradition. As this is a phase of knowledge construction, learning content must be accurate, valid, and reasoned; students are not exposed to conspiratorial or distorted teachings inconsistent with the religion, and their disposition in this phase is to absorb as much knowledge as possible in preparation for the next stage. In the third phase, between the ages of 13 and 15, students begin to grapple with the practical and social consequences of their actions – both positive and negative. Their engagement

Table 2. Distribution of IE materials charged at NCC according to student class and age.

Class and age	IE material taught (Content Area I/ Main)	General religion material (content area II/ supplementary)	General religion material (content area III/ reflection)
Grades 1-3 (Ages 7–9 years)	Islam from the perspective of each individual student and family	Christianity, Judaism and Protestantism and how they relate to Islam	
Grades 4-6 (10–12 years old)	History of Islam, <i>Tafsir</i> of the Quran, and traditions in Islam		
Grades 7–9 (Ages 13–15)	Islamic religious behaviour (tolerance, moderation and openness)	Other major religions	

Source: (NCCBE, 2023, pp. 232, 427, 705).

shifts from acquiring knowledge to applying the religious values they are learning, focusing on how to behave and the consequences of doing so. In this phase, students are introduced to Islamic religious conduct such as tolerance, moderation, openness, justice, and togetherness. The learning material becomes more explanatory, and students are asked to provide feedback or share their own experiences.

At the upper secondary level, Finland uses the National Core Curriculum for General Upper Secondary Schools (NCCGUSS), which was established in 2015. Then, in 2019, NCCGUSS was amended to prioritize and support the growth and development of students into good human beings, balanced and civilized, and active members of society (NCCGUSS, 2019). In this curriculum, IE has six subjects with different topics, two as compulsory subjects and four as supporting subjects. The mandatory first subject focuses on religion as the polarization of the Abrahamic faiths until they separate into religions. It also discusses the world of non-religion and its current effects as secularism. According to Rissanen, this focus is a form of harmony between Islam and other religions as a monotheistic religion brought by Abraham (Rissanen et al., 2023). The second focus is 'Islam in the world view', which gives students an overview of Islam in the contemporary world of history, theology, and culture. This also provides students with an understanding that Islam, as a majority and minority religion in various parts of the world, impacts multiple interpretations of Islam, giving rise to enrichment and rich discussions.

In this second focus, it seems that religious understanding is supported by science and art, arguing that religious education contributes to the development of modern science, and Islam is one of the religious subjects most open to this development. Considering this, the NCCGUSS mandates that Islamic and science education be mandatory, and local governments must develop curricula in accordance with the progress of their regions (NCCGUSS, 2019, pp. 212–213). For example, some local curricula do not yet follow the Basic Islamic Curriculum issued by the National Education Council (Onnisekä, 2011). City governments can adapt their own approach without having to be uniform with other cities in integrating Islamic education with science and arts materials. At this level, our analysis focuses on IE as 'in-depth' study rather than mere practical application. The two compulsory subjects explore the shared Abrahamic origins from which contemporary religions emerged, framing IE as originating from the 'same root' as other Abrahamic faiths – sharing similar core aims while differing in approach and nuance. Students are also encouraged to examine how Islam responds to secularism and atheism in European societies, as well as the relationship between religion and state politics amid contemporary developments. The four supporting subjects, meanwhile, situate Islam within a broader worldview: through material on history, theology, and culture, students come to understand the diverse forms Islam takes across different regions of the world.

Contents of the IE curriculum at FNES

The first IE curriculum was designed by Finnish administrators in collaboration with the Muslim community and was approved by the Finnish National Education Council (FNAE) in mid-1995. The accompanying Joint Decree (JD) directed this curriculum toward comprehensive schools and upper secondary schools, reflecting proposals from Finnish Muslim communities such as the Tatars and the Tampere community, alongside other smaller communities not explicitly named in the JD (FNAE, 1995).

The IE curriculum implemented in 1995 encompasses the full range of IE objectives at the primary and secondary levels, with the syllabus designed to introduce students to their 'religious identity'.

Table 3. Objectives of IE in Finnish schools by level of education.

School level	Aims of IE in Finland	Emphasis
Basic Education	• Basic knowledge about Islam and the importance of religion for the student's personality and environment, such as the five articles of Islam (<i>arkān al-Islām</i>), the six articles of faith (<i>arkān al-īmān</i>), inner preparation before acting (<i>al-niyyah</i>), and the Prophet's lifestyle Muhammad PBUH in everyday life (<i>al-sunnah</i>). • Get closer to God Almighty, grow in praying, and learn about the Islamic lifestyle. • Get to know the Islamic calendar, especially Islamic holidays • Get to know the characteristics of God, the Prophet Muhammad, and the holy book Al-Qur'an	INTRODUCTION
Secondary Education	• The world view of Islam • Understanding of religious practices • Knowledge of other religions and their relationship with the religion they adhere to	UNDERSTANDING

Students learn several short chapters of the Qur'an (from Juz 30), commonly used in daily prayer, and are introduced to the five articles of Islam (*arkān al-Islām*), six articles in faith (*arkān al-īmān*), inner preparation before acting (*al-niyyah*), and the lifestyle of the Prophet Muhammad PBUH in everyday life (*al-sunnah*) (see Table 3).

The overall objectives of IE (in Table 3.) have been adapted to the 1995 Curriculum, which focuses on each religious tradition. This goal has been put into practice by IE teachers to a greater or lesser extent, familiarising children with light religious practices every day, such as saying greetings, preparing themselves for prayer in the correct way, and praying in every activity, such as praying before eating, before travelling, before and after sleep, and others (Karvonen, 1998, pp. 17–18). Meanwhile, the objectives of IE in secondary schools are almost the same as in elementary schools. However, the emphasis is on the level of understanding, whereas at the basic level, it is only an introduction. The second emphasises ethics and knowledge about other religions (Rissanen, 2012). In conclusion, it is clear that IE for Muslim students adapted to the 1995 Curriculum is conventional-theological. This means that almost all Islamic subjects are focused on teaching Muslim students to know and understand their religion well. For example, this does not happen in the Lutheran religion, which only introduces students to ethical issues and living a good life (Pyysiäinen, 2000, p. 24).

As explained previously, elementary school students are taught 'introduction' material. At this stage, children are more engaged in exploration and imagination, and their surrounding environment shapes their understanding of religion; for example, a religious family environment influences their mindset and lifestyle from an early age. Teaching begins with the fundamentals of Islam: the five pillars of Islam (*arkān al-Islām*), the six pillars of faith (*arkān al-īmān*), spiritual preparation before acting (*al-niyyah*), and the *life style* of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) in daily life (*al-sunnah*). Introducing the Qur'an as a book of guidance for life, and Islamic holidays as Muslim celebrations. Meanwhile, in the middle phase, the learning content is more in-depth, focusing on 'understanding' using the explanatory method. More than just exploration, in this phase, students understand IE material with various deeper explanations about Islam in its worldview, in its practices and traditions, and its relationship with other religions.

The IE curriculum in the 2005 Curriculum provisions created a **comprehensive school** system (see Figure 5). The Comprehensive School Curriculum means that the substance of teaching at the primary and secondary levels is combined and not repetitive. As previously explained (in Table 3), the basic education level is focused on 'introduction', namely introducing students to their religion in religious rituals and social life. This is taught from grade 1 to grade 6, and they must be able to apply their religion personally and its uses in social society. At the secondary education level, the focus is on 'understanding'. Students are taught how to understand their religion well, consider how to benefit themselves through their religious identity, and interact with society. The meaning of 'understanding' is that students can use their religion as a guide to life and have a comprehensive view of life.

Compared with the educational goals of other religions, such as Lutheranism, there is an interesting difference in one of the phrases in the 2005 Curriculum:

The Islamic curriculum aims to get to know Islamic traditions, while the Lutheran religious curriculum aims to get to know 'religious culture'. (*uskonnollinen kulttuuri*)



Figure 5. Comprehensive School Curriculum in Finland: Combination of Curriculum for Basic and Secondary Education Levels after the 2005 Curriculum Determination.

This sentence emphasizes that the IE curriculum was explicitly created for introducing and deepening the Islamic religion itself, not for other religions or ethics. Meanwhile, the Lutheran RE curriculum emphasizes a 'universalist' tendency. This tendency was visible in the Lutheran Religious Curriculum in 1995, and no significant changes were made to the 2005 Curriculum. Only a few additions to the more limited range of references to 'Christianity'. In other words, it seems that the growth of multi-religiosity in Finland does not lead to the crystallization of the Lutheran tradition in RE but rather to a more comprehensive approach to identifying Lutheranism with (Finnish) culture (Pyysiäinen, 2000, pp. 12–15).

It is clear that the 2005 Curriculum, as a revision of the 1995 Curriculum, makes Islamic religious education an 'identity'. This term seems to be the motto in the current religious curriculum. Identity only means that religious education functions as a marker that an individual comes from a religion, and other individuals are prohibited from discriminating against students of that religion (Schreiner, 2000, p. 8). This is evident in the new curriculum that prohibits religious rituals in the classroom or within the school environment. However, in practice, it is unclear how to actually strengthen religious identity for students and its application if religious learning material requires practice as a mode or example for students.

Another surprising thing is that IE is designed to respect other religious minorities (Gleditsch & Rudolfson, 2016). The Finnish government introduced religions other than Islam through central policies implemented in schools. This introduction is taught to Muslim students from grade 5 to grade 6 by interfaith teaching, which requires dialogue and religious tolerance. The non-confessional religious education model refers to 'religious worldviews'. Religious freedom in Finnish RE is unique (Rissanen & Poulter, 2023). This model has received international acclaim for guaranteeing freedom of religion and belief. From the primary school level, the basics of religious worldviews according to 'their religion' are introduced, while students who are not religiously affiliated learn Secular Ethics. Religious worldviews reflect the uniqueness of Finland's firm multiculturalist policy to accommodate an inclusive and supportive school culture for minorities (Rissanen & Poulter, 2023, p. 385). 'Religion worldviews' is intended to understand Islam as a universal tradition for Finnish Muslims and other religions, which is the core concept of the substance of the national religious curriculum (Lempinen, 2002, pp. 68; 93).

Therefore, the Islamic Curriculum created by the Finnish government (FNAE) tries to reach an agreement of understanding between teachers and students that Islam must be understood in a universal context, not the interpretation of a religious group's sect, which has an impact on religious conflict and is prone to war as found by Gleditsch and Rudolfson (Gleditsch & Rudolfson, 2016). The Islamic Curriculum in Finland is similar to the Islamic Religious Curriculum in Austria (which is called *Islamische Glaubengemeinschaft in Österreich*) in that it prioritizes aspects of consolidation between religious groups, which are then combined into one consensus called *Islamische Glaubengemeinschaft in Österreich* (Baghajati, 2016).

Religious moderation in Finnish IE: denomination versus general consensus

Imam Subchi said that religious moderation is an effort to be tolerant towards adherents of every religion while refraining from liberal actions (Subchi et al., 2022). In Indonesia, religious moderation is not just an ‘effort’ but has transformed into a government ‘project’ to overcome thoughts and attitudes of radicalism and religious intolerance. For example, the Ministry of Religion of the Republic of Indonesia emphasizes that religious moderation is drawn from two contexts: monotheism and social. In monotheism, religious moderation is manifested in relations between religious communities that believe in their religion ‘radically’ but respect other religious beliefs without justifying them. Meanwhile, in a social context, religious moderation is manifested by doing justice to people of different religions, which is part of each religion’s teachings (Kementerian Agama RI, 2023; Raya, 2022; Raya et al., 2023). The objective reality of religious moderation in Indonesia is the practice of equality where Muslims and Hindus live side by side and create a landscape of world peace mode that mobilizes cultural diversity in various tribes and religions in one hybrid tradition (Raya et al., 2023). In the West, the term religious moderation is not known. It is ‘diversity in religion’, a term introduced by Keith Ward (Ward, 1990).

Diversity in the context of religious education is interpreted as a meeting place for ideas and knowledge that emphasizes equality, confirming the truth in the teachings of each religion and respecting the truth of other religions as a consensus for peace (Barnes, 2014; Franken, 2017; Jackson, 2004). In the Finnish context specifically, where Islam is a minority religion, Islamic education functions as a bond of social cohesion in the national interest: the religious education system is deliberately designed to reinforce Finland’s image as a country that values religious multiculturalism.

We analyse ‘religious diversity’ in Finland within its social context, where the emphasis appears to fall on tolerance, ultimately fostering pluralism and mutual respect for the truth-claims of each religion as a basis for consensus around global peace. Finland has embraced Islamic education (IE) as part of the educational mainstream, challenging the monolithic portrayal of Muslims as a religious minority within a secular European state system. The latest national curriculum for primary schools (FNCCBE) positions diversity and pluralism as a stronger agenda than its predecessor (Zilliacus et al., 2017, pp. 236–237). We observe that the documents analysed demonstrate this trend. Religious groups function as both content designers of learning materials and as supervisors to monitor the extent to which IE aligns with national interests.

Several interview statements from religious teachers will be presented in the sections below.

1. Dialogue on student identity and background

According to the ten teachers we interviewed, students in IE classes come not from a single school of thought but from a range of groups and ethnicities – a diversity that presents an ongoing concern for teachers directly involved in classroom instruction. As T1, T6, T8, and T2 explain:

School is where Muslim students from various ethnic backgrounds and groups gather. So as much as possible, the teacher must make the class a bridge between Finland and Islam.

This suggests that the constitutional agenda of religious diversity is individually interpreted and translated by each teacher. Local context and Finnish identity are further woven into IE material, helping students understand that Islamic teachings form an integral part of Finnish identity – an approach teachers adopt to remain aligned with the interests of the national curriculum.

This is echoed in the statement of two teachers (T4 and T10): ‘Teachers are not allowed to express ‘I am Muslim’, so it must be changed to “I am a Muslim Finnish religion teacher”’.

According to teachers T1, T2, and T8, IE classes are also attended by students from non-religious, secular families. What these teachers experience reflects the broader Finnish educational climate, in which Islam continues to be taught inclusively regardless of individual students’ religious backgrounds.

And the biggest problem is that teachers are not allowed to openly question students’ background, from which group and which country. However, the teacher could ask this in private. This is to protect students’ feelings where they will be embarrassed when they turn out to be Shia or Sunni, Somali or Tatar. (Interview with teachers T7, T10, and T5).

T6 added the following in response to this discussion among the three teachers:

Sometimes, many Muslim children do not know about the prohibitions in Islam. For example, they keep dogs, eat lard, or celebrate Christmas at home. This is not allowed ...! When teachers asked parents about this when they were invited to school, they said this was done because the family was moderate. (T6 teacher's statement)

Addressing students' identity and background in Muslim classes remains a particularly difficult task for IE teachers. Discussions of Islam therefore tend to remain confined to general matters concerning mandatory rituals. Even so, differences in teachings between Sunni and Shia Islam inevitably surface, particularly regarding variations in prayer practice.

We have to know who is Sunni and who is Shia. Their parents teach them [students] to pray three times a day for Shia adherents. Meanwhile, Tatar students pray five times a day. If this is discussed in front of the class, it will cause arguments, and they will choose to leave this school. (Interview with teachers T4, T6, and T9)

Being Shia or Sunni is not, in effect, a choice available to Muslim children in Finnish comprehensive schools. All teachers agree that discussing students' identities and backgrounds is highly sensitive, and this culture is reinforced by the shared understanding that 'this is Finland'. Zilliacus notes that this diversity reflects how external influences – such as students' backgrounds – have become internalized as part of Finnish identity, a shift reflected in the multiculturalism discourse of the FNCCBE curriculum, established in 2014 and enacted in 2016 (Zilliacus et al., 2017, p. 236). What these ten Islamic teachers describe is a latent, ongoing burden in teaching Islam within Muslim classes. Sakaranaho attributes this difficulty to the Finnish government's religious-freedom policy, which places contradictory demands on classroom management: balancing an emphasis on particular national and religious traditions against broader public policy commitments to religious diversity (Sakaranaho, 2018). To overcome this, IE teachers take the steps discussed in the next segment.

2. Addressing denominational diversity with a consensus about Islam

What is unique about the Finnish IE system is that RE is taught cross-sectionally from a multi-religious, denominational, and pedagogical perspective (Riegel & Rothgangel, 2023). This diversity is sustained, in part, by the various challenges teachers navigate in the classroom. The ten teachers we interviewed agreed that the issue of *madhhab* or sectarian differences between Sunnis and Shiites was an important topic during their teaching assignments. To address this, they have different opinions and treatment of students.

We cannot discuss theology in front of students. The questions surrounding religious issues that they encounter outside of school and on the internet. To avoid debate, we returned the questions for their parents to answer at home. (Interview with teachers T3, T4, T9, T7, and T1).

Do not ask, and students are very sensitive towards Shiites (for Sunni students), and vice versa. For Shia students, Sunnis are also strange. However, according to several teachers, some Shiites consider it heretical teaching because it is not by the consensus of Islamic teachings among other groups. (Statement of teachers T6, T2, T5 and T8)

Some teachers state that the denomination revolves around rituals:

Prayers and Ash-Shura Days. This is always sensitive when discussed. It will spread if there are Muslim students who continue to discuss this and provoke other students to ask about these rituals. (Statements of teachers T9 and T10)

From this joint statement by the teachers, we see that the religious diversity practised in Finland is social, not theological (monotheistic). Therefore, questions about the principles and teachings of Islamic denominations are highly sensitive and should be avoided. Tolerance is the starting point that teachers and students agree upon before beginning the first semester of learning.

To overcome this, each group of teachers is treated differently:

- T3, T4, T9, T7, and T1 agreed to return the debate to their parents at home

- T6, T2, T5 and T8 said: 'All Islamic groups are true, and each has its gate to heaven. They will be judged according to their capacity, and the most important thing is their deeds that will be the benchmark'. This gives back to each student.
- T9 and T10: 'Sunnis are generally justified, and Shiites are partially justified. So you [students] follow each other's principles and teachings. Open discussions are still available but limited to consensus. Variants of readings, movements and number of prayers are not permitted to be discussed. Meanwhile, As-Shura Day has become a universal consensus that this is one of the great days of Islam'. T9 and T10 agreed on the differences between the two rituals' consensus.

The denominational debates that occur in Islamic classes, as reported by the ten teachers with respect to the Shafi'i and Hanafi schools of thought, differ from denominational dynamics in Christianity, where a single religion has historically splintered into distinct sects or new religious movements (Gottschalk, 2018; Handman & Opas, 2019). The difference in schools of thought between the four *imams* (Hanafi, Maliki, Syafi'i, and Hanbali) is a matter of differences in understanding and principles in adopting Islamic law (*ijtihad*). Based on the agreement agreed by Islamic experts themselves, the door to *ijtihad* has been closed since the ninth century³ (Hallaq, 1984). By contrast, the Sunni-Shia debate observed in Islamic classes is grounded in the concept of *firqa*, translated in English as 'sect'. A related Arabic term for sect is *ista'ifa* (Sedgwick, 2000). Sunni-Shia has long been a heated debate among Muslims for hundreds of years (Araqian et al., 2021; Blanchard, 2006; Mervin et al., 2013). It is difficult to classify Sunni and Shia as separate denominations, given that both adhere to the same core principles, the same scripture (the Qur'an), and the same Prophet (Muhammad, peace be upon him). Sedgwick's classification instead invokes the term *firqa* where both (Sunni-Shia) are a splinter of Islam in terms of ritual differences.

Clearly explaining these doctrinal differences to Sunni and Shia Muslim students in class discussions is far from straightforward. Unlike Christian theology, where denominational differences have historically given rise to distinct new religious movements that adherents may choose independently (Rhodes, 2015). The approach taken by T3, T4, T9, T7, and T1 – returning contentious debates to be handled at home – represents a first step toward avoiding division and hostility among Muslim students. T4, T6, and T9 reported that some students had dropped out following classroom debates, feeling that the school could not adequately bridge core differences between Sunni and Shia students; parents, for their part, acknowledged these doctrinal differences and affirmed their own right to address them directly with their children.

By contrast, T9 and T10 converge on a shared approach grounded in consensus within Islam. Prayer practices and Ashura remain consistently sensitive topics among Sunni-Shia students in the classroom, requiring teachers to be highly selective in how they convey Islamic religious education material to heterogeneous groups of students. This selectivity adds a further layer of complexity to teachers' already demanding task of preparing learning materials, compounding the broader challenge of teaching a minority religion in Finland, where the government does not provide standardized manuals or teaching materials for minority-religion students – unlike Lutheranism and Orthodoxy, for which such materials are readily available to teachers and students in Helsinki and Espoo.

Conclusion

Muslims constitute Finland's fastest-growing religious minority, expanding at roughly three times the rate observed in other Nordic countries. Alongside this growth, religious education has become an increasingly central sector, particularly following Finland's recognition by PISA as having the best education system in the world. As the number of Muslim students in state and comprehensive schools continues to rise, the need for IE has become correspondingly more urgent. In response, the government enacted the Religious Freedom Act (453/2003), which incorporated the IE curriculum for the Muslim community. This system is widely regarded as remarkable, given that all registered religious communities – both majority faiths such as Lutheranism and Orthodoxy, and minority faiths such as Islam (encompassing Tatar, Yugoslav, Bosnian, and Egyptian Muslim communities, among others) – are officially entitled to appropriate religious education for their children. This entitlement does not, however, extend to

religious practices such as communal prayer within the school environment; this restriction is intended to prevent disparities and discrimination that could otherwise disadvantage students. Such tensions were evident among the ten IE teachers interviewed for this study, who described managing heterogeneous classrooms in which disagreements between Sunni and Shia students occasionally arose. The IE curriculum is accordingly designed to emphasise 'introduction' and 'understanding' content across primary and secondary levels in comprehensive schools throughout Finland. Through the involvement of religious communities and municipal governments, the FNAE and schools have succeeded in fostering multicultural learning; nonetheless, challenges remain, including the limited availability of teaching materials and guidelines for both teachers and students, as discussed throughout this article.

The findings of this study have implications for a more comprehensive understanding of the IE framework in developed countries. The study identified a gap in which IE administrative interests are prioritised over student development, one of the reasons the IE curriculum framework is underdeveloped. This impacts the content of learning and other vital aspects, such as teachers, evaluation, and school institutional governance. This study opens the door to further research on IE teacher governance and evaluation that is more compatible with national agendas and global developments.

Notes

1. The "same rights" refers to the fact that Muslims have equality with other religions that are majority in Finland (namely Lutheranism and Orthodox) regarding legality and are registered as official religions in Finland. That means that all religious adherents are protected by state law, both Islam as a minority and Lutheranism and Orthodox as the majority religions. Included in this paper is the right of Muslims to receive Islamic education in schools.
2. Teachers in Finland call *elämäkatsomustieto* as *Life Stance Education* (in English terminology). See in (*Mitä elämäkatsomustieto on?*, 2023). This terminology was used after the Basic Education Law and the National Education Council used religious education as "Ethical Education". This is due to several suggestions from the Lutheran and Orthodox communities who want ethical education as a term for religious education.
3. *Ijtihad* is the maximum effort exerted by Islamic legal experts to discover new laws not found in the Qur'an and Hadith through the principles and rules of *uṣūl al-fiqh* (fiqh legal theory). Islamic legal experts have decided to stop this *ijtihad* activity called *insidād bāb al-ijtihād* or 'the closing of the gates of *ijtihad*'. See in (Hallaq, 1984)

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Ethical approval

This study has received ethical approval from the Ethics Committee of the *Center for the Study of Muslim Society*, Number 210/DRI/EC.00/03/2023. The ethics committee approved all data obtained and verbal protocol consent. Verbal consent was securely recorded and is presented in the manuscript.

Author's contributions

CRedit: **Akhmad Nurul Kawakip**: Conceptualization, Data curation, Validation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing; **Moch. Khafidz Fuad Raya**: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Methodology, Project administration, Validation, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing; **Nur Chanifah**: Funding acquisition, Methodology, Project administration, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing; **Lailiyatul Azizah**: Conceptualization, Data curation, Project administration, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing; **Munirul Abidin**: Project administration, Supervision, Validation; **Ali Ridho**: Project administration, Supervision, Validation.

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Data availability statement

The data supporting the findings of this study are available from the author, principal, and manager during the research process, Moch. Khafidz Fuad Raya, upon reasonable request.

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