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"I Learnt Much About. . ." the Impact of Cooperative Interreligious Education

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Abstract: Population growth in Austria means that school classes—including those in apprenticeship training—are no longer homogeneous. Apprentices, too, often come from different cultural backgrounds and therefore belong to different religions and worldviews, which makes the classes "multi" in every respect. This can lead to encounters in their everyday working life that are not always smooth because they are accompanied by prejudices and misunderstandings. Can cooperative religious education based on didactics of facilitation and TCI help to gain new insights into religions/worldviews and thus reinforce social cohesion? It has been shown that cooperative religious education gives pupils an insight into religious communities to which they themselves do not belong but does not give much concrete knowledge. It creates an awareness of being different without devaluation and the importance of dialogue that leads to a better mutual understanding and consequently to an awareness of one's own prejudices and judgements towards others. It cannot be said that the attitudes towards religions/denominations/worldviews that were foreign to the pupils have changed with KORU but effects on social interaction are recognisable. The evaluation according to Philipp Mayring (content analysis) was carried out using a triangulation of data: Observation of religious education lessons, lesson preparations and interviews with the participating teachers and two group interviews with students and their written reflections.

Keywords: interreligious encounter learning; cooperative religious education; effects on social interaction

Citation: Danner, Sonja, and Halid Akpinar. 2024. "I Learnt Much About. . ." the Impact of Cooperative Interreligious Education. *Religions* 15: 1339. https://doi.org/10.3390/rel15111339

Academic Editors: Andrea Porcarelli and Marco Guglielmi

Received: 1 October 2024
Revised: 20 October 2024
Accepted: 21 October 2024
Published: 1 November 2024

1. Introduction

Society is on the move due to migration and globalisation. As a result, schools are also becoming more colourful in terms of the cultural, ideological and religious diversity that characterises school life. The acquisition of skills that enable pupils and teachers to engage in intercultural and interreligious encounters and make fruitful dialogue possible for everyone is essential. Appreciation, tolerance of ambiguity, change of perspective, etc.—to name just a few skills—are necessary in a pluralistic society.

Of the 16 recognised religious communities in Austria, 15 offer religious education, which is organised along denominational lines throughout the country and is becoming increasingly difficult to maintain in its current form due to a variety of structural and content-related factors. The heterogeneity of the pupil population has led to considerations about new organisational forms of religious education that reflect the religious diversity of the pupils (Catholic, Protestant, Free-Church, Islamic, Alevi, Buddhist, New Apostolic and Orthodox, etc.), consider their lifeworld and enable learning through encounters, as well as offering opportunities to identify with their own religions/worldviews. Various models of cooperation are therefore being tested and evaluated in Austria: KoKoRu = confessional cooperative religious education (Bastel et al. 2006), dk:RU = dialogue-based confessional cooperative religious education (Becks et al. 2022), KUER = Kultur (culture)—Ethik (ethics)—Religion (religion) (Kreis and Leitner 2022), WIR = Werte (values)—Interkulturelles Lernen

(intercultural learning)—Religionen (religions) (Pruchniewicz, not publishes yet), Christlich-Islamischer Religionsunterricht im Teamteaching (christian-islamic religious education in teamteaching) (Gmoser et al. 2024) etc. However, a study of shared religious education in mixed learning groups in Germany has already been carried out by Kießling et al. (2018). All these models are located in compulsory schools or at upper secondary level. Forms of denominationally cooperative religious education have also been increasingly researched in Germany (Merkt and Losert 2014; Ziebertz et al. 2010a; Ziebertz et al. 2010b; Schweitzer et al. 2006; Biesinger et al. 2008; Kuld et al. 2009).

The accompanying studies show that the quality of cooperative teaching varies greatly and at the same time draws attention to the desiderata. For example, they point to the lack of teacher qualifications for cooperative religious education, but also to the lack of curricula, didactic support, teaching materials, etc. Nevertheless, it can be said that cooperative religious education enjoys undivided approval among all players and is seen in its various forms as a future model for a pluralistic society. In contrast, effectiveness studies in recent years, which have looked at different models of interreligious learning in religious education with regard to learning effects (Ziebertz et al. 2010a; Ziebertz et al. 2010b; Merkt and Losert 2014; Schweitzer 2018; Schweitzer and Bucher 2020), show no effects of interreligious learning on changes in attitudes or few effects in reducing prejudices and highlight the difficulties with regard to the practice of changing perspectives (Schweitzer 2018; Unser 2018).

However, Riegel and Schweitzer (2021) point out that there is still a fundamental "lack of suitable tests that reliably record the specific competences that are to be developed through denominational cooperative learning".

Regarding vocational schools and religious education, the research situation is rather sparse. Kenner, who is responsible for two studies in this area, should be emphasised here. One of the works is an intervention study from 2007 on intercultural learning. He notes that pupils are encouraged to reflect and that there has also been an improvement in the way they interact with each other. However, it cannot be ruled out that this is only a short-term change as the intervention was not designed to be long-term. Another of his works is an empirical study from 2018 on religious commitment and moral judgement.

Until now, religious education at vocational schools in Austria, which are characterised by a multicultural and multireligious student body, has remained completely unexplored. This exploratory study aims to contribute to shedding light on interreligious religious education in this area.

Religious education at vocational schools is not offered in all federal states. In Carinthia, there has been a model for religious education at vocational schools since 2013, "Project Religion", which includes pupils of all religions/worldviews. Catholic, Protestant, Orthodox and Islamic teachers are involved. Even though religion is a compulsory subject in vocational schools in Vorarlberg, only the Catholic Church has so far made use of its right to offer denominational lessons. Most Roman Catholic apprentices attend these religious education classes. Apprentices of other denominations sometimes take part as guest students, although their participation cannot be counted as official attendance of religious education classes (according to the Religious Education Act). To maintain the possibility of religious education in school—the number of pupils who are catholic is falling—a Roman Catholic religious education teacher and an Islamic religious education teacher have joined forces to offer cooperative religious education (KORU).

The establishment of KORU means that the two largest religious communities in terms of numbers (Roman Catholic and Islamic) teach one hour of religion per week in team teaching and representatives of the other participating churches and religious communities, which cannot offer religious education due to the small number of pupils, help to organise the lessons to a proportionately calculated extent. The lessons are conducted by the teachers against the background of comparative theology according to Catherine Cornille (Cornille 2008) and based on enabling didactics (Arnold and Tutor 2007) and Ruth Cohn's theme-centred interaction (Cohn 1994). The concept is described briefly below.

2. Didactical Concept

According to Cornille, five basic attitudes come into play in interreligious dialogue, which she describes as doctrinal or epistemic humility, confessional attachment to one's own tradition (commitment), commensurability and perception of differences (interconnection), empathy and loving attention and hospitality. (Cornille 2008)

By a doctrinal/epistemic humility she means:

> "The impulse to dialogue arises from the desire to learn, to increase one's understanding of the other, of oneself, or of the truth. It thus presupposes humble awareness of the limitation of one's own understanding and experience and of the possibility of change and growth." (Cornille 2008, p. 9)

This means that when understanding another person's practice of faith, there is always a part that remains misunderstood due to the limitations of human understanding. This also applies to one's own conviction in faith and understanding of truth. For Cornille, the confessional bond is to be seen in being at home in one's own tradition and in lived faith, which are prerequisites for the encounter with the other. This also puts a stop to a syncretistic approach. Understanding commensurability and the perception of differences in Cornille's sense can lead to the perception of similarities and differences on the common basis of fundamental comparability and comprehensibility. The dialogue about this can be profitable but can also reach its limits when an incompatibility of religious convictions becomes apparent. Because religions deal with questions of life, new ways of understanding can always be found here. Cornille sees empathy and loving attention as the basis for a change of perspective in dialogue. This empathetic engagement with the religious beliefs of others can also lead to reflecting on and sometimes changing one's own way of thinking. The theoretical and lived beliefs in their affective dimension can be appreciated with this attitude and thus also make the spiritual dimension visible. Interreligious dialogue understood in this way must be careful not to exclude anyone. Finally, she mentions hospitality as a prerequisite for interreligious dialogue. Welcoming the other and recognising that—in Buber's sense—one's own way of thinking can change by engaging with "the guest" is what makes an interreligious encounter possible in the first place.

Enabling didactics should help in this process, which means that the motivation to acquire content depends on the learner—it remains to be seen in what form. However, the teacher can encourage this. The learning effect is greatest where the content can be linked to the learner's own world. These findings come from both learning research and the neurosciences and form the basis for enabling didactics (Arnold and Tutor 2007). The teacher acts as a learning guide for the learner to realise their individual learning goals, as self-organised learning promotes the development of skills. This means that the teacher is no longer a mediator of knowledge, and the learners are no longer mere recipients, which requires both groups to rethink their approach (Quilling 2015). In the so-called S.P.A.S.S. model (Arnold 2012a), Arnold outlines the methodological criteria: self-directed, productive, activating, situational, social and speaks of a "turn towards situational orientation" on the part of the teacher, who is responsible for marking competences with the learners. To do justice to this, teachers need to be open and flexible or have a constructivist, systemic attitude that can deal with the different acquisition logics and non-linear learning processes of the students (Arnold 2012b).

Enabling didactics offers the opportunity, particularly in cooperative religious education, to create a framework for religious learning that makes the different (religious) perspectives of the participants authentically visible in dialogue and encounters and goes beyond the acquisition of mere knowledge in the exchange. Through dialogue, the pupils practise changing perspectives, and, in the best case, this leads to new insights that not only concern the rational sphere, but also the emotional sphere, and have a positive effect on the social level in the classroom. These newly acquired insights and skills can also be utilised in the workplace to prevent misunderstandings, prejudices and friction. This is one of the places where young people experience differentiation based on clothing, food, etc.

Popp (2013) sees a connection here between discrimination based on religious affiliation in Europe.

Theme-centred interaction (TCI), as conceived by Ruth Cohn, is suitable for this learning process within the framework of enabling didactics. Inherent in it is social learning with the simultaneous promotion of personal development based on a topic that is also to be further developed.

Huber and Bernhard (2022) offer a good summary and describe three axioms as the foundation for TCI. The first axiom is the awareness that there is a tension between autonomy and interdependence, i.e., between independence and interconnectedness. Didactic concepts must take this into account and adopt a human image of an autonomous and at the same time interdependent individual. This is about personal freedom and individuality, which, however, cannot be conceived without the "assumption of responsibility for society as a whole" (Hufer 2001).

The second axiom addresses "the reverence for living things and their growth and the advocacy of this. The third axiom deals with the freedom to decide freely within limits and the possibility of extending these limits in favour of greater freedom of action. The axioms thus represent a philosophical-ethical concept that makes statements about a person's personal attitude and creates the basis for dealing and working with people" (Huber and Bernhard 2022).

There are also two postulates that describe TCI. Be your own chairperson—whereby this applies to both pupils and teachers in the classroom—and pay attention to disruptions. This prevents them from manifesting themselves in other ways and blocking the lesson. A chairperson, who is not necessarily the teacher, can take the lead. Communication at eye level is required for this.

There are four factors, IT/I/WE and GLOBE, which work together to ensure the success of communication in group work. IT: Topics are discussed in a results-orientated manner through the exchange in a group. I: The needs, experiences and competences of teachers and pupils are recognised and strengthened. WE: To strengthen cooperation, the group process must be reflected upon. Strengthening trust and promoting resources should help to deal constructively with conflict situations and competitive behaviour. GLOBE: The group is viewed systemically, not detached from its environment, etc. These four factors must be treated in a balanced way by the teacher (Huber and Bernhard 2022).

The Innsbruck model of religious didactics would also correspond to the TCI approach, in which the "educational processes are based on three steps, each with four directions or perspectives. The first step is dedicated to (empirically guided) analysis. It takes place in the four perspectives (a) subjective-biographical, (b) intersubjective-communicative, (c) content-related-objective and (d) contextual perspective" (Sejdini and Kraml 2022).

3. Materials and Methods

An inductive qualitative approach was chosen for the research design to gain a deeper insight into the teaching activities of the teachers involved. The explorative nature of the study required openness on the part of all participants to capture a wide variety of subjective perceptions and conclusions. The research question of interest here was:

Can cooperative religious education based on enabling didactics and TCI help to gain new insights into religions/worldviews and thus reinforce social cohesion?

Two classes at a vocational school in Vorarlberg were available as a sample for the study, a group with 15 pupils (9 Roman Catholic, 4 Islamic, 1 Protestant, 1 Serbian Orthodox) in first grade and another in second grade with 15 pupils (5 Roman Catholic, 4 Islamic, 1 Protestant, 2 without religious denomination, 1 Alevi, 1 Buddhist, 1 Serbian Orthodox). The pupils are therefore aged 14 or older. In addition, there were the religious teachers, who were made up of the religions/denominations to which the pupils formally belonged, apart from the Orthodox, who did not send a religious teacher to the project. The two pupils with no religious affiliation were also not represented by their own teacher. The study was expressly requested by the initiators of the KORU project to visualise the effects

of this interreligious model of religious education. The pupils gave their consent to the evaluation at the beginning of the school year. To ensure anonymity, the school was not named and any reference to the identity of students and teachers was avoided.

The data collection took place from October 2021 to June 2022 and was geared towards data triangulation. Lesson observations in both classes began in October 2021 and were completed in June 2022. A total of 14 lessons were recorded—seven per class. Whenever possible in terms of resources, two observers were on the job to observe the lessons in which three teachers of different denominations/religions organised the lessons together. The Islamic religion teacher (=RE teacher) and the Roman Catholic RE teacher were present in every lesson and were the main pillars of the KORU project, while the Alevi, Free Church, Protestant and Buddhist RE teachers organised the lessons with the two regular teachers in two lessons per semester.

In addition, all six participating teachers were interviewed in June 2022. The preliminary considerations led to the use of a focusing, problem-centred, guideline-based, semi-structural interview method. The following guiding questions led through the interview:

What does religious cooperation mean to you?

Please characterise your (Catholic, Islamic, Alevi, etc.) religious education.

Please characterise your contribution to religious education in the context of KORU.

What experiences have you had with KORU?

What requirements do you need as a religious education teacher to be able to work on a KORU?

What framework conditions are needed to be able to carry out a KORU well?

Does the KORU model have a future? Please give reasons for your answer.

What else would you like to say that wasn't mentioned in the interview?

The pupils were also interviewed in two group discussions in June 2022, whereby any language-centred bias that might occur was considered, as some of the pupils did not have German as their mother tongue. Two key questions were asked here to stimulate discussion:

How would you describe your religious education lessons this year?

Were there any differences or similarities to the lessons of previous years? If so, which ones?

Finally, an atmospheric picture was raised: Would you recommend this form of religious education?

The written entries of 15 pupils in their exercise books, which they were asked to write after each lesson as a reflection on the lesson, were available as further data. However, not all the pupils provided statements about each lesson.

The teachers' preparations for the individual lessons that were observed were available in written form.

The analysis was carried out using qualitative content analysis (Mayring 2021) after the interviews and observations had been transcribed. Initially, three coders with Islamic and Christian backgrounds worked together to sequentialise three of the four data sets. The students' notebook entries were not sequentialised. The coders then created initial codes independently of each other and recorded their key findings in individual memos. This allowed them to contribute their different perspectives and religious contexts. In the next step, regular meetings were arranged to discuss the individual codes and reach a consensus on them. This was intended to create transparency, reduce the subjective component of the analysis and ensure the reliability of the results. In these settings, code groups were agreed upon, to which data were subsequently assigned. As a final step, the data were triangulated and thus placed in relation to each other. The lesson preparations were used to understand the didactic intentions of the teachers.

To be able to categorise which data set the respective quote comes from, here is a brief description. The interviews with the religious education teachers are labelled as follows: I = interview, then the religious affiliation of the teacher I = Islamic, K = Roman

Catholic, E = Protestant, B = Buddhist, F = Free Church, A = Alevi. The numbers indicate in which line of the transcript the statement is located, e.g., (I_K:44–49). The group interviews are organised as follows: G = group interview, 1 = 1st school level, 2 = 2nd school level; S = students; the numbers indicate the student who is currently speaking, e.g., (G1_S3:132–133). Here too, the numbers indicate in which line of the transcript the statement is located. The students' exercise book entries are cited as follows: S = student who was assigned a number for anonymisation (1–15) and the numbers indicate in which line of the exercise book entry the statement is located, e.g., (S_12:25). Finally, the lesson observations should be mentioned. These were quoted according to sequences. U = lesson observation; 6.10. = date of observation; S = sequence. The following number indicates the sequence S1 = 1st sequence. If this is divided into several sections, these are numbered consecutively with lowercase letters (a, b, c etc.), e.g., (U_6.10.:S1a).

4. Results

The lessons in September (the start of the new school year) help the pupils to get to know each other and to grow together as a group. This includes getting to know and perceive the other as a person, defining important points for an encounter in dialogue and introducing religious/worldview perspectives. It is also important for the teachers to get an impression of the class to be able to tailor the lessons to the learning groups. This lays the foundation for the joint learning process, the results of which are now described in relation to the research question.

4.1. Importance of Dialogue and Exchange of Opinions

The lessons are very much based on dialogue. Different forms of dialogue become apparent. There are so-called ping-pong conversations, which follow the pattern: question from the teacher—answer from the pupils. The Roman Catholic teacher in particular tries to involve all pupils in the lesson by asking a question and asking the pupils in turn for an answer. Longer conversations between the pupils mainly take place when working in small groups or when the lesson offers some freedom, such as during a joint celebration or group work in the classroom. More in-depth teacher-pupil conversations often result from questions asked by the pupils.

As early as the second lesson, the students discuss what it means to be in dialogue and thus establish a basic attitude for discussions. This unit clearly did not fail to have an impact on the pupils, as it is the only one reflected on by all 15 pupils in the exercise book and the statements are underlined many times with ratings such as "I really liked it", "very important" or "great". The learning effects noted by the young people here range from simply listening to other opinions to learning how to deal with other opinions to "that you should respect everyone when the person expresses their own opinion" (S6:4–5). Respect is already mentioned here as an issue for young people. The importance of entering dialogue with each other and discussing issues is recognised by the pupils. "Talking and conversing with each other is important and expressing your opinion" (S14:2–3).

They recognise the value of exchanging views and the importance of not only expressing opinions but also allowing different opinions to coexist. This includes them talking openly with each other—even within the family. In class, they have the new experience of being able to discuss texts—including texts from their own and other religious traditions—with each other and to contribute their religious/worldview perspectives. This applies in particular to stories that can be found in both the Bible and the Koran. They also recognise that there are different ways of thinking. "Everyone thinks differently about the same topics" (S9:8).

In the first phase of docking and getting to know each other, the students often use the pronoun "other" in their reflections. It is used in connection with getting to know others, but also when it comes to expressing one's own opinion, exchanging opinions, diversity of opinion and dealing with it. In relation to religion, the term is used when reflecting on what has been learnt: "Other religions are also very interesting." (S9:3) and

"→ got to know Christianity better -> explained to others what Islam is" (S10:5–6). Here the pupil puts themself in contrast to their non-Islamic classmates. Learning something new from others also means telling them something about their own religion. The exchange is therefore not a one-way street. While it is not possible to tell from the first statement which religious or worldview perspective the student belongs to, this is clear from the second statement. At the end of the year, one pupil also mentions this in the group discussion. He/she emphasises that he/she had no idea about other religions before and has learnt to have respect for them and for other opinions (G2_S13:93–101). Respect is also an important factor here and is extended from respect for other opinions to respect for religions. Getting to know other religions goes hand in hand with a respectful attitude towards them. In one booklet entry, respect is even seen as an important aspect of life (S5:14–15).

One teacher observes in class that, in contrast to the large group of students, in which the same pupils always take part in the dialogue, in the small group work it turns out to be positive that, on the one hand, there is always someone who records the results of the discussions in writing and, on the other hand, the pupils, who are otherwise rather quiet in class, get into an exchange with the other group members. They are also asked for their religious perspective on individual topics. The pupils are actively involved. "And I find that very harmonious" (I_E: 163–168).

4.2. Knowledge Expansion

In general, the group discussion in grade 2 emphasises at the beginning that you always learn something regardless of your age and that teachers can, therefore, also learn from their pupils. The young people mentioned the advantage of cooperative lessons, in which they learnt many things that would otherwise not have been possible. It is pointed out that the lessons about the different religions and not exclusively about Christianity were very popular and it is perceived that the KORU project always tries to develop a topic further. It is appreciated that you gain a better insight into other religions and get an impression of "how they work". But you do not just learn new things about a religion, you can also learn from a religion. If you realise that there are some pupils in the class who do not have German as their mother tongue, the comparison of interreligious learning with learning a language is easy to understand.

> "S4: Yes, I mean, we learn different things. For example, Turkish, Croatian, yes, Catholic, yes, it's just good for listening and you can learn something new." (G2_S4:41–42)

This can be an indication that the other religion is as foreign as the language you do not speak. But you can obviously learn and understand the language of the other religion if you listen carefully.

However, learning is not only abstractly related to the religions but is "personalised" to a certain extent by talking about having learnt something about Muslims as a Christian. But identification with the religion to which one feels one belongs is also expressed linguistically in the learning process.

> "S5: So far, I've really enjoyed the religion lesson. It was exciting because I am Buddhism, from Buddhism, yes. And I also have some experience with my own religion. And the different religions, Islam and so on, which I never knew about before. I knew that the pilgrimage site was in Mecca, but I didn't know many, many other, many other things, for example. Yes, and every week we learnt something new. Yes." (G2_S5:46–51)

Cornille speaks here of prerequisites for interreligious dialogue: being at home in one's own religion/denomination. At the end, the statement is confirmed with a: yes.

Most of the pupils' entries in their exercise books remain rather unspecific about concrete learning content and do not go beyond the wording "having learnt something new" (S12:5). Hardly any specific topics from the religions/denominations are named that are particularly reflected upon. This picture is also evident at the end of the year in

the group discussions, where—when asked about content that the students specifically remember—few concrete details can be given, i.e., active memories of specific content cannot be recalled immediately. Statements of a content-related nature are prompted with the help of the Roman-Catholic teacher who is present during the group discussions. For example, one pupil remembers Buddhism, where there is no rosary, "but something similar" (G1_S14:132–133).

It becomes apparent that the label, the theme, which the teachers give to each lesson does not correspond to the associations of the pupils. The keyword "peace lesson" (introduced by the RE teacher as a reminder) does not evoke any remembered content for the pupils. Only when the content of the mentioned lesson is discussed in detail do memories—albeit without depth—come back to the pupils.

Nevertheless, the pupils have the feeling that they have learnt a lot about (other) religions. In the post-lesson reflections, the term "learnt" is used 34 times and is supplemented by "new insights", "informed", "experienced" and "more knowledge". Many of the reflections are accompanied by evaluations of the lessons. For example, many of the entries in the exercise book state that the pupils "liked it (very) much" and that "the lesson was good". Further entries mention "very interesting" and "really exciting". This shows that the teachers were very good at assessing the relevance of the chosen topics for the pupils and were able to arouse their interest.

This impression was also confirmed in the group discussion. The pupils appreciate the variety offered by the cooperative religious education: "The lessons are varied. And, you don't always go through the same thing, because like in primary school, in secondary school you already had religious education, just from your own religion. And if you always [go through] the same thing, at some point it gets boring and there's always a variety here" (G2_S11:85–88). This impression is shared several times and justified in different ways. You learn something new every week and can already do something with the new knowledge (G2_S27:198–203).

From the teacher's perspective, a large proportion of the pupils have an "aha" effect in every lesson and it is perceived that the pupils show interest, actively participate and listen, generate knowledge and gain experience despite being tired after the lunch break. This is clear from the young people's reactions to the lessons (I_I:60–64).

At the same time, the Islamic teacher indirectly provides a possible explanation for the sometimes fragmentary knowledge of the pupils. The time available to each religious community to take a position on an issue is limited. This forces them to formulate their content in a compact way. They are aware that the information is therefore superficial, but the pupils have at least heard something and that is "better than nothing" (I_I:229–235). The tight schedule of the school lessons can also mean that pupils do not even get a chance to ask questions because they are overwhelmed by the pace of knowledge transfer. There is little time to look at a topic from a different perspective and reflect on it to develop questions. This applies, for example, to the terms religion and denomination, which are not differentiated in the lessons observed. It is therefore not surprising that the pupils speak exclusively of religions, even if they mean a different denomination.

4.3. Community and Common Ground

In the classroom, the commonality is repeatedly emphasised, especially by the Islamic RE teacher, who stresses the solidarity of people and is also taken up by the pupils. This emphasises that people have a lot in common. The fact that the community in the classroom also plays a role for the pupils is particularly evident in a lesson that does not take place in the classroom. At Christmas, the teachers move the lesson to the schoolyard, where a fire bowl is set up. They meet there in a relaxed atmosphere to wish each other well and bring the school year to a close together. The focus here is on "the communal aspect" (GI1_S9:84–86), which is less evident in the classroom. "In class, everyone sits and looks ahead, which is a different setting. You also memorise content better if you learn at a place outside of school" (GI_S11:106–112). The observation protocols of the lessons show that the

pupils also discuss private matters in personal conversations and that the bond between them can be extended beyond the classroom. For example, the topic of skiing comes up in both classes and leads to the question of whether they could go skiing together one day.

Although not all of them celebrate Christmas according to their religious tradition, they wish each other a "Merry Christmas" when they are asked by the teachers to wish each other well. In the second grade, all young people, regardless of their religious/worldview affiliation, wish each other a "Merry Christmas", although there is an awareness of differences in religions—that not everyone celebrates this festival out of religious conviction or does not celebrate it at all. "Merry Christmas, even if you don't celebrate it", "Do you celebrate Christmas? What do you eat in China?", "Merry Christmas (handshake) let's go skiing (both laugh)", "Merry Christmas [a] Happy New Year" and "Merry Christmas and stay healthy!" (U_22.12.:S6c).

The community that this form of religious education leads to and that the classes have grown together into is also recognised by the religious education teachers. The example set by the teachers with their team teaching across denominational and religious boundaries plays an important role here. They show the pupils that it is possible to work together, laugh together and have fun together. Talking to each other about religions/denominations/worldviews is also community-building and peace work (I_K:240–244). In turn, this triggers a learning effect for the Protestant RE (religious education) teacher. She mentions the positive aspect of not teaching the class in groups but as a whole class. The effect is a great, visible class community (I_E:18–31).

Linguistically, the growing together of the group becomes visible in the use of the pronoun "other". While, at the beginning of the school year, the pupils' reflections often refer to the other religion when naming the respective denomination/religion to which they do not formally belong, this becomes more concrete at the end of the year. They no longer talk about having learnt about another religion, but about having learnt about Buddhism, for example.

In this community, it is possible for the pupils to discuss stories from the individual religious traditions from different perspectives. This is particularly noticeable with shared stories in the Koran and the Bible. Over the course of the year, the stories of Moses, Job, Noah and Jesus are examined in Christianity and Islam, leading to multiple entries in the exercise book about similarities and commonalities. "Certain themes are quite similar. Some prophets also appear in the Bible and the Quran" (S9:4–5). Not only are the similarities between the religions derived from the stories that are viewed from both perspectives, but also that "we humans in the world have a lot in common." (S2:8). Here, the insight gained from processing the stories that Christians and Muslims share in their scriptures, namely that the two religions have much in common, is applied to humanity as a whole. This shows that the discussions with the teachers, who emphasise in a wide variety of contexts that all people are equal in dignity and connected as brothers and sisters, have borne fruit. The image of humanity that they have conveyed is reflected by the pupils.

4.4. Internal Perspective and Insight

The pupils realise that there is a difference between someone talking about a religion/denomination from an external perspective and whether the content conveyed by the RE teacher comes from an internal perspective.

This internal perspective, finding out how someone does not talk about religion but speaks religiously, is an important experience for the pupils. It is also mentioned and valued in both group discussions in relation to the teachers. When asked whether it makes a difference who teaches the content, one pupil said: "S5: I mean, yes, if the Roman-Catholic [teacher] had talked about it, it would still have been exciting, but if a teacher from their religion did it, they would have practised more [. . .]" (G1_S5:66–68) The practising religious teacher as a lecturer is given preference. Religion thus becomes visible and is not just a religion "for learning" because it is embodied by an authentic person (G1_S1:22–25), with

whom one can "talk everything through" and "really understand, really delve deeper into the culture or religion [. . .]" (G1_S3:44–46).

Through this form of expanding knowledge about a religion/denomination and the associated insight into the religion/denomination to which one does not belong, it is possible for the young people to understand why people behave in a certain way "and how exactly they live and what they eat [. . .], you just hear and see religion very differently, yes" (G1_S2:37–39). On the one hand, this statement can be understood to mean that, when confronted with the teacher's or pupil's internal perspective on their own religion/denomination, they perceive this religion differently than when talking about it, but it can also mean that the new knowledge changes their view of a religious community. When asked whether one also sees the person who belongs to the respective religion/denomination differently, it becomes clear: "S2: No, that remains the same, but I can understand it more, then" (G1_S2:42). The insight into how Christians pray in church is also emphasised in a booklet entry.

In the interview, the Islamic RE teacher also mentions this as an important aspect, that the pupils do not talk about religions in class, but with religions, with the respective experts (I_I:177–184).

4.5. Religious Insights

In addition to the positive image of man, the image of God that the pupils have also becomes visible in the joint discussions. A lesson on the search for God, which the pupils have requested, is organised jointly by the Protestant RE teacher and the Islamic RE teacher. After the Protestant teacher moderates the discussion and asks the questions from her religious perspective, she uses the word "search for God", which is then also used in the pupils' answers. (But this term is also used exclusively in the exercise book entries.) They use images to consider what they mean for their search for God and associate hope, Noah in freedom, God is everywhere, the dark path will end with a light and seeking God's closeness. Those who seek God, will find him, even if you often do not see him at first glance (U_26.1.:S 2a/2b). Pupils also think that God should be characterised as having created Life and Matter.

In their booklet entries, the young people reflect on the image of God, saying that God is everywhere, and you are never alone. You can connect with him in nature. He is omnipotent and accompanies our lives. They come to the realisation that everyone has the same goal, but the ways to get there are different (S10:28–30). Not only the path to God is different. "Everyone sees God differently! But in the end, it comes out the same" (S13:20–21).

Some entries in the booklet are very personal and show the pupil's personal relationship with God. The dialogue with God plays an important role here: "I have the feeling that I have got back on track. Every day before I go to bed, I make the sign of the cross and say: 'Thank you God for such a beautiful day, I love you'. Then I tell him how I feel and then I say, 'Good night' and go to sleep" (S11:13–17). The realisation that you can pray anywhere and that praying calms you down are also emphasised.

The pupils also confirm that their RE teachers' view that the subject of God "can be seen in many ways" (S13:8–9). They see in him a God who is simply EVERYTHING and in whom one should never give up hope. He is just. "Allah" never appears as a name for God not even in the written reflections.

4.6. Relevance of Cooperative Religious Education Beyond the Classroom

The significance of the pupils' insights beyond the group is already evident in the "Christmas lesson" when one pupil speaks.

S11: May I also say something?

L cath: With pleasure!

S11: The way religious education takes place in the classroom is a great enrichment, together with the for. . . [Note from the minute taker: M falters, he doesn't

> want to say the word foreigner]—together with many religions, I learn a lot; otherwise religious education was always boring—we watched lots of films, I can do that at home too—now it's with the different religions—cool idea!
>
> S4: He almost said foreigner.
>
> L islam: The point where M. stopped himself is a realisation! (U_22.12:S7b/8)

Apparently, the cooperative religious education lessons have raised awareness that the term "foreigner" has a discriminatory effect, and the pupil stops when it crosses their lips—as it may have done more than once before. Another pupil notices this and immediately raises the issue. The RE teacher picks up on it and shows his appreciation by indicating that the pupil has stopped themself through this self-recognition, even as they were about to utter the discrimination. This sequence is addressed and commented on by all three religious education teachers present in the interview. The Islamic religious education teacher remembers and reflects on the situation afterwards:

> "There is an awareness, and the [pupils] have become more aware. They already know that they have no right to discriminate against someone else. [. . .] The most important point is that our pupils meet each other. First as human beings, that's important. Being human, yes. There is he or she, facing me and that is a human being, first. The religious beliefs and the religious communities and the whole thing should be secondary, three, four even. But first I should meet as a human being." (I_I:177–198)

KORU is seen as an interreligious and intercultural exchange with mutual appreciation and esteem. Pupils also reflect that the lessons have dispelled some prejudices and stereotypes that some of them may have had towards another religion.

Knowledge about the "other" religions is also useful in the workplace. Thanks to the newly acquired knowledge, statements made by Alevi colleagues, for example, can be better categorised and now make sense.

Another pair of terms that appears in different contexts throughout the year and that the pupils work through is freedom and responsibility. From a Protestant perspective, this would be categorised under "religious knowledge". The pair of terms is associated with the Protestant denomination, and they are related to each other. On the one hand, the meaning of responsibility is seen as being free and, on the other hand, it is seen as two terms that are very close and go hand in hand. Sometimes it takes a closer look to realise how much meaning these terms carry. Trust and equality are also mentioned in this context, but the relationship between them is not explained in detail. In relation to people, freedom for a responsible person means making their own decisions in life. Everyone has their freedom, but it ends where the freedom of others begins. They also reflect on what freedom means for themselves: It's "very important and that I shouldn't listen to other people" (S12:73–74).

Responsibility at work is also discussed in class and is interpreted to mean that you have personal responsibility, for example by handling materials and machines responsibly in the workshop. Freedom, on the other hand, means being allowed to live out your free time. Together we consider what a person needs to make responsible decisions. Terms such as mental maturity, self-confidence and assertiveness are used. They must also be able to judge what is good and what is not. The RE teacher also asks what responsibility they have when they drive at 200km on the motorway or whether it limits their freedom if they smoke at 16. One pupil is convinced that you can live out this freedom when you are alone and do not harm anyone, because you do not have to be restricted by a constraint. This contrasts with another opinion that it is ok to live out freedom within given boundaries. The opinions of the pupils remain separate, even if the teacher makes it clear that she has little understanding of fast driving on the motorway (U_16.3.:S2f/2g).

5. Conclusions

Even in the first lessons, it becomes clear how TCI and enabling didactics are realised in interaction. IT/I/WE/GLOBE. The "I" is addressed by making the individual pupils

visible as individuals and getting to know each other. The question of where they come from does not refer to their ethnic origin but is based solely on the Vorarlberg region. This makes it clear that the pupils do not live in the same place, but in the same federal state—regardless of where they were born or where their families come from. This introduction, which deliberately does not focus on the topic of migration and divides the pupils into majority society and minorities right from the start, means that the young people who see themselves as minorities do not have to take a confrontational or defensive stance to emphasise and defend their religious identity, which never describes the whole person, as a unique selling point. The respective religious identity can thus stand alongside the other identities, such as athlete, social status, etc., that the young people also have. Very quickly, there is no longer any talk of "the others" in the pupils' reflections. It was possible to create a sense of togetherness but there was no co-optation.

Nevertheless, the pupils are aware of the differences that cannot be discussed away. Differences around religions/worldviews are not faded out and the individual topics are always negotiated from different religious/worldview perspectives. This is carried out in a subject-centred way by focusing on the pupils and their questions and interests. The topics (ES) for the following lessons are developed in the discussions of the RE lessons and lead to learning effects that have a direct impact on the group and its social structure. However, the lessons not only focus on what is different but, above all, on what we have in common. This is demonstrated by the fact that teachers often start from what is common. Bible texts are used that appear in both the Qur'an and the Bible. Practising differences in what is common to many pupils is proving to be a fruitful approach, from which even minorities whose written traditions have obviously not been considered can benefit. Peace work is also seen as a goal behind religious education (GLOBE).

Although religious truths also come into view to some extent in religious education, these are not negotiated under a claim to absoluteness. Cornille would categorise them under the first basic attitude. The concept of truth is introduced by the Buddhist RE teacher in connection with the four noble truths and is taken up by the Roman-Catholic RE teacher and the Islamic RE teacher without judgement. This means that no truth is given preference. This makes it easier for the pupils to engage in a change of perspective and, by distancing themselves, not only to be able to perceive the strangeness but also to accept that there are three truths that can stand side by side.

The study shows that dialogue is very important to the pupils. They want to be able to discuss everything and have different opinions without being put down. There is an understanding of dialogue that makes the pupils aware that it is not about adopting the opinions of others. Rather, it is a dialogue that is not syncretistic in Cornille's sense but aims at a change of perspective. The young people recognise that this has to do with a fundamental recognition of the other person and demand that the respect they show to their interlocutors is also shown to them. This is evident in class discussions throughout the school year.

The teachers, who show great appreciation for the pupils in the dialogues, play a major role in this, even if the opinions expressed diverge. For example, they often thank the pupils for their good work during the lessons and make them feel like great personalities. They offer their support for individual or group work. Even if the teachers, who are pursuing specific goals, sometimes try to control the dialogue, they remain open and responsive to unexpected answers from the students. This appreciation is shown to all pupils and is very positively received by them. It is possible that many of the young people do not often experience this attitude towards them and appreciate it even more in religious education lessons. The teachers, who show great appreciation for the students in the dialogues, play an important role in this, even when the opinions expressed differ. For example, they often thank the pupils for their good work in class and make them feel like great personalities. They offer their support for individual or group work. Even when teachers with specific objectives sometimes try to control the dialogue, they remain open and responsive to unexpected responses from pupils. This appreciation is shown to all the pupils and is very

well received by them. It is possible that many of the young people do not often experience this attitude towards them and appreciate it even more in religious education.

The teachers also act as role models in the way they work with their colleagues. The excellent cooperation between the two main leaders of the project is evident not only in the team teaching that works but also in the respect they show each other. This also extends to the "guest teachers", who always find their place well. In team teaching, the teachers develop their perspectives, which are also different in everything that unites them. In this way, they give the pupils an example of how to deal with each other in a cordial way, even if they have different approaches to the religious content and do not always have the same perspective. The focus is on human being. Here the pupils learn about tolerance of ambiguity.

In the spirit of comparative theology, the pupils also engage with religious rituals and welcome them with an attitude of hospitality. This is evident in the pre-Christmas celebration to which all pupils are invited as part of Religious Education. Lesson observations show that the atmosphere is joyful, and all pupils are happy to take part. The conversations during the celebration show an awareness that there are differences that cannot be resolved. This experience of otherness, of recognising the other as a stranger and knowing that they will always be misunderstood to some extent and that it is still possible to celebrate together, is possible in this safe space created by the teachers for both classes.

The young people are all integrated into the class community and celebrate as such: some because it corresponds to their religious tradition and others because they are all invited as guests. This counteracts the formation of groups in which minorities are quickly marginalised. It also prevents identities from being set against each other, as we experienced in the darkest times of our history (being Jewish meant you could not have been an Austrian).

It is exciting that the pupils have the impression that they know what Christians do at Christmas thanks to the pre-Christmas celebration. It is possible that this is more about getting a feeling for what Christmas can mean for Christians. In this context, it could be discussed, for example, what Muslims, Buddhists, Alevi or people with no formal religious affiliation do at Christmas. A discussion about the meaning of Christmas for Christians would also be appropriate. At this pre-Christmas celebration, people chat privately in a cosy atmosphere and do not talk about how Christmas is (not) celebrated in individual families. Instead, the topic of conversation is how the holidays are being spent and whether someone is skiing. Although Christmas is just around the corner, it is not discussed in detail. The question is whether Christmas has already become a secular cultural celebration for many, as even Christians often no longer focus on its Christian origins and meaning. In any case, Christmas is recognised by pupils as a major (Christian) festival, which is probably not the case for festivals of small minorities. A foundation needs to be laid for this. The background against which religious festivals are dealt with is usually the Christian one, with its main festivals of Christmas and Easter. Before these, for example, fasting and thus Ramadan are discussed.

These young people have the impression that they have learnt a lot, even if this learning does not relate to explicitly retrievable knowledge. The tight time frame makes it difficult to consolidate this knowledge, which works against deepening the content. This can be seen, among other things, in the use of the term religion. It is also used indiscriminately for denominations. This distinction is unlikely to play a role in pupils' lives and is not addressed in the RE lessons observed. It is possible that this is more a matter of knowledge based on the individual experiences and insights of the pupils in the cooperative RE lessons and that it plays a role for the young people on a personal—and not exclusively intellectual—level. It becomes clear that the pupils do not learn the content intended by the teachers, but rather what is important and applicable for them in their life situations. It is about new insights into the religion/worldview practised or the faith/spirituality lived by the individual and how to deal with it in relation to oneself. The

acquisition of knowledge stimulates a process of cognitive reflection that links information with experience.

The knowledge imparted may only be retrievable with assistance, but it unfolds its effect in the interpersonal sphere. The feeling of strangeness towards unfamiliar religions/denominations/worldviews diminishes and is replaced by the impression of knowing how they "work" and thus being able to better assess the other person. This implicit knowledge therefore fulfils an important function as a bridge builder and once again demonstrates the importance of imparting knowledge, even if compromises must be made due to a lack of resources. The effects can be seen in a well-functioning class community in which the young people recognise and name differences but are connected to each other. This removes the potential for othering. The pupils also move from the unspecific "I have learnt a lot about other religions" to "I have learnt a lot about Christianity, Islam, etc." in terms of knowledge acquisition. There are signs that this is obviously having an effect beyond school, for example when they consider going skiing together or when they talk about the workplace where they now understand their colleagues better.

The pupils repeatedly mention and appreciate the fact that the involvement of RE teachers from different faith communities means that there is not just talk about religion, but religious talk from people who practise their faith. The confessional connection that Cornille talks about also makes learning religion possible and not just learning about religion, which pupils can achieve through self-study with the help of a book. A possible nascent fear that the pupils would be indoctrinated in a cooperative religion lesson and would no longer learn anything about their own religious/confessional roots is refuted in the lesson observations. The Beutelsbach Consensus is not once violated in the lessons; instead, the pupils reflect on their own religious perspective in the confrontation with positions that are foreign to them. The fact that minorities such as Buddhists are also represented by a RE teacher means that they are in the spotlight at least twice a term and are visible to their classmates. It is a form of recognition. The study also shows that pupils who do not formally belong to a religious community and are therefore not represented by a teacher also benefit for their life experiences. This is evident from the entries in the booklets, which often mention a learning effect for their own lives.

The new knowledge acquired through cooperative RE creates an awareness of prejudices and hasty classifications. This can be seen, for example, in a situation where a pupil wants to address another pupil as a foreigner and stops himself in the middle of a word. With their positive feedback, the teachers show how well the pupil has learnt. The discussion of the concept of freedom and the associated realisation that one's own freedom ends where the freedom of others begins also provides a good counterpoint to the concept of freedom as it is used in right-wing populist circles. In this way, the lesson also addresses the political dimension of religion and carries out preventive work.

However, the validity of the study is limited by the small number of participants (two classes). Furthermore, it is not possible to say whether the learning effect extends beyond the classroom situation or whether it is limited to the safe space of the classroom, where the young people have built up mutual trust. As with the German studies (Ziebertz et al. 2010a; Ziebertz et al. 2010b; Schweitzer and Bucher 2020; etc.), it is not possible to say with certainty whether young people's attitudes have changed towards religions to which they do not formally belong. However, the pupils' increased reflection has led to an improvement in their interaction with each other. The study thus confirms Kenner's findings from 2007. A long-term study would have to be carried out to prove that this is a long-term effect and that the learning does not fizzle out after a short time. This also applies to the acquisition of knowledge.

Author Contributions: Conceptualization, S.D. and H.A.; methodology, S.D.; validation, S.D. and H.A.; formal analysis, S.D. and H.A.; investigation, S.D. and H.A.; resources, S.D. and H.A.; data curation, S.D. and H.A.; writing—original draft preparation, S.D.; writing—review and editing, S.D. and H.A.; project administration, S.D. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki and approved by the Institutional Review Board of Research and Development at the Private University College KPH Wien/Krems by Dr. Doris Lindner. Date of approval: 28 September 2021.

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study. Written informed consent has been obtained from the patient(s) to publish this paper" if applicable.

Data Availability Statement: The data presented in this study are available on request from the corresponding author due to privacy reasons.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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