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## FOSTERING INTERCULTURAL DIALOGUE THROUGH RELIGIOUS EDUCATION IN PRIMARY EDUCATION IN SPAIN

*Promoviendo el diálogo intercultural a través de la asignatura de religión en Educación Primaria en España*



*María Luisa Sierra-Huedo y Cayetano Fernández Romero*

*Universidad San Jorge*

*E-mail: [msierra@usj.es](mailto:msierra@usj.es); [cfernandez@usj.es](mailto:cfernandez@usj.es)*

*ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8809-7924>  
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6547-8270>*

### **Abstract:**

This article is part of a multiphase research project funded by Erasmus Plus, which main objective is to analyze if religious education in Spanish primary schools helps the development of intercultural competence among the students. One of the main characteristics of the current Spanish society is its increasing diversity. Thus, the development of intercultural competence in education is key in the current Spanish context. This article focuses on a reflection about the subject of religion and how this subject can contribute to intercultural learning in primary education. Therefore, a qualitative methodology has been used to know the opinion and perspective that religion primary teachers have about this topic. The findings show that teachers positively value the need of an intercultural training and learning, and they consider that the subject of religion fosters the content and space to do it. Even though, the participants agree that the curriculum and schedule do not help in this matter.

**Key Words:** education; integration; intercultural competence; interculturalism; primary education; religious; Spain

### Resumen:

Este artículo forma parte de un proyecto de investigación con diferentes fases, financiado por Erasmus+, cuyo objetivo principal es analizar como la educación religiosa en colegios españoles de educación primaria ayuda a promover el desarrollo de la competencia intercultural entre sus estudiantes. Una de las características de la sociedad española actual es la incorporación de personas con diversidad cultural. Por este motivo, el desarrollo de la competencia intercultural en la educación es fundamental. En este trabajo, se plantea una reflexión sobre el cómo la materia de Religión puede contribuir a esta formación en educación primaria. Para ello se ha empleado una metodología cualitativa que permite conocer la opinión y valoración que sobre este tema tienen los docentes implicados. Los resultados indican que los profesores participantes valoran positivamente la necesidad de una formación intercultural y consideran que la materia de Religión facilita el contenido y espacio para hacerlo. Sin embargo, en su opinión, el currículo y horarios no lo facilita.

**Palabras clave:** competencia intercultural; educación primaria; educación religiosa; España interculturalidad; integración

## 1. Introduction

Castles, De Haas and Miller affirm that “migration and the outcome of ethnic diversity are some of the most interesting questions in contemporary societies” (2014, p. 1). This perfectly describes what has happened in the last two decades in Spain in relation to migration, it has transformed from a country sending migrants to a country receiving migrants. Laparra and Martínez de Lizarrondo (2004, p. 4) declare that “Spain is without a doubt a very special case”.

From the demographic point of view, as it can be seen in Table 1, it can be underlined the fact that, in 1999, the percentage of foreign population over the total was less than a 2%. However, with the change of the century, it can be seen an increase from the 3.3% in year 2001 to the 12.2%, the maximum in 2010. From that moment, the immigrant population tends to decrease, to a large extent because of the economic crisis, according to the *Instituto Nacional de Estadística* (INE, 2017).

Because of the progressive increasing of the immigrant population in Spanish society, it can be seen a parallel evolution in the number of foreign students in classrooms. In Table 1 it is presented the evolution of immigrant population in the level of Primary school 1999-2017. Spanish primary education has students from 6 to 12 years old. It is compulsory and free, and its main objective is to ease:

the learnings of the oral expression and comprehension, the reading, the writing, the calculation, the acquisition of basic notions of culture and the coexistence, study and work habits, the artistic sense, creativity and affectivity, with the purpose of guaranteeing a comprehensive formation that contributes to the full development of the students personality and of preparing them for studying with an academic progress the Compulsory Secondary Education. (Ministerio de Educación, Ciencia y Deporte, 2017)

This education level in Spain can be studied in two kinds of centers: the public ones, financed by the State, and the private ones. Inside the public ones, it must be outlined that in 1985 the Ley Orgánica del Derecho a la Educación (LODE), (Organic Law to the Right of Education) was approved, that let the religious and private schools to also be financed with public fundings. These started to be called “concertados”. The public centers are characterized for being secular and for being financed and managed by the State and the Local Entities. The “concertados” schools (Catholic state schools), as public are usually secular, but they usually are religious schools, financed by the State. Therefore, they are under some determinants of it, such as the number of students per class. However, they have a high level of freedom in its internal management.

Religious Education (RES) classes are paid by the State or government, when the number of students attending then is equal to or larger than ten. Every year, the Spanish government shall transfer the total amount resulting from the application of the previous clause for the service provided during the preceding academic year by the teachers of Religious Education who are not government-employed schoolteachers. As in the case of Catholic religious education, there is an alternative subject in Compulsory Primary and Secondary Education, but there is no alternative subject in High School.

It is interesting to highlight that Jewish religious education is neither regulated nor taught in public schools in Spain.

In Primary Education the immigrant population is usually enrolled in public centers. For example, in the case of the enrollments registered in the 2016-2017 school year in the Community of Aragón, the 68.7% of the foreign students are enrolled in public centers. Whereas in private centers (“concertados”) the 28.4%, and in private schools, the 2.9% (CESA, 2017, 94). This fact, as it will be analyzed in the results, has incidence in the methodology and in the work of the class in the subject of religion.

Table 1

*Evolution of foreign students enrolled in non-university teaching and foreign student enrolled in EGB and Primary School.*

School year	Population Total January 1st of the second year	% Foreign population	% Foreign students non-university studies	% Foreign students EGB & primary education
2016-17 (1)	46.539.026	9,8	8,6	9,1
2015-16	46.557.008	9,9	8,4	8,7
2014-15	46.624.382	10,1	8,6	8,5
2013-14	46.771.341	10,7	8,8	8,6
2012-13	47.129.783	11,8	9,1	9,1
2011-12	47.265.321	12,1	9,5	9,7

2010-11	47.190.493	12,2	9,6	10,4
2009-10	47.021.031	12,2	9,6	10,9
2008-09	46.745.807	12,1	9,8	11,6
2007-08	46.157.822	11,4	9,4	11,3
2006-07	45.200.737	10,0	8,4	10,3
2005-06	44.708.964	9,3	7,4	9,2
2004-05	44.108.530	8,5	6,5	8,1
2003-04	43.197.684	7,0	5,7	7,0
2002-03 (2)	42.717.064	6,2	4,4	5,4
2001-02 (3)	41.837.894	4,7	2,9	3,5
2000-01	41.116.842	3,3	2,0	2,4
1999-00	40.499.79	2,3	1,5	1,7
1998-99	40.202.160	1,9	1,1	1,3

Source: Self-made from the information of the census on the 1st of January of each year (INE, 2017) and series of student body (Non-university teaching statistics). Subdirección General de Estadística y Estudios del Ministerio de Educación, Cultura y Deporte (2017).

This fact is very important, because, as Gómez and Fernández (2013) note, immigration can be defined as a polyhydic and structural phenomenon, because for its comprehension numerous keys are necessary. One of these is education that also is a basic factor for social integration. However, this social integration in education needs to be done with certain control and having teachers promoting the intercultural interaction (Allport, 1954; Pettigrew, 1998). According to Grant and Sleeter (1989) a multicultural education approach tries to reduce and diminish prejudices and certain discrimination against certain minority groups “to provide equal opportunity and social justice for all groups, and to effect and equitable distribution of power among members of the different cultural groups” (p. 54). Along these lines, the European Union points out that “Education and training provide tools for improving the level of successful attainments and are essential to empower immigrants to be active participants in society” (Commission of the European Communities, 2007, 512 final, p.7). This report also points out that:

The importance of the cultural dimension of integration is increasingly recognized and intercultural dialogue, including inter- and intra- faith dialogue, became an essential instrument to foster successful integration and counteract racism and extremism. The 2008 European Year of Intercultural Dialogue will give a major input to the strengthening of activities in this area. (COM 2007, 512 final, p.6).

For this reason, the focus of this approach is reform the educational process thus it is fair for all children (Banks & McGee Banks, 1989). As Banks (2004) states multiculturalism is the public acceptance of immigrant groups, assuming that they have the same rights as native citizens without leaving their own diversity and adapting to a certain key value. This can be reached learning from early ages about

the multicultural “other” (Nussbaum, 1997).

The main objective of this study is to show how the presence of foreign students could have influenced in cohabitation and in intercultural relationships in the classroom, how the religion subject in primary education can contribute to encourage interculturality between students and how teachers confront the challenge of education in intercultural contexts. The specific objectives are to analyze the current legal situation of Religious education; to know the opinion of primary teachers of religion and experts in religion; to show their proposals and suggestions made by teachers and experts, in order to hear their voices (Wolcott, 1994 and 2008). For it, the work is divided in various sections. First, it is considered the legislative framework in religion subject in Spain from 1978, moment in which it is approved the current Spanish Constitution, to present. For checking how this legislative framework affects in the practice implementation of this subject, it is made a fieldwork, through qualitative methodology. The participants of the study are teachers and experts in education in religious subject. The common topics detected after collecting the information are presented and analyzed.

The basic legal framework governing religious education in Spain (RES) and its presence in the Spanish educational system is defined by the Spanish Constitution (1978) in which is stated that “The public authorities guarantee the right of parents to ensure that their children receive religious and moral instruction in accordance with their own convictions”. Thus, parents can choose religious education for their children and they will receive it as it is established in the Spanish constitution. This is indeed validated and regulated under the organic law of religious freedom 7/ 1980, July 5<sup>th</sup>.

Spain takes into consideration different religions for the religious education. It has agreements with Religious Faiths such as the Catholic Church, Evangelism, Islam and Judaism.

In Spain, the *Informe Anual sobre la situación de la libertad religiosa en España 2016* (Annual Inform about the situation of religious freedom 2016) (2017), states that in 2015 Catholic religion is a majority with 32.556. 922 of Catholics, followed by Islamic religion with 1.887.906 of Muslims, Evangelism with 1.500.000 of Protestants and Judaism with about 100.000 Jewish.

The religious authority shall be responsible for determining the contents of religious education, as well as suggesting textbooks and instructional materials for this purpose. Before the beginning of each academic year, the Religious Authority shall inform the corresponding Education Authority who the suitable persons to teach Religious Education at different educational stages are. The teachers in these cases depend on the corresponding religious authorities that have designated them. Likewise, these authorities shall be authorized to establish the labor system of the teachers, in accordance with the specific nature of the service provided.

Every academic year, students shall take one of the following subjects

included in the area of specific subjects: Religious Education or Social and Civic Values, at parents' or legal guardians' choice.

Currently, the educational law *Ley Orgánica para la Mejora de la Calidad Educativa* (LOMCE) points out different objectives and transversal elements that favor the development of capacities in students with the purpose of encourage the cohabitation/integration, in the classroom and the development of an intercultural society.

Along these lines, the *Conferencia Episcopal Española* (Spanish Episcopal Conference) (CEE), once the new educational law was approved, developed the Religion and Catholic Moral Curriculum, whose contents were intended to contribute to achieving the objectives proposed in each educational stage. According to this Curriculum, "the Catholic religion wants to contribute to the integral education of the child in two directions. On the one hand, it responds to the religious dimension of every human being and, on the other hand, it introduces it in the reality to the light of a hypothesis offered by a history and a tradition "(CEE, 2015, 1). In this sense, in a transversal way, the curriculum points out how the subject of Catholic religion contributes to the development and acquisition of social and civic competences, and how it contributes to the awareness and respect towards different cultures and traditions. Thus, facilitating meaningful intercultural dialogue, which is key when teaching across cultures (Leask & Carroll, 2013).

In Table 2 it is established the existing correlation between the objectives pointed out by the Ministry of Education in Primary Education and the contribution of its achievements in the Curriculum of the CEE.

Table 2  
*Contribution of Religion Curriculum to the LOMCE goals in Primary Education*

CEE Curriculum. Competences	MECD Curriculum (LOMCE). Transversal elements and goals
Encourages the development and acquisition of social and civic competences that contribute to the perfection of the personal and social responsibility, for the common benefit of the society.	To know the values and norms of living together, learn to behave accordingly, and be ready to the active exercise of good citizenship. Respect human rights and the pluralism present in any democratic society.  Promote the development of gender equality values. Prevent gender violence and any kind of discrimination.
It gives to the conscience and cultural expressions the meaning and critical evaluation towards one's own culture and other cultural and religious traditions.	To know, understand and respect different cultures. To know that all people have the right to the same opportunities and no one should be discriminated.  Teachers' program should cover work preventing gender violence, terrorism and racism including studies about historical moments such as the Jewish holocaust.

Source: Self-made from CEE Curriculum (2005) and LOMCE (2013)

Intercultural competence as such is not established as a key competence. However, there are other competences that could be related to intercultural competence such as “To know the values and norms of living together, learn to behave accordingly, and be ready to the active exercise of good citizenship. Respect human rights and the pluralism present in any democratic society” and “To know, understand and respect different cultures”, “To know that all people have the right to the same opportunities and no one should be discriminated”, as well as the prevention of racism and understanding of terrible historical moments for human understanding like the Jewish Holocaust (Table 2).

For this study we understand intercultural competence as “the ability to behave and communicate effectively and appropriately in intercultural situations based on one’s intercultural knowledge, skills and attitudes” (Deardorff, 2006, pp. 247-248). Since it is a very complex construct we would like to specify that intercultural competence involves to have knowledge of others (development of empathy towards a multicultural other) (Nussbaum, 1997 & 2012); knowledge of oneself (as cultural beings); skills to communicate and behave in different cultural contexts as well as abilities to discover, having curiosity towards different cultures valuing other’s values, behaviors and beliefs (Byram, 1997; Deardorff, 2006; Paige, 1993). The acquisition of intercultural competence and/or sensibility is an ongoing process of development. The desired outcome of developing intercultural competence is “behaving and communicating effectively and appropriately (based on one’s intercultural knowledge, skills and attitudes) to achieve one’s goals to some degree” (Deardorff, 2009, p. 480). As for the desired internal outcomes of intercultural competence is to be able to adapt to different communication styles and behaviors as well as to be flexible, selecting adequately communication styles and behaviors with cognitive flexibility, and to develop empathy. Since acquiring it is a developmental process, all subjects are needed to help students start learning about it (Paige, 1993). Specific aspects need to be in place in order to help students to develop intercultural competence in the classroom, such as using different methodologies in the classroom more student-centered, promoting reflection about oneself and the multicultural “other” (Leask & Carroll, 2013; Nussbaum, 2012).

## 2. Methodology

The use of qualitative research gives the researcher the opportunity to look into the detailed personal aspects of a phenomenon (Kvale, 2007; Stake, 1995). Qualitative research includes differences that are “ideologically, epistemologically, methodologically and most importantly, humanly” (Merriam, 2009, p. 52). Using qualitative research allows the researcher to look into details, personal aspects, interpretations and perceptions that quantitative research would not allow. The main idea is not to generalize but to develop an in-depth understanding of a situation of phenomenon. Qualitative methodology helped to look in depth about the reality of primary teachers of religion and their perspectives about how their subject helps

students develop intercultural competence. This is why this study collected data following a qualitative methodology. This study draws upon the interpretative perspective within qualitative research has its origins in cultural anthropology and American Sociology (Creswell, 2009). This type of explorations employs different philosophical assumptions, strategies and methods of collecting data, analysis and interpretation, which differs from quantitative research (Gibbs, 2002; Wolcott, 1994). According to Creswell (2008, 2009) quantitative research helps the researcher to inquire about the existence of relationships among variables. Merriam (2009, p.13) states “there are many definitions of research, but what they all have in common is the notion of inquiring into, or investigating something in a systemic manner”. Qualitative research is a term that covers many different interpretative techniques; the objective of which is to describe, decode and analyze natural phenomena (Wolcott, 2008). Qualitative researchers want to understand “how people make sense of their world and the experiences they have in the world” (Merriam, 2009, p. 13).

Merriam (2009) identifies six assumptions of qualitative research design that perfectly fit the study design. Qualitative research is the following:

- a) Inductive: Theories are built from details trying to give meaning and understanding to natural phenomena and professional practices that occur in natural settings (Gibbs, 2002; Kvale, 2009; Stake, 1995; Yin, 2009).
- b) The researcher is the main instrument for collecting, analyzing and interpreting the data (Kvale, 2009).
- c) Qualitative research is concerned with the process rather than with the outcomes (Gibbs, 2002).
- d) Rich description is required; the context, the participants, and the interesting activities are described using what Wolcott (1994) calls thick description.
- e) Conducting fieldwork is an extremely important part of qualitative research.
- f) The analysis is descriptive and demonstrates understanding using words, pictures or any other visual aid (Gibbs, 2002; Kvale, 2009).

There are other characteristics and competencies that Merriam (2009) attributes to qualitative research, such as how qualitative studies are ideally “emergent and flexible, responsive to changing conditions of the study in progress” (p. 16). The sample is a purposeful sample and tends to be smaller than in quantitative studies (Kvale, 2009).

With this methodology were made Focus Group y video -taped personal semi-structured interviews to experts in religious education in Spain. These data collection types were chosen because these tools involve open-ended questions, which are unstructured with the purpose of get the views, opinions and perspectives from the participants. These tools gave the opportunity to know the reality of the current situation of primary teachers of religion, how they felt about their work, the

challenges that they face as well as how they construct their own reality. The researchers conducted the personal interviews and the focus group, transcribed them and coded them. These research tools were useful because participants could not be observed directly in their classrooms, they provided important historical information, which indeed helped with the coding and the analysis of the categories chosen. It also helped to have “control over the line of questioning” (Creswell, 2009, p. 179). The focus group helped researchers to listen to primary teachers of religion and learning from them. This tool helped fostering the dialogue between researchers and among participants themselves. The questions produced lively discussions and researchers had the great opportunity to try to understand their current situation (Morgan, 1998).

## 2.1 Focus Group Participants

Focus groups are a qualitative research method used for collecting qualitative data, which is generated through group discussions (Krueger & Casey, 2009). This is why “they use guided group discussions to generate a rich understanding of participants’ experiences and beliefs” (Morgan, 1998, p. 11). Focus groups draw on three main strengths: 1) exploration and discovery: because focus groups are usually used to learn about topics that are usually poorly understood, 2) context and depth: helping to understand the background of participants’ experiences and thoughts about certain topics, and 3) interpretation: since participants want to understand each other, sharing thoughts and ideas provides understanding of why certain things are the way they are.

These interviews were guided by a moderator. It is a method that promotes communication amongst the group participants and the researchers. Focus groups are in the middle of a communication process that has three steps: 1) the researcher decides what he/she needs to hear from the participants; 2) the focus group method promotes a conversation among the participants about the topics selected by the researcher; 3) the researchers summarize what they have learned from the participants at the end of the focus group (Morgan, 1998). When using focus groups, the researcher decides what set of group dynamics best fits the research project. The moderator can follow a strict interview protocol, or the discussion can be less structured with open-ended questions.

Six religious education teachers, a moderator and a secretary (both of them researchers in the study) participated in this event that lasted two and a half hours. The focus group started with the presentation of the professional role of the moderator and secretary. Following this, participants were asked to introduce themselves, with the aim of creating a trustworthy working environment, a space for reflection and participation, allowing teachers to freely express their opinions and share their experiences. The focus group took place June 2nd at one of the schools (Table 3). According to Creswell “to best understand this phenomenon, the qualitative researcher purposefully or intentionally selects individuals and sites” (2008, p. 213). This purposeful sample started before data collection and it was a

“typical sampling” (Creswell, 2008, p. 215) since the intention was to have the participants describe what was normal for them to unfamiliar people with the case under study.

Table 3  
*Focus Group Participants.*

Participant	Gender, Public or Private School
Participant 1	Female primary teacher. Teaches Religion in a Public School
Participant 2	Female Secondary teacher. Teaches Religion in secondary education and Education in Social Sciences in Higher Education. Religious expert.
Participant 3	Female Primary teacher in public and private (receiving public funding) schools.
Participant 4	Male Secondary teacher I private school (receiving public funding). Head of Religion Department
Participant 5	Female Primary teacher. Teaches English in private school (receiving public funding.)
Participant 6	Female Primary teacher. Teaches English in private school (receiving public funding).

Source: Own production

There were six participants, one moderator and one secretary taking notes. Most of the participants did not know each other. Four of them teach Religion in primary and secondary schools in Zaragoza and two of them are English teachers who help in the schools to promote values and organize religious activities within the school community. The former are trained in formal education (counsellor certificate) and the latter have training in Content Language Integrated Learning (CLIL). They all have extensive teaching experience and educational management experience although the contexts where they teach is indeed very different depending on the social context and location as well as if they are public schools or private.

## 2.2 Semi-structured interviews

Apart from the focus group, personal semi-structured interviews to religious education experts in Spain, purposefully selected, were developed (Table 4). The interview in research is a powerful method, used in order to produce knowledge and to get an insight and understanding of a human situation. The participants were selected because of their expertise, they were key informants in the field of religious education in Spain. The knowledge of the semi-structured interview participants enriched and complemented the insight and experience of the focus group participants. These participants were selected because they all have similar characteristics (homogeneous sampling) (Creswell, 2008).

Table 4  
*Personal Interview Participants.*

Participant	Gender and Institution
Expert Participant A	Female National Pastoral Delegate in Religious Education
Expert Participant B	Male Religious Education Teachers' Union Delegate
Expert Participant C	Male Regional Delegate for Religious Education at the Archbishop
Expert Participant D	Female Teacher and Religious Studies Expert & Sociologist
Expert Participant E	Male Professor of Theology & Pedagogy at Center for Religious & Theological Studies of Aragon

Source: Own production

According to Krueger and Casey (2009), the semi-structured interview brings nice balance and fluidity to the process. This type of interview should have an interview guide. The most commonly used strategy for sequencing the interview is the funnel or focused interview, which begins broad with more general questions at the beginning and later on they become narrower and more focused. The number of questions depends on the time with 10-14 questions in two hours or 6-8 in one hour. The questions are focused and as part of the strategy sometimes they seem spontaneous in order to create a conversational group discussion and environment (Krueger & Casey, 2009). The focused interview differs from other types of research interviews. First, the persons interviewed are selected because they know or are part of a particular situation. Second, these characteristics have previously been analyzed by the researcher and he/she has developed an interview guide:

“Setting forth the major areas of inquiry and the hypotheses which provide criteria of relevance for the data to be obtained in the interview. (...) the interview is focused on the subjective experiences of persons exposed to the pre-analyzed situation in an effort to ascertain their definitions of the situation” (Merton, Fiske & Kendall, 1990, p. 3).

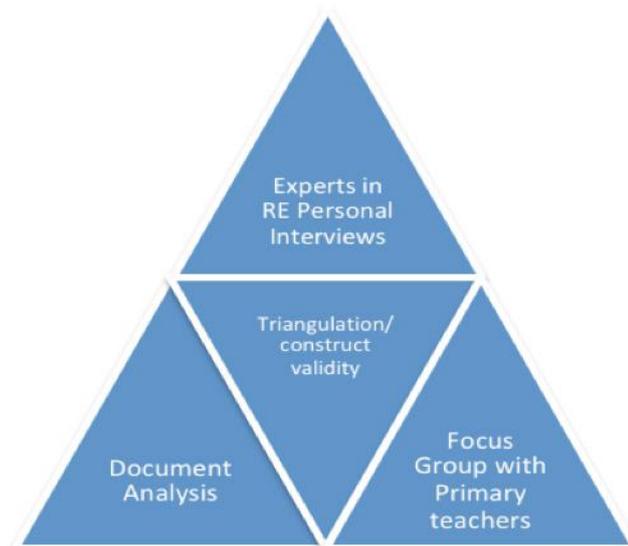
Afterwards, opinions of educators had been taken with the semi-structured focus group method. As well as video -taped personal semi-structured interviews to experts in religious education in Spain. The interview in research is a powerful method, used in order to produce knowledge and to get an insight and understanding of a human situation.

The video-taped interviews, were conducted by the researchers, transcribed and coded with the focus group, in common themes.

As Creswell affirms (2008), the intention of qualitative inquiry “is not to generalize to a population, but to develop an in-depth exploration of a central phenomenon” (p. 213). This is why, for a better understanding of phenomenon under study, it is appropriate to intentionally or purposefully select the individuals and sites. Personal interviews were important in this study because they helped the researcher to get an in-depth and detailed picture of what key participants thought about promoting interculturalism in religious education in Spain and how it was being developed.

The process of the analysis of the data involved making sense out of image and text data. Researchers conducted different analysis, moving deeper and deeper into making sense of all the data collected (Creswell, 2009). Answers to the questions have been transcribed. After analyzing them, the key ideas and testimonies illustrating said ideas are presented in common themes and key findings. In order to validate the accuracy of the information researchers read through all data, coded the data by computer, draw themes from the data with codes, in two groups: first codes on topics that were expected to find, all based on the literature review and that address a broad theoretical perspective in the whole spectrum of the research and second codes that were surprising and not anticipated or unusual but nevertheless interesting to readers (Creswell, 2008 & 2009).

Figure 1. Triangulation & Construct Validity process.



Source: Own production

To ensure construct validity and data source triangulation multiple sources of evidence were collected and analyzed (Yin, 2009). Additionally, using mixed data collection methods including focus group interviews, personal semi-structured interviews and document analysis brought detailed vision and a better understanding of the process of promoting multiculturalism in religious education.

### 3. Results

The following findings try to answer the research objectives which are: to show how the presence of foreign students could have influenced in cohabitation and in intercultural relationships in the classroom, how the religion subject in primary education can contribute to encourage interculturality between students and how teachers confront the challenge of education in intercultural contexts. The specific objectives are to analyze the current legal situation of Religious education; to know

the opinion of primary teachers of religion and experts in religion; to show their proposals and suggestions made by teachers and experts, in order to hear their voices (Wolcott, 1994 and 2008).

Qualitative methodology has allowed us to get to know from the primary teachers and experts about the richness and limitations to develop intercultural competence within the subject of religion, from the point of view of cultural diversity, the limitations of the traditional pedagogy and the legal limitations that come from the curriculum.

The analyzed data was coded into five main common themes, being those: Diversity in the classroom; Methodological change; Dialogue as key in promoting understanding; Challenges and barriers.

### **3.1 Strengths of the subject religion to promote intercultural competence**

#### **a) Diversity in the classroom**

Cultural, religious and ethnic diversity in the classroom, caused by the arrival of immigrants and refugees, require the creation of spaces that promote co-existence and increases an interest in knowing other people (Allport, 1954; Grant & Sleeter, 1989; Pettigrew, 1998). Four out of the six focus group participants explained that cultural, religious and ethnic diversity in the classroom, caused by the arrival of immigrants and refugees, require the creation of spaces that promote coexistence and increase an interest in knowing other people (Leask & Carroll, 2013). As Participant 6 affirmed:

“In the school we have approximately 2,500 students, 400 of them are not Spanish, and there are more or less 35 different nationalities. And some students are Orthodox, others are Muslims, others Protestant”. (Participant 4).

Religion courses create a space where a real dialogue takes place and where religion does not separate but unite (Allport, 1954; Leask & Carroll, 2013). As one of the experts stated:

“We have to see multiculturalism and multi-religious groups as richness, being this indeed a challenge for teachers of Religion, in order to establish a dialogue with the other” (Expert Participant A).

The impact of Muslim students within the class of Catholic religion subject was seen as an important element to promote intercultural dialogue and knowledge about the “other” who is different, “the multicultural other” (Gómez & Fernández, 2012; Nussbaum, 1997 & 2012). As stated by Participant C in the focus group:

“We try to understand people through their religious background, their internal reasons for moving, their beliefs, their convictions. And so, if you know a person’s deep convictions, you can live with them in such a way that... I think that, really, there is no longer a superficial welcome, there is an acceptance, a deep

welcome, because you understand the brothers and sisters that come to live here...”

Religious education plays a crucial role in integration, since religion courses allow for the understanding of people’s internal reasons for moving, they set up a space to answer questions about the meaning of life (Pettigrew 1998; Nussbaum, 2012). It is important, “to have faces of immigrants in order to avoid prejudices” (Expert Participant A).

In short, religion courses contribute to the students’ total, absolute and comprehensive education (Participant 3; Expert Participant A & B). These courses use different teaching methods and during the course it is possible to “stop” and reflect, this last action being essential for intercultural competence development (Deardorff, 2006).

### **b) Dialogue promoting understanding**

One of the elements highlighted by the teachers and with which all of them agreed is that religion courses provide a humanizing service, since they create a space where the deepest unanswered questions asked by everybody can be articulated (Leask & Carroll, 2013; Nussbaum, 2012):

“We’re blessed in class [...] they generate a lot of debate. And so, we can see that religion is like a big tree, isn’t it, with common roots... And then, you know, I think that we aren’t talking about tolerance anymore, not at all, but about coexistence with a deep knowledge that promotes a deep respect, not tolerance just for show, forgive me for the expression... It is a real coexistence in which I understand you, I mean, I deeply understand the other person” (Focus Group Participant 3).

Questioning oneself and wondering why help understand that we are all cultural beings (Paige, 1993). Religious education promotes reflection, philosophy, and transcendence. It contributes to training students to think, an essential element in the process of intercultural competence development. Thus, it is done through dialogue (Leask & Carroll, 2013).

The environment and the context are essential to promote intercultural dialogue. Focus Group Participant 2 affirms:

Religion courses are the place and focal point where a commitment to respect and integration should be born. These courses are a great opportunity for the kids to learn to live with students from other religions and to respect them. And do you know why they learn to live with and respect them? Because we teach them what religion is and its differences, as well as its similarities.

Dialogue helps understanding, empathy and also the development of intercultural competence (Byram, 1997; Deardorff, 2009; Paige, 1993) as Focus Group Participant 3 states, “We have to be very skilled in using a language that embraces and unites, not a language that divides”.

The teachers that participated in the focus group as well as the experts point out how religious education in school contributes to an intercultural dialogue. In their opinion, religion courses, due to coexistence between students from different nationalities, cultures, religions and ethnic groups, favours integration thanks to the promotion of respect (Deardorff, 2009; Gómez & Fernández, 2012; Leask & Carroll, 2013; Nussbaum, 2012). For this reason, integration is promoted. According to Focus Group Participant 1:

Religion courses are a really good opportunity for welcoming all our students. Of course, we have many immigrant students [...] We have very little time, I wish we had more... but it is very good for them, I think it is the launch pad from which they can start feeling like the others, feeling loved, more relaxed... And furthermore, all our students, male students, yes, but I especially mean female students... I love when I see the Muslim girls who look at me with wide eyes when we are talking about dignity, about... gosh! We revitalize them.

In conclusion, according to the teachers, talking about religious education is equal to talking about life itself, about culture and society in general.

One of the difficulties is the changes introduced in the curriculum in recent years, especially after the last Education Reform (LOMCE, 2013), are a difficulty. These changes do not promote the potential of religious education as one of the key elements for structuring a multicultural society. The teachers highlight some failures in the contents and, especially, a lack of time to teach these contents.

### **3.2 Challenges and barriers to develop intercultural competence in the subject of religion**

#### **a) Methodological change**

One of the key findings in the focus group discussion is that RES promotes multicultural understanding and its importance in the school. Its teachers use different methodologies that help promote reflection and knowledge about other religions and cultures (Leask & Carroll, 2013). Experiential learning is key in developing intercultural competence, and thus in multicultural education (Banks, 2004; Deardorff, 2009; Paige, 1993). Using the diversity in the classroom we may enhance the knowledge about others' cultures and beliefs. We can use case studies, role plays etc. "Religious teaching helps to deepen in experiential learning" (Expert Participant B).

Knowledge of oneself thanks to religious education contributes to knowing other cultures. It is a two-way learning process (Leask & Carroll, 2013). It is true that as it has been general stated Muslim immigrants in Spain bring a deeper religious culture than current Spanish children, "The aim is that they learn different things and we will learn from them too" (Focus Group Participant 6).

New methodologies are indeed needed in a multicultural classroom (Banks,

2004; Leask & Carroll, 2013). Sharing experiences, points of view in a safe environment are a must for promoting understanding and the development of empathy. All the participants in the study agree that traditional teaching methodologies when teaching Religion are not fine anymore. They mentioned the important of transversal learning using cooperative learning, working with History and Art teachers (Fullan, 2008). As one of the experts highlighted when finishing her interview, “I would like to insist in the methodological change, we are not just in the time of class contents but in the development of capacities” (Expert Participant A).

### **b) Acknowledgement of the role of religion in the curriculum**

Within this theme the major challenges the teachers of Religion face are two: class time allocation and professional recognition (Fullan, 2008). Within the first one, teachers affirm that every year it seems they have less time allocation for their classes. Nowadays in Aragon (Table 2) in Primary Education they have 90 minutes a week. Two classes a week of 45 minutes each, every time there is a change in the government or there is a revision of the educational law the time for Religious Education is cut off. However, the content of the curriculum has not been reduced accordingly, which produces great stress among the teachers. Before they had two hours a week and they feel the pressure of not being consulted when revising the curriculum.

As for professional recognition, participants affirm that the reduction of class hours makes them feel less important than teachers from other subjects (Fullan, 2008). Teachers feel that teaching religion is a difficult subject mainly because it is not valued among their own colleagues. During the focus group they stated that they are considered the weird ones, as if they were “islands in the middle of an ocean” (Focus Group Participant 1).

Fullan (2008) affirms that in order to create positive learning environment in an educational institution, institutional members should feel valued. He calls these different steps the secrets to success: Secret two engages peer interaction, generating knowledge and commitment. Secret three builds members’ individual and collective capacity. Secret four promotes everyday learning. Secret five values transparency in rules and feedback and secret six is a compound of the previous secrets, love employees and create an organizational learning system. Fullan states that a problem that any system faces is “how to achieve a degree of cohesion and focus in an otherwise fragmented environment” (p. 41). Promoting leadership throughout an institution helps teambuilding and faculty and staff members work towards a common vision and purpose. According to Soininen, Meriuso-Storm and Korhonen (2013) teachers’ competence is built by sharing a mission and purpose, sense of professional autonomy as well as values and attributes. The importance of ethics and teaching values is considered key in building a school culture focused on a common vision and mission.

#### 4. Discussion

Education has always been key for the development of any society. Nevertheless, nowadays, due to the increasing movement of people it is fundamental for any integration process. Intercultural education is a response to the diversity in the classrooms.

In the Spanish case, the educational law, LOMCE, has this in mind. Besides, although Spain is a lay country or a secular state, this legislation recognizes the right of receiving religious training that from its perspective, also contributes to the compliance of the law of education and of the intercultural training of the students.

This study shows correlation between the law, LOMCE, and the curriculum pointed out by the Episcopal Conference in interreligious and intercultural terms. Furthermore, opinions and experiences from religion teachers in primary schools and from experts in the topic have been collected.

The focus group discussion with RES teachers as well the video-taped semi-structured personal interviews with national experts, really helped to enrich the vision from the legal and theoretical point of view with the one from the practitioners. Focus group participants were very grateful that a project about RES was being developed because they feel as outsiders in the school life and somehow marginalized, due to a reduction of their class time among other factors. In order to really understand RES teachers' reality, it is key that they are asked about their impressions and daily life within the new educational reform, the changes in the curriculum and in their student body demographics. This is indeed the only way to construct social understanding and knowledge. Looking into the national framework of RES and deepening into the reality of RES teachers and experts indeed enriches a social understanding of the importance of teaching Religion in order to promote interculturalism. New teaching methodologies, more student-centered promoting multicultural and multi-religious dialogue helps students to develop empathy towards the "multicultural other" which indeed is more difficult than developing empathy towards the other who is similar to us. Religion is culture and an important element of any culture is their religions. In the education field policy makers tend to make changes without consulting the practitioners of those changes, who are key in promoting change in the classroom.

The subject of religion contributes in an incredibly special way to the intercultural formation of the students since it allows a perspective, the religious culture that is rarely treated by other subjects in the curricula. This is done using different methodologies, such as cooperative learning and classes that are less teacher-centered and more student-centered. According to Leask and Carroll (2013) the key principles of practice when teaching across cultures are: focus on students as learners; respect and adjust for diversity; provide context-specific information and support; facilitate meaningful intercultural dialogue and engagement and be adaptable, flexible and responsive to evidence.

Promoting interreligious dialogue, maximizing the religious and cultural diversity in the classroom helps the development of empathy towards the multicultural other (Nussbaum, 2012). Religious Education teachers feel that their job is not taken as seriously as it should be and they consider that in the current context, more than ever, their role and courses are key for acquiring knowledge of other religions as well as Catholic, Religion is culture and culture is religion.

This article is a clear example of that. Comparing how other countries implement educational reforms, like they did in Finland it should help us to reflect how successful processes work and take them into consideration.

From the legal and curricular analysis of the subject of religion in primary education it can be affirmed that, intercultural competence does not appear as such (cited and developed) in the Spanish educational law. It is indeed a key competence that needs to be developed by our students and ITS INCLUSION should be considered in future educational reforms. For our primary students to become global citizens they need to be trained in becoming interculturally competent. Thus, primary teachers need to be trained how to include the development of such competence in their teaching. Most of the teachers who have participated in this international project manifested the need of training in intercultural communication and how to develop intercultural competence among their students.

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