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Original Research

Religious Education and Prevention of Violent Radicalization: Analysis of Catholic and Islamic Education Curricula in Spain

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Abstract: This article analyzes and compares the content of the curricula published in Spanish legislation in 2022, of Catholic and Islamic religions, in compulsory education in Spanish schools, in order to determine whether the subject taught in schools helps to prevent violent radicalism. A qualitative methodology is carried out, together with a critical discourse analysis, to detect whether the curricular content (Catholic and Islamic) reflects the intercultural educational reality and whether it teaches students the main descriptors of global competence and the codes of ethical, intercultural, and communication behavior. The descriptors related to tolerance, peace, coexistence, interculturality, respect, equality, dialogue, human rights, humanity, democracy, common good, gender perspective, citizenship, diversity, belonging, identity, critical thinking, participation, cooperation, empathy, information, violence, extremism, and inequality are analyzed. To conclude, they emphasize that religious curriculum design is a fundamental and vital aspect in the prevention of radicalism. Both Catholic and Islamic Education Curricula recognize the importance of the teaching of religion for young people to act as leaders in the construction of peace and the common good in society.

Keywords: *Intercultural Education, Integration, Cultural Identity, Radicalization, Catholic Religion, Islamic Religion, Global Competence, PISA*

Introduction

Since the beginning of twenty-first century, today's democratic societies are witnessing a democratic recession characterized by the undermining of democratic values (Cortina 2022). This democratic weakening can be seen in a lack of trust in democratic processes, political disaffection among citizens, economic pessimism, and a political environment characterized by division and confrontation in the public space, which have consequently encouraged increased polarization, extremism, and a lack of dialogue. All these reasons give rise to a need for Europe to address important social challenges in which aspects related to religion and its place both in the public space and in the classrooms of educational systems constitute important issues to be addressed in the process of social integration.

The Eurobarometer Report on the Future of Europe (European Parliament 2022) shows how, in the opinion of those surveyed, terrorism is the second problem and the main concern

of Europeans. The same report indicates that the European Union's (EU's) main asset remains respect for democracy, human rights, and the rule of law (European Parliament 2021). Also, in the spring 2022 survey, as a result of the crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine, respondents consider that the fight against poverty and social inclusion should be the main priority of European policies (European Parliament 2022).

The great consensuses left over from World War II are giving way to a rise in xenophobia. The culminating moment of anti-Western violence was the attack of September 11, 2001 (New York and Washington). During this time, Europe has performed various functions at the service of jihadism on a global scale, as a transit and refuge zone, a logistics platform, and a field for radicalization and recruitment (De la Corte 2018).

This generation is witnessing disintegrative tendencies and processes of rupture that are putting the EU itself to the test, along with the resurgence of exclusionary movements of an identitarian nature, which strongly erode the EU's own values and denote the deep discontent of the citizenry along with a growing individualism that puts individual well-being and one's own rights before others. Along with this, the rise in prejudice, discrimination, and violence in the streets are expressions of the difficulty of coexistence and the deep division of today's society (Pérez-Latre 2022).

International organizations approach these problems from positions that understand it as a security problem (Azqueta and Merino-Arribas 2022), which threatens the peace and stability of countries, to a much broader phenomenon that requires developing a preventive approach (Amit and Kafy 2022). This is precisely the line of action suggested by the United Nations (UN), which differentiates between preventing violent extremism (PVE) and countering violent extremism (CVE). Although they share some aspects derived from common policies, there are important differences in terms and methods (Christodoulou and Szakács 2018).

It is also necessary to differentiate some close and interrelated concepts, such as radicalization, polarization, and violent extremism. They are difficult to define, and there is still no consensus on their scope and meaning (Bazaga Fernández and Tamayo Sáez 2021). Radicalization is broadly understood as the process through which a person, often a young person, opts for extreme ideas or beliefs that condone the use of violence to achieve political, ideological, and religious ends (Schmid 2013; Van den Bos 2018). Many of these people, even if they never personally use violence, sympathize with, and legitimize, extreme approaches and ideologies of different kinds, which they rationalize and justify. Some of these radicalization processes turn into violent extremism because they lead to participation in violent actions and terrorism (Moyano, Kruglansk, and Trujillo 2022). Moreover, violent extremism knows no borders and has come to affect the security, welfare, and way of life of a large part of European countries (Azqueta and Merino-Arribas 2020). Polarization is defined as the process by which a social group identifies itself in opposition to other groups and incorporates elements of relevant hostility, discriminatory behavior, and hatred.

Radicalization does not necessarily lead to violence; nor does it necessarily result in polarization; but it is an element that can drive vulnerable people toward radicalization processes (Rodríguez-Basanta and Guillén 2021).

Research on this issue concludes that the causes of radicalization are varied. For Kepel (2016), radicalization is the result of the failure of integration policies that have led to residential segregation, employment difficulties, social and political marginalization, and, ultimately, the withdrawal of the Muslim community into itself. The propaganda of radical Salafist groups employing a fundamentally religious logic has taken its toll on these second or third generations of European citizens who often find themselves stigmatized and rejected and yearn to belong to an accepting group (Lahnait 2018). This is how grievance, or the perception of an unjust situation, strengthens feelings of empathy with the attacks. However, Roy (2017), with a cross-cutting approach, emphasizes the affinity of European jihadists with a disaffected and radical youth culture in which religious motivation is not relevant since many of them do not know or understand Islam in depth. In this highly fragmented framework, Europe has become a "laboratory" of integration (Innerarity 2006) and European socio-educational policies a fundamental pillar in the quest for European integration and social cohesion (Eurydice 2019; Ghosh et al. 2017).

Education and Prevention of Radicalization

One of the most influential events was the Paris attacks in November 2015, which are considered the worst massacre in France since World War II. As a result of the attacks, the "Paris Declaration" was signed (Eurydice 2016). This document marks, for the community level, common objectives together with the implementation of socio-educational policies favoring integration, social cohesion, and the prevention of radicalization (Eurydice 2019). Emerging research shows that a statistical relationship does not always exist between education and the rejection of violence and extremism. For Brockhoff, Krieger, and Meierrieks (2015), although education is a key element that can decrease the risks of radicalization, its impact is conditional and educational measures must be accompanied by improvement in socioeconomic, political-institutional, and demographic circumstances. If these are unfavorable, education can incite terrorism and increase feelings of frustration and humiliation.

Based on the orientations set by international institutions (Council of Europe 2016a, 2016b), the OECD elaborates its global strategy that seeks to define the learning required in societies that are changing rapidly and profoundly and in which social and cultural diversity is reshaping countries and communities (OECD 2018a). The complexity lies in how to combine European identity with other cultural, national, racial, and religious identities. Education systems are sought to contribute to building more cohesive and inclusive societies.

The OECD, within its Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), has assessed in the 2018 tests (OECD 2020), in addition to the three usual core domains (reading,

mathematics, and science), another learning objective, termed the "global competence" (OECD 2018a). Seventy-nine countries around the world participated in the tests, of which fifty-six completed the global competence questionnaire. It seeks to assess how education systems steer young people toward a diverse and peaceful society. In recent decades, PISA has become an instrument of global governance that guides countries' educational policies and reforms (Fischman et al. 2019).

In examining the role of education in preventing violent extremism, it is necessary to identify and understand both the individual risk factors that lead to radicalization (Jordán 2009) and the contextual elements that drive radicalization processes (Nemr and Savage 2019). The causes leading to radicalization are therefore not unique. The United States Agency for International Development (USAID) differentiated, as early as 2009, three types of factors conducive to radicalization: environmental factors in the immediate environment, pull factors (relating to individual motivations), and push factors (relating to socioeconomic, political, and cultural structural conditions) (USAID 2009). There is no doubt that these circumstances make the preventive task more complex.

The EU Agency for Police Cooperation (Europol) as the body in charge of coordinating operations to combat crime in the member-states of the EU details in its annual report for 2018 that the jihadist attacks were committed by terrorists radicalized in their country of origin and not by so-called foreign fighters (Europeans who traveled abroad to join a terrorist group). Subsequently, in the 2020 report, it states that most of the perpetrators were young men (85%), between 20 and 28 years old (70%), the youngest of whom was 16 years old, who had a passport and nationality of the country in which they carried out the attacks (60%) and, it continues, that although the attacks were carried out by individuals acting alone, they needed a large network of help, which is why many suspects were incriminated (Europol 2018, 2020).

In 2015, no doubt under pressure from the terrorist attacks in the United Kingdom and France, the EU brought together more than ninety educators in Manchester to sign a manifesto for education—Manifesto for Education-Empowering Educators and Schools (Network, 2015). The aim of this document was to engage educational bodies, teachers, and schools, as well as to remind member-states' governments about the enormous responsibility that educators have in preventing radicalization leading to violent extremism. It explicitly recognizes that teachers and professors are confronted daily with students' behaviors and ideas in the classroom, a true social microcosm. When it comes to extreme manifestations, whatever the origin and motive of these expressions (grievance, injustice, peer pressure), the educator alone is faced with the challenge of identifying and addressing these issues in a safe and open manner, and, for this task, specific investment and support is required to increase their capacity to engage and act. The report not only provides concrete proposals for education authorities in EU countries, such as the need to invest in additional and specific teacher training to address these challenges, but also provides concrete approaches to help in the classroom, such as collaboration with other social actors, such as NGOs, support from

external education networks, and the incorporation of victim testimonies. Schools and colleges, the manifesto recommends, must provide a safe and respectful learning environment for their students—for otherwise stifling dialogue and expression of views could fuel frustration—and it urges school boards and school management teams to understand that recruitment and radicalization are as much a risk to students as are sexual exploitation and criminality.

The murder in October 2020 of Samuel Paty, a history teacher in a French school, prompted the revision and second edition of the *Manifesto for Education* (2021). The Manifesto suggests bringing the preventive task forward to the start of the preadolescent stage, which is why it proposes incorporating primary school pupils into the training. Students are exposed to ideas, controversies, fake news, and memes at increasingly younger ages, as mobile phone use and internet access begin at an early age. Interaction with technology can affect the formation of one's own beliefs, so it is important that from the beginning of schooling pupils learn to respect diversity, to deal with conflicts peacefully, and to perceive and feel the confidence that they are being listened to. For this reason, multiple pedagogical initiatives aimed at promoting respect for difference have emerged to foster the value of coexistence in diversity, not only in schools, but also in the social sphere, as a complement to the institutional sphere (Carratalá and Herrero-Jiménez 2017).

Recent research points out that to prevent violent extremism, it is essential to build resilience to violent extremist ideologies at both individual and collective levels and to address the root causes that fuel it and attract young people to join religious extremist groups (Vega Gutiérrez 2023). Although education is vital in this task, it must be emphasized that it must be an education aimed at accepting and coexisting with the different, with the "other." For a broad sector of experts and politicians, education becomes an issue of security for all; not just any education, but specifically that which opens the minds of young people to the "other," to those who are culturally and religiously different. It is worth noting the importance of school-based training in educational institutions, as it is precisely these educational institutions that are among the sites of recruitment, along with the internet and prisons (Saeed and Johnson 2016).

However, the academic literature that studies the relationship between education and the prevention of violent radicalism has taken shape since the publication of the UN Secretary-General's Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism (2016). Radicalization is a process and cannot be effectively prevented without the essential help of teachers (Alberca 2017). In this sense, schools can help students deal with messages that may lead them to violent radicalization. A challenge arises for young people with a migrant background who are in school in a country other than their country of birth, as identity formation occurs in adolescence and can influence their later psychosocial development.

It is not possible to forge a profile of radicalized individuals, although they do share some common characteristics such as the Islamic religion, a complex socioeconomic situation, and

a loss of cultural identity. A variety of factors are intertwined in their radicalization, such as the pressure of modernization; the economic, cultural, social, and political crisis; the prolongation of certain conflicts; the need for belonging and security; and the growing frustration of young people. Most of them live in hostile foreign societies with little chance of a future (Motti-Stefanidi and Salmela-Aro 2018). Many of these young people settled in European countries belong to second or third generations of immigrants and find it particularly complex to harmonize dilemmas that can often be contradictory (authority vs. freedom, autonomy vs. community, innovation vs. continuity, Islamic religious societies vs. secular and secularized societies).

In these cases, the religious factor appears as a relevant element. Most of these young people live as minorities in historically Christian but strongly secularized societies. Sometimes, they experience difficulties regarding their identity: They do not feel part of the community of their parents, and they also feel rejected by the host society. In this task, schools have a relevant place to strengthen the sense of belonging and personal identity, to increase resilience, to familiarize with democratic practices, to promote the common good and the search for a shared future beyond mere schooling. At school, the principles of future life are formed, and the right context is provided to normalize behaviors that create bonds of affection and friendship among pupils. At school, contact between peers is facilitated, relationships and interactions between different individuals are established, and one learns to value identities different from one's own and to acquire tools for dialogue with those who are different. De Miguel Luken and Carvajal Gutiérrez (2014) point out how the school, being a space of forced coexistence, is the environment in which the person has the possibility of being known and valued independently of their origin. Difficulties are often encountered in other areas of coexistence where interaction does not occur or is not provoked and where it is easier for prejudices to nestle. Living with different cultures enables adolescents to accept customs, languages, ethnicities, and religions different from their own, so that these situations shape their personalities (Azmitia, Ittel, and Radmacher 2005) and foster tolerance and greater sensitivity to the differences arising from different cultural and religious perspectives (Villalobos-Carrasco, Valdivia, and Vaquera 2017).

Thus, schools become an arena for promoting citizenship. Schools are relevant elements for fostering integration, preventing radicalization, and forging relationships and interactions between different individuals (Fleischmann and Phalet 2018) in which intercultural friendships can be forged (Barrett 2018). Similarly, Semmami (2019) argues that these factors can be strategic, though not the only ones, for effective prevention of violent extremism in the name of Islam.

Bearing in mind that religion is a fundamental part of Islamic identity and education is a key element in preventing radicalism, this article focuses on analyzing the role of religion in preventing violent extremism in the name of Islam. This article focuses on the analysis of the Spanish legislation that regulates the curriculum both for the teaching of the Catholic

religion—as established with the Spanish Episcopal Conference and the Secretary of State for Education (Resolution of June 21, 2022)—and for the teaching of the Islamic religion as agreed with the Islamic Commission of Spain and the same Secretary of State for Education (Resolution of September 16, 2022) through which the curricula for Catholic and Islamic education are published for Infant Education, Primary Education, Secondary Education, Secondary Education, and Primary and Secondary Education, and, respectively, Primary Education, Compulsory Secondary Education, and Baccalaureate.

It should be noted that Spain is an interesting laboratory on the world stage for having Catholic and Islamic religion curricula in basic compulsory education, as it is one of the few Western countries that have a governmental agreement with the Islamic community present in Spain to offer an official Islamic religion curriculum, which includes a teaching staff and textbooks under the responsibility of the Islamic community, but written in Spanish and subject to Spanish educational inspection. This synergy is relevant, as it allows for an expert teaching staff in Islamic religion, with the corresponding qualifications and subject to selection processes similar to those that apply to Catholic religion teachers.

Methodology

The aim of this article is to carry out a critical analysis of the content of the Catholic and Islamic religion curricula in compulsory education in Spanish schools, in order to determine whether the subject taught helps to prevent violent radicalism.

This article studies whether the descriptors of global competence (OECD 2018a) and the elements reflecting codes of conduct and communication in intercultural contexts at the global level are expressly included in the curricula of both Islamic and Catholic religious education recently published in Spanish legislation: Resolution of June 22, 2022 (Ministerio de Educación y Formación Profesional, 2022b), publishing the curricula for the teaching of Catholic religion and Resolution of September 16, 2022 (Ministerio de Educación y Formación Profesional, 2022a), publishing the curricula for the teaching of Islamic religion. It is presumed that its presence can contribute to the prevention of radicalization and, therefore, religion can contribute positively to prevention. Its absence in the curriculum would denote on the contrary its failure to contribute as a preventive element to radicalization.

The terms that are analyzed in the documents—curricula of Islamic and Catholic religious education published in Spanish legislation—are the descriptors of global competence that have been defined and evaluated by the OECD (2018a), for the first time, in the PISA test (Ministerio de Educación y Formación Profesional 2020; OECD 2019, 2020). The OECD considers them as basic life skills that define a democratic and interculturally competent citizenry (OECD 2018a) that express the intentions of governments and guide national policies. Global competences go beyond the interest in forging global citizenship that focuses on the interest in going beyond national borders (Schultz et al. 2010). Global

competences reflect an emerging perspective that is related to other values such as sustainable development, the defense of universal human rights, peace education and respect for diversity, among others. It is interesting to review whether religious education curricula include these values. The conceptual framework of global competence was defined following a long process involving the Ministries of Education of the Council of Europe member-states. In the present research, the seven terms that, in the opinion of the authors of this study, define a democratic and intercultural citizenship and can be expressly included in the study plans and curricula of both Catholic and Islamic religion were selected.

To meet these objectives, a qualitative analysis methodology was used, together with critical discourse analysis, along the lines of Bardin (2002). For this lexicographic analysis, grouping techniques were used (Leydesdorff and Persson 2010), by means of a text statistics software that applies the multidimensional exploratory method on the texts, searching for similarities and coincidences through words or lexemes (Reinert 1986, 1990). This is the Iramuteq program, which displays the results graphically and is suitable for comparative studies of texts, as in the case of this research. Because this software yields a large number of relational results, it is necessary to complete the methodology with the pruning algorithm of Kamada and Kawai (1989). In this work, the texts analyzed have been included in the original language (Spanish). To this end, the study focuses on the following specific objectives.

Table 1: Specific Objectives according to the Dimensions Considered in the Analysis of the Work

Content Agenda	*Global Competence Descriptors (PISA 2018)*	*Identifying Words of the Codes of Conduct and Communication*
Identify the topics addressed in the subject matter exposed in the two curricula of religion of compulsory basic education in Spain (Catholic religion and Islamic religion), highlighting the contents, the main messages, if it contemplates global citizenship, if it reflects the intercultural educational reality, if it is focused or not on identity formation, if it stresses the strength of peaceful coexistence, if it counts on the family, and so on.	Social and civic competences: democracy, justice, equality, citizenship and human rights, coexistence, respect.	No discrimination, solidarity, making decisions by voting, analytical skills, adapting to change, respecting diversity, valuing freedom of expression.
	As a concluding objective, we propose a comparison between the two documents, which are mandatory in compulsory education in Spanish schools.	

Source: Azqueta and Merino

This research has some limitations, such as the focus on the Spanish context or the specific descriptors chosen for the analysis. It is clear that the results could be different in the case of applying this methodological model to other countries or from another perspective. As part of future research, similar research studies could be carried out in different European countries, with their specific religious education curricula. However, it is emphasized that this research is framed within the parameters of community regulations that advocate the creation of a European identity with shared fundamental values, where intercultural dialogue is essential to recognize the different identities with a constructive and democratic vision, in accordance with common universal values.

Results

To understand the graphical representation of the results provided by Iramuteq, it is necessary to take into account that each graph (colored balloon) groups the words that are related by their proximity to the object of study, considering that the larger ones have a greater co-occurrence than the rest. The importance of the relationship between the graphs is determined by the thickness of the thread that links them.

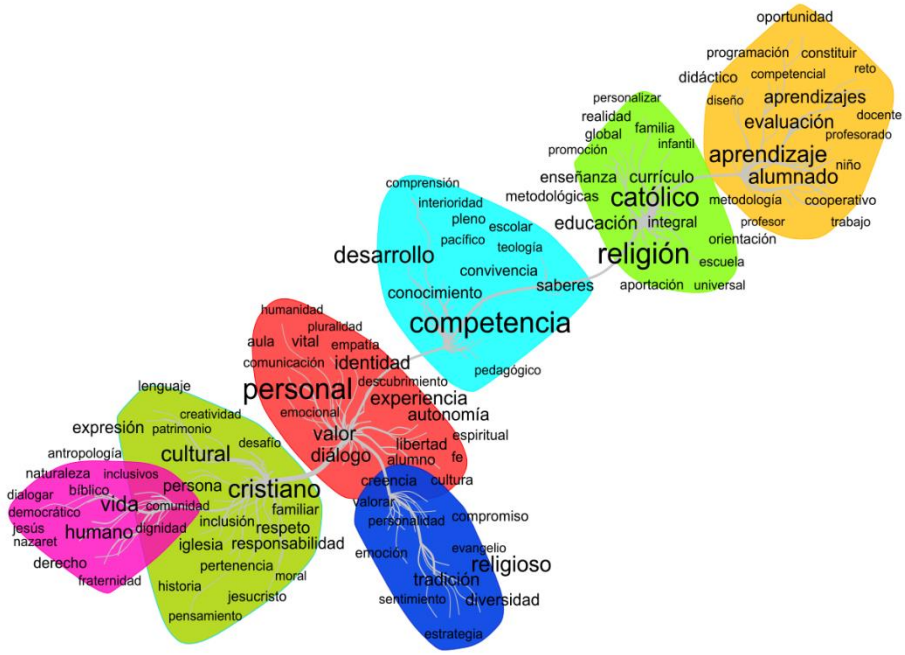


Figure 1: Iramuteq Results for the Analysis of the Catholic Religion Curriculum
Source: Azqueta and Merino

According to the objectives of this analysis and the methodology used, the most outstanding results of the Catholic religion curriculum are that it is based on Christian

anthropology, without forcing schoolchildren to practice Catholicism. Likewise, it allows this subject to be optional, and it is up to the families to choose it for their children, as shown in the green balloon.

The syllabus is based on learning, habits, and values proper to a Christian vision of life, which can be put into practice by any person, without the need to be a practicing Catholic (pink balloon). This curriculum design considers the global context of society in the twenty-first century, dialogues with the European framework of key competencies (2018), and emphasizes the centrality of the person in educational processes, as seen in the red balloon. It becomes clear that the teaching of the Catholic religion highlights the essence of the faith–culture and faith–reason dialogue (greenish balloon). The most important competencies in the Catholic curriculum include the formation of personal identity and support so that students learn to cultivate the emotional and affective dimensions of the student body so that, with autonomy and freedom, they can approach their life project inspired by the Christian vision of inclusion and fraternity (dark blue balloon). Part of the basic knowledge of this curriculum is the promotion of the values of freedom, responsibility, the encounter with others to grow in harmony and communion, in the light of the Christian message of fraternal welcome.

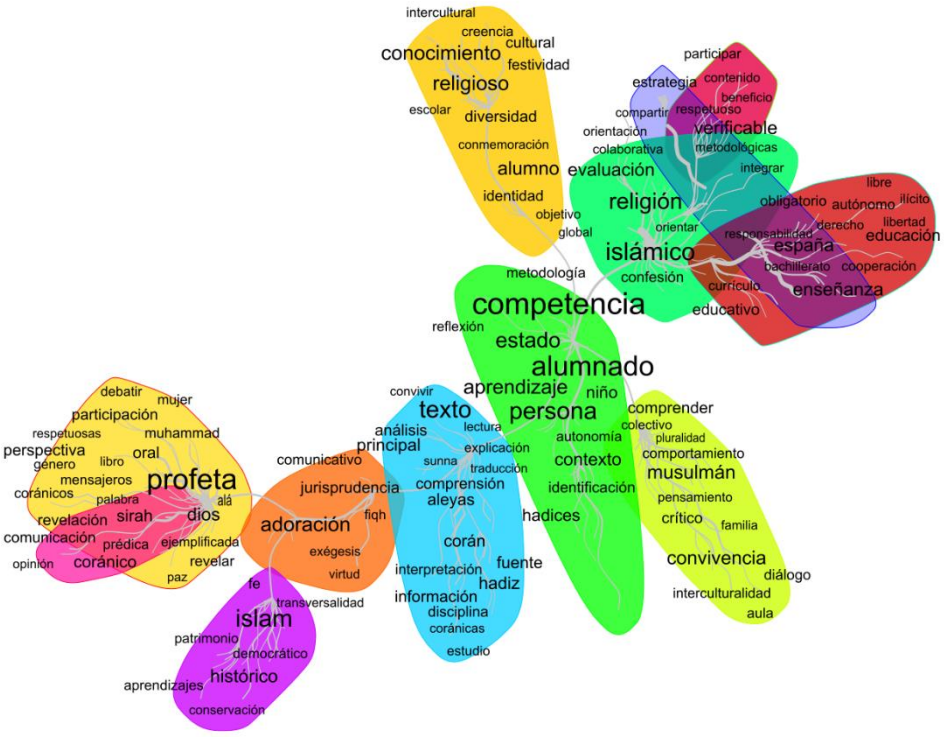


Figure 2: Iramuteq Results for the Analysis of the Islamic Religion Curriculum
Source: Azqueta and Merino

The results of the Islamic religion curriculum highlight the active commitment of families and the school, so that the contents of Islam transmitted at home complement those of the school, ensuring that there are no cracks (yellow-green balloon). The three specific competences of the Islamic religion area focus on aspects of the individual and social identity of Muslim students within the school environment (red balloons) and the integration of their religious experiences with a sense of belonging to the immediate environment, in order to overcome the challenges posed by their sociocultural diversity. The focus is on friendship, respect, and solidarity when acting with others, aspects promoted by the Prophet Mohammed (yellow balloon), all of which are linked to peaceful coexistence. One of the blocks of the Islamic curriculum insists on the worship exemplified by the Prophet and students are encouraged to maintain affective-emotional ties with the Koranic texts, in direct relation to inclusion among equals (blue balloon).

Discussion and Conclusion

Especially in the years following the September 11, 2001, attacks in the US, religion and its place in public space have become an important topic of public debate worldwide. That has led to greater attention to religious education and its place in school. Whereas until the 1960s of the twentieth century, the teaching of religion in schools was carried out in close collaboration with local churches and efforts were made to familiarize students with religious principles and practice. Currently, the teaching of religion in school faces the challenge of interpreting religious practice in a context of religious diversity and cultural heterogeneity (Knauth 2007). From this perspective, it is considered that religious literacy can contribute to promoting the ability to know and respect others. Social dialogue and intercultural and religious mediation can be considered the most effective mechanisms to contribute to social coexistence.

In the comparison of the two religions' curricula, that is, the Catholic and Islamic, in force in Spain for compulsory basic education, we conclude that they are very valid documents for preventing violent radicalism in schoolchildren. The critical discourse analysis carried out as part of this study showed that the documents analyzed strongly highlight the key words selected for this analysis: tolerance, peace, coexistence, intercultural, respect, equality, dialogue, human rights, humanity, democracy, common good, gender perspective, citizenship, diversity, belonging, identity, critical thinking, participation, cooperation, empathy, information, violence, extremism, and inequality.

In this sense, both the Catholic curriculum and the Islamic curriculum sow in schoolchildren the same values of tolerance, equal treatment, citizen participation and solidarity, among others. Likewise, both documents consider the family, individual, and group levels. On the other hand, both include attention to the most vulnerable groups.

It can be affirmed that both are aimed at forming students into ethical persons, in accordance with a Christian vision of life in the case of the Catholic curriculum, and of

virtuous imitation and worship of the Prophet in the case of the Islamic curriculum. This training should lead school children to avoid conflicts, since their gaze and goal is set on two leaders of peace (Jesus Christ and Muhammad). This includes the ability to resolve conflicts, overcoming disagreements, and promoting agreement between the parties.

Both documents not only promote respect for cultural and religious differences, together with equality of treatment, but also advocate the promotion of spaces for reflection on intercultural and religious reality. It is especially relevant that both emphasize the construction of personal identity in an environment respectful of diversity.

Both have trained teachers, with documentation accrediting their suitability, which includes the ability to fight against all forms of discrimination and racism.

Both recognize the importance of teaching religion to enable young people to act as leaders in building peace and the common good. Here, Islamic religious education plays an essential role in preventing radicalism in the name of Islam. Another similar finding between the two documents refers to interreligious and intercultural communication or dialogue as an explicit competency for students, which is present in both curricula.

On the other hand, the main difference between the two religions' curricula in force in Spain refers to the specific competence linked to communication. In the teaching of Catholic religion, empathetic communication between people is advocated, within personalized education, like Christian prayer, of dialogue with God. This communication is framed in the chapter of acquiring skills and attitudes of relationship with others, of mutual help, so that coexistence in school and in the family reflects universal fraternity.

In the teaching of Islam in Spanish schools, communication is also referred to sincere communication with Allah and the benefits of oral communication in the relationship with people of different religious denominations and ideas are made explicit.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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