What does “new learning” require from religious education teachers? A study of Finnish RE teachers’ perceptions

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Abstract

This article examines “new learning” skills from the perspective of Finnish in-service Religious Education (RE) teachers by exploring which skills teachers emphasize in their instruction. The data of this study consist of a quantitative online questionnaire (N=83), and qualitative semi-structured interviews (N=18) that were conducted to clarify the data. Skills were categorized and analysed by using the Assessment and Teaching of twenty-first century Skills (ATC21S) framework. The study shows that, from the four categories in the framework, teachers emphasized skills in Ways of thinking, Tools for working, and Ways of working categories, quite equally highly, though this was less true of the skills in Ways of living in the world category. However, the diversity among individual skills was high. Comparing individual skills, understanding diversity, religious literacy, communication skills (excluding leadership) and critical thinking were the most important in RE and leadership; producing a result and productivity were less emphasized skills in teachers’ instructions. The results were explained by ongoing changes, such as religious pluralization, and digitalization in Finnish society, and the aim of RE as developing equal communication and developing, not finalizing, pupils’ thinking.

Keywords New learning · Transformable skills · Religious education · RE teachers

1 Introduction

The purpose of this study is to explore what “new learning” skills Finnish in-service Religious education (RE) teachers are emphasizing in their instructions, and why. Finland offers a particular case for examining new learning skills in RE. In contrast to many other European countries, RE in Finland is organized based on the pupils’ “own religion”. In general, this means that if there are three or more pupils in a registered religious community, schools have to organize teaching in accordance with their religious affiliation if parents ask for it. There

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are 13 different curricula for different religions, and Ethics classes are provided for pupils who are not religious observers (NCCBE 2014). The RE model is described as being “weak confessional”, as it includes the theory rather than the practice of religions (Ubani 2007, 2013). Today, the Finnish RE curriculum emphasizes progressive aspects such as religious literacy and religious competence. Pupils also need different kinds of dialogue skills, critical thinking and citizenship skills to live in a multi-religious society (Kallioniemi and Ubani 2016). In terms of teacher qualification, weak confessionality means that teachers do not have to be a member of the religion they are teaching, and in practice, many RE teachers also teach the alternative subject of Ethics.

The need for studying new learning skills in RE has risen because of the changes in religious landscapes, changes in societies in general, and on account of new ideas of learning. RE needs to deal with ongoing global trends such as the reality of religious plurality (Berger 2014; Riegel and Delling 2014), individualization of religions (Jackson 2014; Woodhead and Catto 2012), and the consequences of secularization (Taylor 2007). The wide ongoing debate about developing RE in many Western countries has focused on what kind of knowledge RE should provide and what skills and competencies are most relevant today (Freathy et al. 2017; Skeie 2014; Conroy 2016; CoRe 2018; Clarke and Woodhead 2017). In addition, RE has been faced with new conceptions of learning pedagogy, namely “new learning”. In the curricula, the idea of learning has moved towards more skill-based (Griffin and Care 2012) and informal (Kumpulainen and Mikkola 2015) learning. Learning today is considered less dependent on time and space and that has led to the need to introduce new learning skills into education (Kumpulainen and Mikkola 2015; Lakkala et al. 2015). Changing contexts and the idea of new learning is also affecting RE as pupils today are living amidst an explosion of information and expanding social media, and this is affecting their views about religion and the world (Helve 2016; Bouma 2017).

In recent years several studies on the profession of RE teaching and the practical work of RE teachers have been conducted (Kuusisto and Gearon 2019; Baumfield 2016; Freathy et al. 2016; Riegel and Leven 2016; Ubani 2018). RE teachers’ professionalism has also been in focus (Conroy 2016; Kuusisto and Tirri 2014). Given the nature of RE, the teacher’s role has been emphasized, and certainly recent studies have highlighted the role of the teacher in successful RE (Everington 2007; Bakker and Heimbrock 2007; Kimanen and Poulter 2018; Riegel and Delling 2014). The demands of our changing societies and the changing idea of learning places an additional challenge on RE teachers’ competence. Jackson (2014), for example, has pointed to the increasing need for dialogue and a safe space in public education. In order for open discussion to take place pupils need to feel that their classroom is a safe space, and it is the teacher’s job to create that ambience (Jackson 2014; Santoro 2008). However, there is no previous research about how “new learning” requirements affects RE and RE teachers’ work. This study provides a wider understanding of the relation between new learning in RE by answering the following research questions from the viewpoint of practising RE teachers:

1. Which of the “new learning” skills are RE teachers emphasizing in their instructions?
2. How do RE teachers justify their emphases on these skills?

2 New learning and transformable skills in Finnish public education

The educational systems in Western countries have made similar efforts to respond to the estimated needs in the future (Karjalainen et al. 2015). Like many Western educational systems, Finland adopted skill-based objectives as it did in the latest curriculum reform issued in 2014 (NCCBE 2014). Regardless of the prior positive evaluations of Finnish public education, studies preceding the reform reported that Finnish comprehensive education did not sufficiently support learning skills for the future (Norrena and Kankaanranta 2012). Such skills included social skills, problem-solving skills, empathy, creativity and collaboration skills (Sahlberg 2015). As an outcome of the reform, even though the current curriculum remained subject-based in structure, the focus of the Finnish curriculum moved towards transformable skills (Niemi et al. 2018). As a result, the Finnish national curriculum includes seven transversal competencies derived from the aforementioned new, transformable skills (NCCBE 2014).

Over the past few decades, many researchers have advocated the need for rethinking public education curricula and their respective pedagogical grounds (Sahlberg 2015). For instance, Anderson and Krathwohl (2001) have revised Bloom et al. (1956) well-known taxonomy of learning. According to Anderson and Krathwohl (2001), higher-order thinking levels such as creating and evaluating need to be taught at the same time with lower-order thinking levels. As Siemens (2005) points out, knowledge and learning are not considered to be centred on individuals anymore but on the sum of different perspectives and sources. One of the main core skills today is to perceive connections between ideas and concepts using *know-how*, *know-what*, and *know-why* perspectives. Subsequently, changing pedagogies and expanded amounts of knowledge have blended different learning environments so that learning is now considered a broader holistic phenomenon than earlier (Bonk and Graham 2004). It has been acknowledged that learning does not only take place in a formal school context, and learning can be seen as a dialogue between formal and informal contexts (Kumpulainen and Mikkola 2015).

In literature, the new learning skills are referred to in different ways, such as transformable skills, twenty-first-century skills, future skills and soft skills. Most of the skills are not “new” (Banks 2001; Silva 2008; Irenka and Eccless 2014) and several theories on which the skills are based can be identified in their background. Such theories include problem-based learning (Boud and Feletti 1991), social learning theory (Bandura 1977), positive psychology (Peterson and Seligman 2004; Seligman 2011), cognitive flexibility theory (Scott 1962; Spiro et al. 1988), and networked learning theory (Illich 1971; Siemens 2005).

However, admittedly there are several problems concerning new learning skills and public curricula. One challenge in the curricula is that in contrast to core content, there are not that many studies on how to teach transformable skills effectively, or what skills are even teachable (Rotherham and Willingham 2009). In addition, as learning has changed from traditional subject-based teaching to a learning-focused approach (Lakkala et al. 2015), there is a void in how to assess purposively the learning that takes place in the lessons. In light of the new developments in conceptions of learning, good learning needs to be assessed based on how well pupils link information from inside or outside the classroom, rather than the amount of knowledge they know (Lee and Tan 2018). This makes the assessment of learning in connection with the instruction challenging. It has to be concluded that as transformable skills are difficult to evaluate, the legitimacy of adding these kinds of skills to the curriculum is questionable (Silva 2008).

In this study, we use the Assessment and Teaching of twenty-first century Skills framework (ATC21S) for evaluating the new learning skills. The ATC21S distinguishes between (1) ways of thinking, (2) ways of working, (3) tools for working and (4) living in the world (Griffin and Care 2012). Different frameworks for categorizing transformable skills exist (Partnership for 21st Century Skills 2009; OECD 2005 etc.). Naturally, the frameworks overlap, but there are some differences between them with regard to their foci, areas of emphasis and dimensions in the definitions (Voogt and Roblin 2012; Dede 2010). From the many different frameworks, ATC21S was chosen, because although it is internationally recognized, Finnish scholars have contributed in its development, and the framework was tested in the same age groups that this study uses. All these factors supported its suitability for this study. Finnish pupils were selected to be in the testing groups and Finnish teachers considered that the skills to be evaluated were realistic. In addition, the framework was developed especially to answer the needs of changing societies (Griffin and Care 2012). To conclude, the framework has also been used for evaluating education in the Finnish context before (Ahonen and Kankaanranta 2012). One of the other strengths of the ATC21S is its emphasis on thinking skills, which is comparable with the emphasis on pedagogical reflection skills in teacher professionalism (Wang et al. 2018).

To create a wider and deeper understanding of new learning skills, we expanded the four categories of the ATC21S framework by adding and defining skills more specifically. The additional skills have also been researched previously from student teachers' perspectives by the same research group (Viinikka and Ubani 2019; Viinikka et al. 2019). The Table 1 shows transformable skills in this study. In Table 1 the added skills are in italics. The first category, Ways of thinking, focuses on thinking skills, included problem-solving, critical thinking, creativity and innovation skills, and learning to learn. In addition, we expanded this category by adding flexibility (Pietikäinen 2009), referring to the flexibility of thinking, empathy (Seligman 2011) and understanding diversity. These skills have been defined as integral, for instance, in today's changing ethnic, cultural and religious landscape in the Finnish context. The second category, Tools for working, included information literacy skills. Religious literacy was added to meet with the demands of RE, and media literacy was added with regard to social media. In the third category, Ways of working,

Table 1 Transformable skills in this study

Ways of thinking	Tools for working
Critical thinking	Information literacy
Problem solving	<i>Media literacy</i>
Creativity and innovation	<i>Religious literacy</i>
Learning to learn	
<i>Flexibility</i>	
<i>Empathy</i>	
<i>Understanding diversity</i>	
Ways of working	Ways of living in the world
Communication (= <i>dialogue, leadership, interaction, social skills</i>)	Life and career (= <i>combining life and career, productivity, producing a result</i>)
<i>Collaboration inside and outside the school context</i>	Personal and social responsibility → <i>global responsibility and sustainable development</i>
<i>self-guidance</i>	personal and social responsibility → <i>recognize social and cultural aspects</i>

communication skills were expanded to include dialogue skills, social skills, leadership and interaction. In addition, collaboration skills were specified as collaboration inside and outside the school context. Self-guidance skills were also added to this category because of their emphasis in the curriculum and in work-life needs. In the fourth category, Ways of living in the world, life and career was changed to productivity, producing a result and combining life and career; personal and social responsibility was changed to global responsibility and sustainable development; and personal and social responsibility to recognizing social and cultural aspects.

3 The competent RE teacher in the twenty-first century

Finnish RE teachers offer an interesting case for this study. The teaching profession in general is highly appreciated in Finland and the percentage of admittance to degree programmes is low (Toom and Husu 2016): this also includes RE teachers (Kallioniemi and Ubani 2016). The qualifications of RE teachers in Finland are solely academic and the majority of teachers are Masters in Theology. Their main subject is chosen from theological subjects or religious studies and their education programme includes 1 year of pedagogical studies. Usually, teachers are also qualified to teach other subjects, for instance psychology (Kallioniemi and Ubani 2016). Finnish teacher education emphasizes teachers' autonomous development, which is achieved by helping student teachers discover their personal strengths and construct their professional identities based on these strengths. In addition, especially developing teachers' pedagogical thinking in Finnish research-based teacher education is a relevant part of teacher education (Toom and Husu 2016).

Changes in societies and new ideas of learning have created a need to rethink teachers' competence in the twenty-first century. According to Darling-Hammond (2006), teaching as a profession requires three components: knowledge of learners and their development in a social context; knowledge of subject matter and curriculum goals; and knowledge of teaching (Darling-Hammond 2006). However, teachers' competence requirements are also contextual and situational: they are constantly changing and need to be frequently re-evaluated (Helsby 1999). There are several European policy documents about religion in public education that acknowledge societal changes with regard to diversification and the secularization of societies on the one hand, and to changes with regard to knowledge, digitalization and globalization on the other (OSCE 2007; Jackson 2014; CoRE 2018). They also advocate that teachers understand the impact of religions and beliefs on society (past and present) and culture (OSCE 2007). Documents also include references to broader applicable skills: for instance, it has been discussed how the effects of media and digitalization on people set challenges for education about religions, as they offer images connected to religions and beliefs. Hence, critical thinking, evaluation, and reflection skills should be provided in RE (OSCE 2007; Jackson 2014).

The European-wide study on RE teachers led by Ziebertz and Riegel (2009) seems to indicate that RE teachers in Europe are quite well aware of the changing societal situation concerning religion. However, religion still plays an important role in the developing world, albeit in a less visible way. There were also some concerns in the study: RE teachers' insecure and confused attitudes towards a multi-religious world conflicts with the fact that multiculturalism is viewed as an opportunity. Perhaps RE teachers did not have the means (or the competence) to confront new religions and new views (Räsänen et al. 2009). The study also showed that Finnish RE teachers in particular perceived religion to be an

integral part of society and lifestyle. In addition, social pluralization was seen to be a good thing, and Finnish RE teachers in general experienced little conflict between their beliefs and their teaching.

There are some previous studies about new learning skills in the RE teacher context. Viinikka and Ubani (2019) have recently studied Finnish RE student teachers regarding the expectations of twenty-first century skills in various RE teacher education studies. According to the study, RE student teachers expected that critical thinking and religious literacy in particular would be developed during their theology studies. In their pedagogical studies, they particularly looked forward to the development of various skills related to interaction. Different kinds of literacy skills and general dialogue skills were also seen as important for developing a competent RE teacher. Another study investigated RE student teachers' perceptions of a competent RE teacher now and in the future in the light of twenty-first-century skills (Viinikka et al. 2019). According to the study, RE student teachers' views of a competent RE teacher now and in the future were in line with what kind of skills they expected to develop during their teacher education. In addition, they linked various aspects of citizenship skills, such as global responsibility and sustainable development, to the competence of a RE teacher.

Previous studies about competent RE teachers in the Finnish context have focused on student teachers' professional development. These studies indicate that student teachers discerned both task competencies (content knowledge and good practice) and personal competencies (personal experience, professional awareness, motivation, and pro-social orientation). They also see themselves as being more competent at the end of their pedagogical education than at the beginning (Ubani 2012a, b). Kuusisto and Tirri (2014) found in their study that RE student teachers felt that a teacher's pedagogical and moral competence and expertise in the subject matter were important. A pedagogical relation with students was also seen as a relevant and deeper understanding of the pupils and the importance of a didactic relation in teaching was identified as important. The curricula guided the student teachers' pedagogical aims and they viewed themselves as professionals who were responsible for the holistic development of their pupils more than student teachers of other subjects (Kuusisto and Tirri 2014; Tirri and Ubani 2013).

4 Data and methods

4.1 Research design

The purpose of this study was to find out which new learning skills teachers emphasize in their instruction. The methodological approach of this study was Exploratory Mixed Methods Sequential Design (Creswell 2011; Gay et al. 2012), as the study began with a quantitative study following up the qualitative data gathering. The quantitative method was chosen because we wanted to gather teachers' opinions on a wider scale to achieve a more generalized view about the emphases. However, to understand connotations and meanings behind the emphases, qualitative interviews were chosen. The mixed method approach was chosen for this study to sum up a deeper, comprehensive and complete understanding of teachers' emphases as well as the explanations behind the given answers (Creswell 2011; Cohen et al. 2004; Hirsjärvi and Hurme 2008; Gay et al. 2012). The quantitative data answer the first research questions about which of the skills teachers are emphasizing and the qualitative interviews explain the reasons why these skills are emphasized or not.

4.2 Quantitative questionnaire

An online questionnaire ($N=83$) was sent to in-service RE teachers in Spring 2019. The questionnaire was the same as in Viinikka et al. (2019) study that focused on pre-service teachers. The questionnaire was sent via different social media online channels and via RE teachers' unions' email list. All the participants were informed of the aims and process of the study and were asked to give a formal agreement before they answered the online questionnaire. The respondents were from different backgrounds. They had different qualifications in addition to RE teacher qualifications and they were graduated from different universities. They also were from different parts of Finland. Participation in the questionnaire was voluntary. In the online questionnaire teachers evaluated the importance of each skill on a 5-point Likert scale, where only the far ends of the dimension were given a worded description (1 = not so important, 5 = very important). Individual skills were not categorized by the framework and teachers evaluated skills individually. Arithmetic means and standard deviations were analysed from this data. Tests showed relatively good reliability in the four ACT21s categories: Ways of thinking (7 items, $\alpha=0.917$), Tools for working (3 items, $\alpha=0.808$), Ways of working (5 items, $\alpha=0.860$) and Ways of living in the world (5 items, $\alpha=0.703$); even if the last category was lower than the others it was included to maintain theoretical cohesiveness. Friedman's test of variance was used to analyse the differences between categories.

4.3 Qualitative interviews

Of those who answered the questionnaire, eighteen teachers ($N=18$) participated in 40- to 90-min semi-structured interviews in Summer 2019 (“Appendix 1”). Participation was voluntary and interviewees were reached via email. The information about the study, possible questions, and the possibility of withdrawing from the study were also ethical issues addressed before every interview started. The interviewees were selected based on their working years, gender, working area or city, and qualifications to teach different religions (see “Appendix 1”). Six of the interviewed participants were male and twelve female, and they worked in 16 different cities in Finland. Two of them worked as Islamic RE teachers, one as an Orthodox RE teacher and the rest as Evangelical Lutheran RE teachers. The teachers were qualified to teach in other subjects, too, such as Ethics, History, Philosophy, Psychology, Guidance Counselling and Health Education. The interviews lasted 40–90 min and were conducted in workplaces, homes or at public libraries. The interviews focused on four themes: RE nowadays, the competent RE teacher, teacher education, and RE in the future. Each theme was discussed by using a table about defined new learning skills. The participants had the table about the skills in front of them during the whole interview and some questions, such as: “Which of the skills should be emphasized in RE now and in the future?” or “Which of the skills do teachers need when working as a RE teacher?” were purposefully asked, referring to the table. The interviews were semi-structured, and the teachers were also encouraged to reflect on some skills if they were missing from the table. The data was analysed using deductive qualitative content analysis (Creswell 2011).

The data were categorized by using the ATC21S framework. The four subcategories of the ATC21S framework used were (1) ways of thinking, (2) tools for working, (3) ways of working, and (4) ways of living in the world. The aims and relations within categories were reported first in the results, and then each category was reported separately by first focusing

on the first research question about emphasized skills, and then focusing on the second question explanations of the quantitative results. The frequencies (f) refer to the number of interviewed teachers mentioning this aspect in the interviews and, naturally, in the report the means and standard deviations refer to the quantitative data from the whole sample ($N=83$).

5 Results

5.1 How teachers emphasize ACT21S categories in general

The first research question of the study was to find out which skills teachers emphasize in their instructions. Figure 1 shows the most emphasized categories according to the skills that teachers determined were important when teaching RE. In the quantitative data from the four skills categories, Tools for working ($M=4.50$; $SD=0.72$) and Ways of thinking ($M=4.45$; $SD=0.73$) were most emphasized. Ways of working ($M=4.32$; $SD=0.89$) were also ranked high. Only the skills in the Ways of living in the world category ($M=3.96$; $SD=0.99$) were not highlighted in teachers' instructions. To summarize: on a 5-point Likert, the means in Tools for working, Ways of thinking, and Ways of working were quite high, although Ways of living in the world was less emphasized. Friedman's test of variance confirmed a difference between the emphases in the categories at the significance level of 0.05 ($F_r=105.348$, $df\ 3$, $p<0.01$). However, there was a lot of variance between the individual skills in each of the category and therefore it is more useful to focus on the results of each categories.

The second aim of this study was to find out explanations about the emphasized skills. In general, the qualitative data shows that the RE teachers stated that nowadays the objectives of RE place more emphasis on skill-acquisition than knowledge, and subsequently many of the skills from the ACT21S framework were emphasized in teaching RE. Teachers nowadays described RE as a subject that is more practical and skill-based than theoretical. Overall, they had a positive attitude towards defining skills and associations related to skills during the interviews. Many of the interviews started with a discussion about the

Fig. 1 The importance and means of categories

importance of skills in RE in general. The interviews focused on individual skills and therefore teachers did not evaluate categories per se.

5.2 Skills in the Ways of thinking category

The first research question was to clarify what skills teachers emphasized in their instructions, and it was apparent that the Ways of thinking category was highlighted in both the questionnaire and in the interview data. As can be seen in Fig. 2, all skills in the Ways of thinking category were ranked high.

In general the interview data showed that when asking teachers about what skills they believed were most relevant to teach in RE now and in the future, the Ways of thinking category was emphasized. Teachers argued that thinking skills was the most important skill that RE can offer, and therefore they emphasized those skills in their instructions when teaching RE. Skills were seen to belong naturally to RE, because they lead pupils to think about more essential questions; this was seen as one of RE's objectives. Teachers stated that teaching thinking skills were crucial when educating self-thinking members of society, and skills were seen as even more important nowadays than core content knowledge because finding information was easier than ever before. Thinking skills were not seen as important only in teaching RE, for teachers argued that it was crucial to develop such skills throughout one's life. Thinking skills, therefore, can be seen as fluid and developing. The basics of the skills were important at the beginning of the education path, but it was also thought that they should be developed during the teachers' careers. The teachers pointed out that developing thinking skills is crucial in the middle of diverse religions and a changing society to both pupils and teachers.

Even though all the skills in the Ways of thinking category were emphasized in the quantitative data, the qualitative data show some differences in the explanations why those skills were emphasized. Friedman's test showed a difference in the variances between the skills in Ways of Thinking at the significance level of 0.05 ($F_r=51.031$, $df\ 6$, $p<0.01$). Critical thinking ($M=4.69$; $SD=0.64$) was underlined in the quantitative data and in almost every interview ($f=14$) when asking what skills should be emphasized in teaching

Fig. 2 The importance of skills in the Ways of thinking category

RE. The highlighted role of critical thinking was explained by the need for source criticism and an increased amount of information.

‘Critical thinking. That has changed in the history of RE. That we can question also our own worldview nowadays.’ (001, *work experience 19 years*)

‘Critical literacy because information is constantly available in different forms.’ (013, *work experience 31 years*)

In the questionnaire, understanding diversity was the second most emphasized skill ($M=4.66$; $SD=0.70$), and the most emphasized in the interviews ($f=16$). Teachers believed that diversity continued to increase over the following 20–30 years and therefore it was crucial to emphasize in teaching RE how to face religious and worldviews diversity. Teachers argued that increased religious and worldview diversity in a classroom had many causes, such as multiculturalism, secularization, changes in Finnish society related to tolerance, and religious plurality. One of the interviewees even argued that understanding diversity is the main aim of RE. Understanding diversity was seen broadly to be a new skill, and it was nowadays highlighted:

‘Society is changing all the time and the need for understanding each other. And [there is] increased conservatism, secularization, and challenges related to immigration. There is a huge need to understand others.’ (013, *work experience 31 years*)

Teachers considered that religious and worldview diversity education was a vital part of RE. Religious and worldview plurality was also noted in teachers’ arguments and in their instructions, even though pupils were separated into different groups according to their religion:

‘I have learned that there are many religions inside the Lutheran church and that diversity is [found] among the teaching group. You cannot combine it [the pupils’ religion and the group]. I think it does not tell much about a pupil’s religion in which [teaching] group of religion a pupil is.’ (009, *work experience 4 years*)

‘Nowadays you cannot start with the idea that all pupils belong to a church. They don’t. We have everything here.’ (001, *work experience 19 years*)

In addition, other skills in the Ways of thinking category were also emphasized in both data; learning to learn ($f=10$) ($M=4.49$; $SD=0.72$), flexibility ($f=11$) ($M=4.46$; $SD=0.70$), and empathy skills ($f=11$) ($M=4.55$; $SD=0.72$). Only creativity and innovation skills ($f=12$) ($M=4.24$; $SD=0.79$), and problem solving ($f=9$) ($M=4.35$; $SD=0.74$) were not so emphasized in the quantitative data so highly; however, compared to the other categories these skills were also ranked high.

5.3 Skills in the tools for working category

The second category includes multiple literacy skills, and in general as an answer to our first research question, all skills were emphasized in quantitative data; religious literacy ($M=4.69$; $SD=0.66$), media literacy ($M=4.36$; $SD=0.73$), and information literacy ($M=4.45$; $SD=0.74$). As Fig. 3 shows, all skills were emphasized, though religious literacy was seen to be the most important. In the Tools for working category Friedman’s test indicated a difference in the variances between the skills at the significance level of 0.05 ($F_r=21.776$, $df\ 2$, $p<0.01$).

Fig. 3 The importance of skills in the Tools for working category

According to qualitative data, and as an answer to our second question, teachers assumed that it was even more important to teach literacy skills in the future than it is nowadays. The interview data show that the need for multiple literacies was linked to ongoing societal phenomena, especially digitalization and expanded amounts of information. Millennials were perceived to have good, often even better skills than teachers and were capable of dealing with different devices and media and with the massive amounts of information that belong to their everyday life. This led to the need to teach literacy skills at schools. The category was seen as a link between pupils in everyday life. Skills were needed to handle huge amounts of information, including social media, and to evaluate valid and non-valid or even harmful knowledge. Teachers described RE as a context where pupils should learn literacy skills and when speaking about religions and worldviews in the modern world, these skills were seen as crucial. RE teachers naturally highlighted the importance of religious literacy in RE, but when asking which of the skills should be emphasized in teaching RE to pupils, only five of the interviewees mentioned religious literacy. It is worth noting, however, that many teachers considered literacy skills to be important without separating them from each other. Media literacy ($f=9$) and information literacy ($f=10$) were highlighted as important in both data.

5.4 Skills in the ways of working category

Answering the first research question, what skills teachers emphasized in their instructions, the Ways of working category required more examination on the individual skill level. The category included very emphasized skills, such as dialogue ($M=4.60$; $SD=0.68$), interaction ($M=4.65$; $SD=0.71$), and social skills ($M=4.68$; $SD=0.65$); however, the variation was high. As Fig. 4 shows, the greatest difference was within collaboration skills (dialogue, leadership, interaction, and social skills). Comparing all skills, this category include the least emphasized skills, such as leadership ($M=3.39$; $SD=0.97$) and collaboration inside and outside of the school context ($M=4.16$; $SD=0.85$). Friedman's test showed a difference in the variances between the skills in Ways of Thinking at the significance level of 0.05 ($F_r=190.181$, $df\ 5$, $p<0.01$) quite a lot due to the less emphasis on “Leadership”.

The qualitative data explained that when asking which of the skills were important, communication skills were mentioned to when they supported equal working skills, such as dialogue ($f=14$), interaction ($f=9$), and social skills ($f=9$), but not in leadership ($f=2$), because that was explained to be dominance skill. One teacher argued that because teaching

Fig. 4 The importance of skills in the Ways of working category

now contained more peer-learning and was individual-based, being led by one authority was no longer seen to be valid. Self-guidance skills ($f=9$) ($M=4.45$; $SD=0.74$) were seen to be important, although not specific to RE. Two interviewees argued that the idea of new learning demanded that pupils played an active role during the lessons and that caused challenges because pupils had very different, and at the time low self-guidance skills.

5.5 Skills in the ways of living in the world category

The data shows that in answering the first question about which skills teachers emphasized in their instructions, teachers emphasized least the skills in the Ways of living in the world category in general. This category was considered to be the least valued and was not seen strongly to be linked to RE. However, as can be seen in Fig. 5, the variation within the skills was high (see Fig. 1). Also Friedman's test showed a statistically significant difference between in the variances between the skills in Ways of Living at the significance level of 0.05 ($F_r=166.346$, $df\ 4$, $p<0.01$).

Fig. 5 The importance of skills in the Ways of living in the world category

The interviews explained that life and career skills were described as supporting a more market-driven society, which was even seen as being opposed to the values RE was trying to reach. In other words, teachers avoided market-driven skills such as producing a result ($M=3.15$; $SD=0.99$), and productivity ($M=3.74$; $SD=0.93$) in their teaching. The explanation for these intentions was that those were designed to make more with less, and the idea of RE was to achieve deep knowledge and an understanding of issues in the bigger picture. Instead of rushing things, the process of understanding and learning was seen to need time and space. When asked what skills did not belong to RE, the majority of teachers ($N=18$) pointed to producing a result ($f=14$) and productivity ($f=12$).

According to the quantitative data and to answer for the first research question, global responsibility and sustainable development ($M=4.10$; $SD=0.91$) were seen to be current and pupil-centred and interesting phenomena for pupils. When investigating the reasons for that in the interviews, half of the teachers ($f=9$) mentioned the skill, when asked which skills should be emphasized in RE in the future. Global responsible and sustainable development was especially seen to have become more important in recent years:

‘Global responsibility and sustainable development are in the curriculum and they are easy to add to RE. Like all moral questions are taken into account in new textbooks. At least in Islam books.’ (014, work experience 2 years)

Recognizing social and cultural aspects ($M=4.49$; $SD=0.72$) was emphasized in the quantitative data, though not much in the qualitative interviews. Combining life and career ($M=4.31$; $SD=0.80$) was seen as an important skill for a teacher, but according to the interviews, only one teacher mentioned it as a skill which should be taught to the pupils.

6 Conclusions

The aim of this study was to find out which of the new learning skills are emphasized in RE, by investigating which of the skills RE teachers are emphasizing in their instructions, and what explanations they have for the emphases. In general, new learning skills were seen as a crucial part of RE, even more important than core contents. The skills were categorized by using the ATC21S framework in four different categories. Three of the categories: Ways of thinking, Tools for working, and Ways of working were emphasized. Only Ways of living in the world was not seen as that important, because it included skills teachers described as a market-based skills, which were seen as the opposite of RE’s aim. However, the variation between individual skills was considerable and therefore it is more purposeful to focus on individual skills rather than categories.

The first research question aimed to answer what skills teachers emphasized in their instructions. According to both data, the quantitative questionnaire and the qualitative interviews, the most emphasized individual skills in RE were understanding diversity, religious literacy, communication skills (excluding leadership) and critical thinking. It is obvious that RE teachers as subject teachers clearly emphasized matters that were connected to the subject’s content, namely understanding diversity and religious literacy. Comparing the results for the previous study, RE student teachers felt that different interaction skills and literacy skills as well as critical thinking were important when asked for their views about the same questionnaire. In addition it was noticed in both studies that particular different literacy skills were intertwined with each other (Viinikka et al. 2019).

The second aim of this study was to gain an understanding of the reasons relating to the emphasized skills. The skills that were emphasized were in general linked to ongoing societal issues, such as globalization and increased cultural diversity. All four categories of skills were seen as a crucial part of RE in the future. Teachers argued that diversity among pupils had increased, and that affected many ways of teaching RE. The diversity within the groups has also been noted in other studies (Kuusisto and Kallioniemi 2014; Kimanen and Kuusisto 2017). RE has a crucial role in teaching tolerance towards different religions and worldviews, and in countering negative issues concerning diversity such as othering and even extremism and radicalization (Kavonius et al. 2015; Halafoff 2016; Rautionmaa and Kallioniemi 2017). RE teachers seemed to perceive that in future, global responsibility and sustainable development will be highlighted in RE and that was justified for instance by reference to different environmental changes like climate change. This is also a sign that RE is affected by different societal factors and RE teachers think that new learning and skills can help with these challenges.

Naturally, our study has its statistical limitations. The amount of data, questionnaires (N=83), and interviews (N=18) set limits to the generalizability of research results, although two types of data can be seen to strengthen the case. The results are interpretations of current RE and its emphasis by participating RE teachers. It is noteworthy that the study has been carried out in the Finnish context and the research also revealed issues typical of the Finnish RE model. RE differs quite considerably from country to country and that limits the applicability of the results. The research concludes that RE teachers emphasized highly new learning skills in RE. However, more research is needed to explore and clarify what is really happening during RE lessons at schools. How are these skills constructed there and what kind of teaching pedagogy and procedures are teachers using to direct pupils towards these skills? Research on skills connected to actual teaching could be a good starting point for further research. It would also be interesting to observe how RE teachers in different countries see the situation, and how changes in Western societies and the idea of new learning are considered in other countries and in their RE. However, RE is not a separate subject in school, although it is linked to other subjects and to learning in school in general. Therefore, it could be interesting to investigate how teachers in other subjects such as geography and history education see new learning skills in their work. The results also show that RE teachers are very enthusiastic about using new learning ideas in their teaching.

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Appendix 1

Code, gender, working years and religion they are teaching.

Code	Gender	Work experience	Teaching as
001	Female	19	Evangelical Lutheran RE
002	Female	23	Evangelical Lutheran RE
003	Male	15	Evangelical Lutheran RE
004	Female	36	Evangelical Lutheran RE
005	Male	29	Evangelical Lutheran RE
006	Male	36	Evangelical Lutheran RE
007	Female	3	Evangelical Lutheran RE
008	Female	17	Evangelical Lutheran RE
009	Male	4	Evangelical Lutheran RE
010	Female	34	Evangelical Lutheran RE
011	Female	2	Evangelical Lutheran RE
012	Male	30	Evangelical Lutheran RE
013	Female	31	Evangelical Lutheran RE
014	Female	2	Islam RE, Orthodoxy RE
015	Female	4	Islam RE
016	Female	14	Evangelical Lutheran RE
017	Male	4	Evangelical Lutheran RE
018	Female	16	Evangelical Lutheran RE

Appendix 2

Reliability analysis: Cronbach's α and number of items.

a. Ways of thinking

Cronbach's alpha	N of items
0.917	7

b. Tools of working

Cronbach's alpha	N of items
0.808	3

c. Ways of working

Cronbach's alpha	N of items
0.860	6

d. Ways of living

Cronbach's alpha	N of items
0.703	5

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