

Dr. Olga Schihalejev



Name and position today and a short background

Olga Schihalejev. I am a senior lecturer (docent) in religious education at University of Tartu, in co-operation with The Centre of Excellence in Cultural Theory (CECT). I also work as a partner of the Centre for Ethics (University of Tartu) in the National Values Program. I have started working at Tartu University in 2006 when I was involved in REDCo research and continued with doing research and teaching on RE after Pille Valk's death.

Contact; Address; Telephone; e-mail; Website

Faculty of Theology

University of Tartu

<http://www.us.ut.ee/> (website of theological faculty)

Ülikooli 18-310, Tartu 50090, Estonia

mob: (+372) 520 8026

e-mail: olga.schihalejev@ut.ee

<https://www.etis.ee/portaal/isikuCV.aspx?TextBoxName=Olga+Schihalejev&PersonVID=40665&FromUrl0=isikud.aspx&lang=en> (my page on the website of the Estonian Research information System)

Short CV

I have worked in church with children and young people, also worked as a teacher (mainly RE) in different schools. I wrote teaching-learning resources for the new syllabus of RE and I am a co-author of a textbook and different didactical materials for RE.

I was a researcher on the EC Framework 6 project REDCo. Within the REDCo Project my research has been on how religion is perceived by young people in a secular context. Additionally I have been interested in perception of religion and tolerance by different ethnic groups in Estonia.

My doctoral research was 'Meeting Religious Diversity: the Role of Schools'. The aim of my research was to examine the potentials and limitations of RE in coping with religious diversity in Estonia, especially identifying approaches that can contribute to promoting dialogue and mutual understanding among representatives of different worldviews and examining how openness towards others and mutual respect across religious differences might be strengthened.

I am a board member of the Estonian RE Teachers Association, actively involved in improving the national syllabus for RE, and a member of a team which organizes annual conferences for RE teachers in Estonia.

Your special contributions to the theory of RE; some notes about your personal intentions, criticism of other positions or approaches, in short what you want to change and develop.

On the basis of my study, the public concern in Estonia that RE would convert students to Christianity is poorly grounded. None of the differences in regard to religious belief were significant among those who studied or did not study RE. Triangulating the data of the quantitative

study to the qualitative, one may suggest that RE does not make students religious, although it sometimes changes attitudes to become more tolerant; religion is not regarded as something to be afraid of or 'a stupid relic from the past' but as at least an acceptable choice for some people.

The attitudes of those students who studied RE only in primary classes were somewhat contradictory. On the one hand, they said that they attended religious services and prayed more frequently. At the same time, they saw religion as nonsense more often than other groups did. The students who studied RE secondary level saw more often differences as not only normal but also an interesting part of life. Probably the knowledge they possess about different religions and skills they acquire lessens their prejudices about religious issues and dread regarding perceived differences. This also gives courage to be different.

Currently, there is a lack of balanced information about religion among most students in Estonia. Existing prejudices and regarding religion as a strictly private matter contribute to segregation and exclusion toward religious students and students who are interested in religion. Although knowledge about religions is an important prerequisite for mutual understanding it is not sufficient. My studies on classroom interaction reveal that experience of religious education may contribute to more open attitudes among students both with religious and secular worldviews. But the possibilities to promote dialogue between different worldviews are hindered by teacher centered pedagogical context. Reflective and emphatic approach and contacts with representatives of different worldviews and religions are needed for promotion of active tolerance.

The findings suggest that those schools that integrate religion into their everyday school culture, making it more visible and less private, support students' readiness for respect and tolerance. Students who had never studied RE (both with and without a religious affiliation) felt uncomfortable and insecure in encountering a different worldview and lacked the competence needed for mutual dialogue. RE in secondary schools, on the contrary, made students curious, developed readiness for discussing religious matters, and also helped increase students' self-confidence to maintain and express a different opinion. In this respect RE is not a threat to freedom but a prospect for it.

Keywords to characterize your research profile

I have studied classroom interaction by using videography, biographical research on teachers, used mixed method approach in studying young peoples' attitudes to religion and religious diversity.

Your research and interest fields (short description)

Research on Estonian young people in a secular context, their attitudes to religion and religious diversity. RE didactics; teachers strategies and biography, values education; contextuality of young people's attitudes in relation to religion.

Current projects (short summary)

The research project *Contextual factors of young people's attitudes and convictions in relation to religion and religious diversity* – The aim of the project is to investigate how young people's beliefs and commitments are expressed in different discourses of school, family, religious communities and the youth culture.

During the project new pedagogical approaches will be worked out to promote mutual understanding among people with different religious and non-religious convictions.

Bibliography (Please enter your publications with the latest at the top in each section)

1 Books

- Schihalejev, Olga (Editor) *Õppemeetodid väärtuskasvatuse teenistuses – miks ja kuidas?* [Methods in Values Education – Why and How?] Tartu: Tartu Ülikooli Eetikakeskus. (2012). **Keywords:** Values education, didactics, narratives, drama, philosophising with children, inquiry teaching.
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- Schihalejev, Olga (Ed). *Põhikooli valikaine usundiõpetus*. [Religious Education in Basic school] Tallinn: Riiklik Eksami- ja Kvalifikatsioonikeskus. (2010). **Keywords:** Keywords: curriculum, religious education, cross curricular topics, basic school.

2. Book chapters (if possible together with a short summary or keywords)

- In the book** Schihalejev, Olga (Editor) *Õppemeetodid väärtuskasvatuse teenistuses – miks ja kuidas?* [Methods in Values Education – Why and How?] Tartu: Tartu Ülikooli Eetikakeskus. (2012). **I contributed to the following chapters:**
- Schihalejev, Olga; Jung, Nelli*. Sissejuhatus. [Forword] **Keywords:** aims of the education, values education, didactics.
- Schihalejev, Olga; Jung, Nelli* Väärtuskasvatuse mudelid [Different Approaches of Values Education]. **Keywords:** values education, inculcation, values clarification, cognitive-developmental approach, character education.
- Schihalejev, Olga* Narratiivid väärtuskasvatuse teenistuses [Using stories in Values Education]. **Keywords:** Narratives, storytelling, didactics, metaphoric thinking.
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- Schihalejev, Olga; Jürgenstein, Toomas*. Usundiõpetuse ainekava: taust, teemad, võimalused ja rõhuasetused gümnaasiumis. [RE curriculum: background, topics, possibilities and emphases in upper secondary school]. **Keywords:** curriculum, religious education, cross curricular topics, upper secondary school.

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