

THE RELEVANCE OF MORAL-CHRISTIAN EDUCATION IN PREVENTING ALCOHOL-RELATED ANTISOCIAL BEHAVIOUR AMONG HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS

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Abstract: Adolescence is an important period in human development, a period which is often characterised by a high risk of deviant behaviour. This reality can influence the life and academic performance of adolescents in school. The antisocial behaviour of high school students may often be a consequence of the use of substances in general and (in the Romanian context) of alcohol in particular. Given this situation, the present article sets out to explore the preventive role of moral-Christian education in regard to the alcohol-related antisocial behaviour among high school students. The article is based on research which has been conducted in the context of a confessional high school, through a quantitative method and using the technique of the questionnaire. The significance of the study also lies in the possibility of identifying useful resources which moral-Christian education can provide for the prevention of alcohol-related antisocial behaviour. Furthermore, this research highlights the important connection between the students' academic performance and the school climate in which they undergo their study.

Keywords: moral-Christian education, school, prosocial behaviour, alcohol consumption.

Introduction

Adolescence represents a period of “affective and intellectual restructuring” of human personality and it is regarded as “a process of individuation and metabolisation” of one’s physiological transformations (Doron, 2006, 31). It is generally understood as covering the age range of 13-14 to 17-18. During this period, the adolescents’ views about themselves, as well as their worldviews, are being shaped. They are keen to understand the social, moral, and cultural values on the basis of which they are going to build their own values system.

The danger of deviant behaviour is very significant during this period (Gavrilă-Ardelean, 2014; Modrea, 2006; Şchiopu, 1979; Gavrilă & Gavrilă, 2010) and it is often related to one’s existential conflicts, to clashes of values in the environment, or by one’s life ideals. Among the direct causes of antisocial behaviour, scholars have referred to: frustrations, the misuse of drugs or alcohol, exposure to violence through media, etc. Also, inner experiences, personality types, self-esteem, as well as external experiences, situations, and examples may be factors which favour antisocial actions (Iluţ, 2004, pp. 109-120; Gavrilă-Ardelean & Gavrilă-Ardelean, 2016).

The tensions of adolescence may also be seen in school life. During this existential stage, the adolescent is part of the high school network. The teachers’ attention as well as the learning experience need to be adapted to the specific characteristics of the students, if educational progress and the motivation for study are to be achieved. The models which adolescents find in school, the educational environment, the teachers’ guidance and support, all work together in preventing delinquent behaviour and in directing students towards positive attitudes and behaviours. According to Cozărescu, the school system needs to find the right instruments for keeping up the students’ motivation and for avoiding school failures (Cozărescu, 2013, 18).

The role of the school in shaping the students’ behaviour is undeniable. The risk of alcohol related antisocial behaviour can be avoided through a positive educational environment, where positive role models are available.

Alcohol consumption among adolescents

According to a study from Vouchercloud during 2010-2015, based on data from the World Health Organisation (WHO), Romania is among the top ten countries in the world insofar as alcohol consumption is concerned. Moreover, serious concerns exist in Romania regarding the problem of alcohol consumption among underage youth. According to an UNICEF report which

was published in 2013, with the title of *Situația adolescenților în România* (“The Situation of Adolescents in Romania”; Centrul de Sociologie Urbană și Regională, 2013), 42% of Romanian adolescents had used alcohol at least once. The percentage was higher among adolescents who were over 14 years old, with boys (57%) more frequent than girls (27%), and in an urban environment (50%) more often than in a rural one (32%) (www.unicef.ro).

Although it is inappropriate to talk about alcoholism with regard to adolescents, the high rate or degree of alcohol use may have very negative effects on adolescents. The impact of alcohol consumption on the development of the human brain, on the adolescents’ health, behaviour and social relationships are undeniable. Social problems in the school context, such as absenteeism, delinquent behaviour, low level of interest and poor academic performance are often related to the use of alcohol.

Alcohol consumption during adolescence has a variety of causes. There are, on the one hand, individual causes (having to do with one’s specific way of life). On the other hand, there are familial causes (a family environment which stimulates alcohol consumption), as well as social causes (such as peer pressure). A survey by ESPAD (*European School Survey Project on Alcohol and Other Drugs*) which was conducted in 2015 in Romanian schools, regarding the use of tobacco, alcohol and drugs by 16 year old students, has generated valuable data regarding this subject. Thus, 77.9% of adolescents of grades IX and X in Romania had used alcohol up to that moment, indicating a slight decrease as compared to previous studies. The survey has also indicated the simultaneous existence of several types of addictive behaviours in the sense that that students who had used alcohol at least once had also used other substances, such as tobacco and drugs. The peer factor was also important. The results of the survey have indicated important correlations between one’s alcohol consumption and the presence of the same behaviour among one’s friends. Insofar as the compulsive use of alcohol is concerned, the results are similar to those in previous years (www.ana.gov.ro).

It is, therefore, correct to say that the cultivation of a responsible behaviour in regard to alcohol consumption is an important dimension of the adolescent’s development both at the national and at the European level.

Legal aspects regarding alcohol consumption

The European Union is keen to promote efficient strategies regarding the detrimental effects of alcohol overuse (The Council of the European Union, 2017). In this respect, alcohol-related policies need to be known and transposed in adequate programs, which take into account the cultural, social, legal and economic particularities of each country. The Council of the European Union highlights the fact that the global strategy to reduce the harmful use of alcohol,

which was adopted by WHO, as well as the European action plan of WHO for the reduction of harmful use of alcohol 2012-2020, which was approved by all the 53 member states of the European region of WHO, shows “the need for adopting a global approach and for adequately employing sectors such as development, transport, law, social welfare, finance policies, trade, agriculture, policies of consumers’ protection, education, employment, as well as the civil society and the economic stakeholders” (The Council of the European Union, 2017).

The bottom line is that all members of the society have the right to be protected first of all from the harmful use of alcohol, such as violence or accidents, in order to be able to enjoy a good quality life in family and society. Secondly, all people have the right to know, as soon as they reach discernment age, in a correct and unbiased way, the effects of alcohol consumption on the personal and social life. People who, for various reasons or for any period of time, do not use alcohol, have the right to be supported in their choices and not to be put under any pressure of alcohol consumption in the name of cultural norms or practices. At the same time, people who are affected by alcohol consumption have the right to receive specialised counselling and therapy. Insofar as the children are concerned, it is vital that they are able to grow up in an environment which is protected from the effects of harmful consumption of alcohol and from the publicity which encourages the use of alcohol, through “diminishing the exposure of children and youth to the marketing and advertising of alcohol” (The Council of the European Union, 2017).

Romanian legislation regarding alcohol consumption stipulates, with regard to adolescents, that it is forbidden to sell or offer them access to alcoholic drinks. Thus, Law No 61/1991, republished in 2011, article 3, paragraphs 21 and 22, qualifies as infringement any action of marketing or consumption of alcoholic drinks within the institutions of teaching and education (near the entrance, in the courtyard, or within the buildings), as well as any offer of alcoholic drinks to children in public buildings. The law also forbids the consumption of alcoholic drinks by young people under the age of 18 even in public places which are specifically meant for alcohol consumption.

Law No 148 from 2000 regarding advertising forbids any publicity for alcoholic drinks within schools or within less than 200 meters from their entrance. According to the same law, advertisements are forbidden if they are directed to youth below the age of 18 or if they show them using such products.

In order to protect underage youth, Decision No 220/2011 of the National Audiovisual Council forbids, between 6 am and 10 pm, any broadcasting which include alcoholic drinks.

Meanings of the moral-Christian education

Starting from the observation that alcohol is a common part of life for many people, its influence on the lives of children and adolescents is significant. Based on their early life experiences, children can come to view alcohol as a regular and common part of life. This is where the moral-Christian education can have an important role, enabling children and adolescents to develop a prudent attitude in regard to alcohol consumption. They need to acquire abilities, resources, and a critical thinking which enable them to deal with peer pressure and to make the right decisions for their personal health and for their social behaviour.

The ultimate goal of education is to shape people's personality and prepare them for successful social integration. It has, therefore, "the role of a mediator, of an interface between an individual and the environment, as well as the role of harmonising the interaction between heredity and the environment" (Codreanu, 2014, 98). By being part of the school system, the adolescent is exposed to influences which generate behavioural changes. Through all dimensions of education – intellectual, moral, physical, professional – the goal is to equip the student with a set of knowledge, skills and abilities which are useful to his or her successful social integration. Education becomes, therefore, "a deliberate, organised, systematic, and continuous means of shaping and influencing human personality, endowing the human person with a second 'nature' – an axiological one, which is closely related to the social and cultural dimension of his or her existential matrix" (Codreanu, 2014, 98).

The moral education, as a key part of education, is meant to ensure an adequate framework for enabling the individual to assimilate various dimensions of morality. More specifically, its goal is to shape the moral profile of an individual, within society. It is directed towards the *shaping of the moral conscience* and the *shaping of the moral conduct* (Nicola, Farcaş, 1993, pp. 19-20). School teachers have, therefore, a strategic role in shaping the profile of the young generation. Through their moral attitude, as well as through adequate communication, they can have an important contribution in the formation of the adolescents' character (Popp, Adrioni, 2014, 72).

If moral and religious education is offered as part of the school curriculum, children become acquainted with religion during the religious education classes. The importance of this subject resides in its ability to produce group cohesion and to set behavioural standards for the students. More specifically, moral-Christian education is understood as "the sum of all divine and human means whereby the moral-Christian character is developed" (Păunescu, 2014, 115). Moral education and religious education are meant to complement each other. Accordingly, if the goal of moral education is the formation of the moral ideal, from a Christian standpoint, ethics originates from

the nature of the Creator and is based on God and his word, which ultimately explains all moral order. Ravi Zacharias notes the fact that in both testaments of the Christian Bible “everything which points to morality also points to the supreme value which is the knowledge of the love of God” (Zacharias, 2010, 121).

Analysing the moral-religious sensitivity of adolescence, Duță states that the assimilation of values, for adolescents, takes place during the process of socialisation. During adolescence, human beings develop a cultural identity which depends, to various degrees, on their family, school, peers, as well as religious institutions in their proximity (Duță, 2011, 191).

Moral personal decisions are made possible by the conversational abilities of human beings and are the result of people’s inner dialogue with their self. Among the key factors which influence people’s moral reflections are their life experiences, freedom of choice, life principles and values, cultural context, religious convictions, as well as their neurobiological structure. People’s inner balance is determined by their ability to live according to their moral standards (Nullens, 2014, 91).

The relevance of confessional Christian education is given, therefore, by its formative potential, which consists, on the one hand, of the psychological processes which it employs and, on the other hand, of the intrinsically moral dimension of the religious values (Ionescu, 2014, 188).

Research method

The present study has set out to analyse the role of moral-Christian education in preventing alcohol-related antisocial behaviour among students from a confessional school in Timișoara. The specific objectives of the study are (a) to test the students’ knowledge about key aspects of the moral-Christian values and (b) to investigate the role of this knowledge in the prevention of alcohol-related antisocial behaviour among the students.

The specific method which has been used in the study was the survey and the research instrument was the questionnaire. The questionnaire was of a self-administered omnibus type. The data from the questionnaires has then been analysed with the help of the SPSS.20.0 program. The research population consisted of 32 students of a confessional high school in Timisoara who had received their education in a confessional school beginning from the primary level.

Research results

Starting from the premise that during the education process specific information regarding a certain subject is being assimilated, several questions from the questionnaire were meant to test the students’ assimilation of key

aspects of the moral-Christian values. The students confirmed the important role which the classes of Christian education played in their familiarisation with the moral-Christian values. 84.4 of the respondents declared that the classes of Christian education have enabled them “to a large extent” to know the Christian values.

Given the fact that the students had been studying in a confessional school from the primary level to the present, they were able to indicate their access to several sources of information about Christian values. Thus, in addition to the religious education classes, they pointed out to the theological subjects of the curriculum, to the influence of the teacher during regular classes, to extra-curricular activities, to school tutorials, and even to charity activities which had been organised in school. 75% of the respondents believe that the moral-Christian education which they had received had enabled them “to a very large extent” or “to a large extent” to assimilate key knowledge about Christian life and about moral-Christian values. Also, 87% of the respondents indicated that they were positively interested in the religious education classes from their curriculum. The same percentage indicated that they were seeking to conduct their lives according to moral-Christian values.

Thus, our working hypothesis, according to which *high school students who are studying in Christian confessional schools are familiar with key Christian values* is validated.

Our study went further to investigate the social behaviour of the students in the school environment. It is assumed that the assimilation of moral-Christian values must be noticeable in the adolescents’ behaviour. Thus, in order to test whether the moral-Christian values had been internalised by the students, their behaviour in relation to each other and to the school was analysed. They were invited to indicate how often they had been involved in various types of action which are associated with antisocial conduct. To different degrees, they declared that they had *never* been involved in the following actions: violence towards their colleagues (71.8%), theft (100%), verbal bullying (53%), lying (50%), school absenteeism (43.7%), lack of respect towards teachers (65.6%). Regarding alcohol consumption, 90.6% declared that they had never drunk alcohol and 9.6% declared that they had drunk alcohol sometimes. Altogether, these results indicate a predominantly positive social conduct, especially since negative conduct was not indicated as happening “frequently”, except for a small percent in the case of verbal bullying (3%) and school absenteeism (3%).

All respondents declared that they were responsible for their own behaviour. 65.6% indicated that the moral-Christian education which they had received in school had enabled them “to a very large extent” or “to a large extent” to develop a prosocial behaviour. 78% declared that they benefited in school from positive behavioural models, both from their teachers and from

their colleagues.

The working hypothesis, according to which *the high school students regard the moral-Christian education as having an important role in the prevention of antisocial behaviour* is, thus, validated.

Based on these results, it is possible to state that the assimilation of moral-Christian values in the case of confessional education is a relevant factor in the formation of prosocial behaviour. It contributes to the development of communication skills, to decisions which are based on shared values, to increased responsibility in relation to oneself and others (colleagues, teachers, family members, friends, etc.) and, last but not least, to the adequate management of social conflict.

The promotion of social, personal and cognitive skills, alongside an adequate guidance based on Christian values, can lead to the healthy development of the adolescents' moral conscience. The assimilation of such skills is likely to lead to a significant decrease in antisocial behaviour in general and in alcohol-related antisocial behaviour in particular.

Conclusions and recommendations

Given the abundance of offers and choices which characterises today's consumerist society, adolescents are faced with a wide range of challenges. On the one hand, there is the fundamental need for autonomy and on the other hand the need for relationships. To help adolescents deal with such complex challenges, several directions of action, from a pedagogical angle, could be useful (Kollehn, Weber, 1988, pp. 121-124): (a) the development of individual psycho-social competences, covering three areas of competence – cognitive competences (the ability to reflect and think critically), psycho-social competences (one's sensibility towards his or her feelings and attitudes), and moral competences (the capacity of moral action, based on certain values); (b) specific information regarding consumption and addiction; (c) the promotion of alternative offers; and (d) the possibility of modifying certain structural connections.

Through constant information, through adequate familiarity with moral norms and values, through the development of a social identity and of a moral conscience, through an education which promotes genuine values (such as the moral-Christian values), it is possible to create a community of mutual support and common good. The positive ingredients of such a community enable its members to overcome social or learning deficiencies and open up new social opportunities.

It is possible, therefore, to state that the moral-Christian education plays an important role in the prevention of antisocial behaviour among high school students. Our study has indicated that the adolescents who had studied in a

confessional school from primary to high school level have developed a prosocial behaviour which is based on moral-Christian values. Such a behaviour incorporates, at the same time, a responsible attitude towards potentially antisocial behaviour, such as alcohol consumption.

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