

KINDERGARTEN RELIGIOUS EDUCATION IN ROMANIA. THEORETICAL ISSUES AND PERSPECTIVES OF USING THE CASE STUDY

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ABSTRACT

The present article deals with an issue which has relatively recently attracted the attention of the curriculum authors in Romania, the need to support the religious education that kindergarten teachers carry on with parental consent in kindergarten. The aim of this paper is to present some theoretical aspects and to raise a number of questions with a clarifying role for the direction in which the moral and religious training in kindergartens in Romania should follow. The paper is set up as an ascending endeavour, having in its final presentation the summary of a case of child significantly sustained in the recovery of his mental and emotional development as a result of an intervention having in the foreground the religious story. Increasingly used in education, the case study method also involves, for the moral and religious education in kindergarten, a number of facets: educational method, research method, method of educational counselling.

KEYWORDS: moral-religious education, kindergarten, research methods, case study

1. PRELIMINARIES

For the educational system in Romania, the issue of moral and religious education in kindergarten is a particular one. Basically, after 1989, the year of the fall of the atheist communist regime, religious values have regained the right to be available for the children and young people in the national education system, so that they may receive a complete education [1]. Whereas for the school education cycles, those nearly two decades and a half have meant taking some significant steps towards a necessary normality, the education in kindergartens has a major handicap in the curriculum development plan. Yet, in Romania, there is not a consistent document and support materials for the activities that the teachers in kindergarten carry out for the moral-religious formation of children. The main reasons for this situation are, we believe, the lack of a pedagogical model for religious education in kindergartens, inherited from the Communist period and of low concern of the decision makers to use the models of best practice, including the ones in European countries with experience in this area, such as Italy.

As it happens in other European countries, attending religious education activities must have the parental consent in the case of minor children. From the

point of view of religious pedagogy, if for people their eternal destiny is important, then the education cannot circumvent this issue [2]. The fundamental question for moral-religious education in kindergarten is related to its purposes, in relation to the models promoted by modern society.

In the context of the trend of growing globalisation in recent decades, moral and religious education in kindergarten can give children the support elements for understanding the values of the family and the community to which they belong, as a prerequisite for the explicit inclusion of these values in the process of building their own personalities. Also, the moral and religious education in kindergarten can support the physical, mental, moral and affective stages of the development through the inner formative potential that the religious knowledge used from at a certain age can have.

2. INTERROGATIONS RELATED TO THE RELIGIOUS EDUCATION IN KINDERGARTEN

The novelty of the educational approaches in the field of moral and religious education for pre-primary cycle, the absence of specialised works to support local initiatives in this area, but especially the incipient stage in which the Romanian school is in its attempt to suggest a stable curricular model led us to suggest a set of interrogations, formulated as a result of interviews with teachers involved in carrying out such activities. We preferred this way of working in order to formulate synthetic expectations and needs of support and development of those involved in the design and implementation of activities with religious or moral content, who even try to synthesise in an optional curriculum the experience in kindergartens or groups in which the concerns listed are already a reality. We believe that for the current stage of development of moral and religious education in kindergartens in Romania formulating a set of interrogations constitutes an approach able to sustain the necessary conceptual and procedural delimitations.

a. Psycho-pedagogical contextualisations

- What are the learning contents which can support the formation of desirable behaviours in preschoolers?
- Are the moral and religious habits formed in response to external demands or predominantly as an imitation of the behaviour of others?
- What are the representations or the impressions that sustain an acceptable level of formation of the first elements of moral conscience?
- How can positive emotions submitted by the characters in the religious stories support the formation of moral conscience in children?
- How can the religious feeling of children, manifested before the emergence of religious thinking be harnessed?

b. ER status in kindergarten

- Is an explicit cooperation between kindergarten and family needed in achieving the moral-religious activities?
- How useful is the optional curriculum for religion to kindergarten teachers?
- What are the elements that facilitate the success of project-based activities, respectively for a moral-religious optional curriculum in the kindergarten?

c. The resources involved in the teaching process

- Are the kindergarten teachers, almost all without theological studies, willing to learn new things to cope with the rigours of an optional curriculum of religion?
- What are the training needs in theological and psycho-pedagogical aspects in order to organise moral and religious activities in kindergarten?
- How could kindergarten teachers contribute to the future development of the curriculum for preschoolers?
- How large must the teacher's autonomy be in the establishment of religion, or project-based activities?
- Can curriculum compensate for the differences in the material conditions of the kindergartens?

d. The model curriculum

- What are the religious needs of a child in kindergarten?
- What model curriculum should be adopted to support an effective teaching approach?
- Is it necessary for the curriculum to provide alternative models in achieving aims?
- How does the curriculum solve the problem of ideological differences between parents of preschool children?
- How can religious activities in kindergarten and those in the first school classes support each other (social skills, communication, physical development)?

e. The learning content

- What learning content can support children to highlight their individuality and personal experience?
- What should be the proportion of religious / moral in different types of activities carried out with the kids?
- Is it necessary to include in the curriculum some learning contents for which the presence of a theologian is required?
- What learning contents can help develop the creativity and the language in preschool?

- What learning contents can sustain positive feelings towards children with other faiths and cultures?

3. FOR A CONTENT OF THE MORAL-RELIGIOUS LEARNING WHICH CAN BE USED IN THE PREPARATION OF THE ACTIVITY PROJECTS FOR THE CHILDREN IN KINDERGARTEN

We believe that one of the most important aspects in achieving religious activities in kindergarten, in the form of optional courses or project-type activities, is given by the ability of the teacher to select learning content and the aims set related to the available resources they have, and to harness the defining elements of local culture.

Given the particularities of religious education issues in kindergarten, where teachers are specialised most often in a different domain from the theological one, their knowledge of moral and religious education pertaining to the sphere of self-education, we provide below some guidelines for future stages of curriculum development in this area.

The examples suggested circumscribed the theme "Children and the beauty of the world", which requires different approaches in a continuum, from a group of preschoolers to another, on aspects of the beauty that surrounds us, the use of beautiful words, which support the relationship with their fellows and with God and continuing with the need of children to learn the beautiful things, both in formal and in informal environments.

	First Level 3-4 years	Second Level 4-5 years	Third Level 5-6 years
Children and the beauty of the world	<p>When everything around us is beautiful</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • My body is clean (what it means to be clean, why it is good to be clean) • I live in a clean environment (environments where children live, the responsibility of all to keep the places clean, attachment to things, care for the place where I work, 	<p>Words that make our life beautiful</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I talk to people nicely (the effects of my words on others, what truths cannot be told, the magic words, what I do when I want something) • I talk to God in prayer (what I tell God, my position when I talk to him, when I 	<p>Let's learn about the beauty of life</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I learn about beautiful things (where I learn about beautiful things, who teaches me?, my attitude and behaviour towards my teacher) • I am surrounded by friends (what I know about my classmates and friends, what my

	behaviour when eating, praying at meals) I take care of plants and animals (plants and animals are God's creation, I respect the work of those around me, the importance of protecting nature)	talk to Him, where I talk to Him) • I talk to people about God (what I can talk to people, when I talk, where I talk, when I am quiet, what I say about God)	classmates do for me, mutual aid, biblical examples of friends) Love and forgiveness (love and beauty, whom I love, who loves me, I forgive and I am forgiven ;)
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4. THE CASE STUDY IN EDUCATIONAL AND INVESTIGATIVE BACKGROUND

The use of qualitative methods often encounters much criticism, starting from the fact that they cannot prove the same rigour and objectivity involved in the quantitative approach. In this context, the role of the case study is to highlight not only the qualities it undeniably has as an educational method, but also to reconfirm the ability to formulate hypotheses for quantitative research and contribute significantly to the development and testing of educational theories. Natural sciences researchers have criticised the use of case study in the social sciences research, emphasising that it is difficult to support the representativeness of observation for a particular social phenomenon and also showing that the lack of rigour in data collection hardly supports a scientifically solid construction. The issue of partiality induced by the subjectivity of the researcher is backed by the research participants.

In parallel, researches carried out by practitioners and theorists of management and business schools show that strictly quantitative measures have created far too great a difference between the theory and the economic reality. The last decades have shown that quantitative research can be biased as much by the researcher as by participants, according to the critics of the qualitative research if the samples are administered incorrectly, intentionally or not, when the survey is wrong or if respondents do not participate honestly [3].

What is specific to the case study in social sciences is taking part in an inductive approach, trying to get closer to the empirical details that constitute its object of study, in contrast to the deductive methods of natural science, in the context where the question remains open whether we can talk about the uniqueness of the particular case analysed. [4].

Related to the case study, quantitative research tries to bring into the foreground the issue of explanation and that of control in order to identify the relationship of cause and effect between a limited number of variables.

Qualitative research aims at understanding the complex interdependencies that occur between the elements of the analysed case. In parallel, qualitative studies aim at drawing a certain conclusion which they try to generalise and the quantitative paradigm analyses a set of cases from which to draw relevant conclusions [5].

Beyond these differences in approach, the case study is the preferred strategy in situations where variables control is extremely difficult, when the phenomenon is a contemporary one and it requires contextualisation and reporting to the real life.

Yin suggests four main applications that require the use of the case study [6]. Firstly the case study is used to seek explanations and causal links in real life interventions, a far too complex process to be subjected to theoretical study or experimental strategies. Secondly, the case study can describe the elements of context-related intervention. Thirdly, the descriptive case study can be an assessment tool. A final issue relates to the possibility of generating theories, when the results of an intervention are too large to be evaluated.

In educational research, the case study is considered more and more an empirical research method of a contemporary phenomenon, based on a real-life context of delineating partly the boundaries between phenomenon and context. The success of the case study is dependent on the dynamic mode that combines data collection methods, such as study of archive documents, interview, questionnaire-based survey or observation method. Triangulation is one of the ways to support the results of the qualitative data collected in the case study: 1) the data are analysed in different places at different times and in different contexts; 2) it is necessary to have two different teams of researchers, procedures and conclusions; 3) it is necessary to use different data sources - interviews and records - to analyse the same case.

The case study should be considered a method in a broad sense, as research data collection is achieved in a complex and always different way, the aim being to render the progress of the case in time or after the introduced intervention [7]. The limit of this method and that of the case analysis, the monosubject experiment respectively of the biographical method is very narrow. Even if the resemblance is very close, the characteristics of each are well defined [8].

5. QUALITATIVE AND QUANTITATIVE IN THE INTERVENTION TO OBTAIN BEHAVIOURAL CHANGES IN PRESCHOOL CHILDREN. CASE ANALYSIS

We will present briefly, based on the work done with the kindergarten teacher L.D.G., a case study relevant to the particular way in which moral and religious values can support the personal development of children in kindergarten.

N.A. is a 6 year-old little girl and she attends a normal program kindergarten in a rural area, near a city in Alba County. She has a delay in intellectual development, manifested through representation at a modest level, lacking details, inertia in thinking. Her vocabulary is poor, she encounters major difficulties in the grammatical and logical expression and also in terms of stability and volume of attention. During the previous two years of attendance of kindergarten, N.A. has made some progress regarding the acquisition of the basic concepts about the surrounding world, reaching the level at which she can recognise animals, means of transport, clothing, objects, actions, etc. She has also developed some habits that give her a certain degree of autonomy.

The neurological problems that she has also diminish the motility of her arms, which reflects on the activities in which she attempts to achieve some graphics. Unlike previous years, N.A. tries to manage on her own, she wants to draw and paint by herself, like her classmates. She mimics every gesture, word or action made by children or teachers, but she likes to repeat poems in front of the group or to sing along with children. Although she has been in the attention of the speech therapist from the age of 5 and a half, she faces some difficulties in speech and the use of connectors.

Regarding her behaviour, N.A. has moments of aggression through which she tries to draw attention to her classmates and she intervenes in the game of her colleagues and sometimes she destroys the boys' construction, takes one of their toys or a piece of a game, etc. Talking to her, we can conclude that she understands what is right, she has the ability to decode her classmates' reactions, she can distinguish between good and bad. In addition, sociograms show that N.A. does not make any choice, but she has the maximum number of rejections.

The intervention in the presented case aims to harness the forming potential that the story with a moral and religious content has for preschoolers in order to achieve behavioural changes, based on the fact that for a child, every social situation is an opportunity and a context for learning, even if it is theoretical. Also, the teacher has assumed the role of researcher mediator for preschool child behavior. The intervention took place during a school year, which is why it has become necessary to select a set of stories that present special events or facts and allow the teacher to ensure a proper emotional framework. The stories have been the support for various discussions, drawings, games or activities that harnessed their message.

A first additional element was the support that N.A. received from another girl, F.D., characterised by teachers as having a communicative and cheerful behaviour, supported by the fact that she has not made any rejection in the initial sociogram. Later, the little girl, B.P is convinced by the teacher to show to her colleague N.A. how to play with a doll. Gradually, the girls begin

to accept her in their groups, giving various advice and support in the activities they carry out.

In parallel, starting from the content of some stories, N.A. was required to perform various tasks, to perform roles in the short plays of the preschool group. Polite formulas start to be used by N.A. and she is more attentive in her collaboration with her classmates, with their drawings, and the conflicts with the boys decreased significantly.

Although the moral-religious stories chosen for N.A. were short and were accompanied by brightly coloured images, she did not involve a great deal, given the limited capacity of her attention. At the end of the intervention, she reached the stage of development of social and emotional behavior.

The conclusions of the case presented above confirm the theoretical assumptions stated at the beginning of the present work. The careful use of the specific moral-religious content in kindergarten, in the context of objectives which include supporting of physical, moral, emotional development and contextualised in relation to the cultural environment of the community from which the children are, proves a significant formative potential, including the support for special cases of children with developmental delay.

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