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Religious Education at Preschool. Main Assumptions and Kindergarten Teachers' Opinions

Abstract

The historical, political, social and cultural issues of the past have strongly impacted upon the current Religious Education at preschools in Poland. In the beginning of socio-political transformation of Poland the confessional nature of Religious Education was one of the demands presented not only by the Church, but also by society. Today, even the presence of Religious Education is discussed. In order to understand better the arguments supporting Religious Education at preschools in Poland, this article will provide kindergarten teachers' opinions on the basis of a research survey, which was conducted among preschool teachers from Malopolska and Silesia region in April and May 2018.

Keywords

Religious Education, the preschool environment, values-based education.

Religious education at preschool has been widely discussed in Poland, not only by the supporters of introducing catechesis to kindergartens as promptly as possible but also by its opponents who frequently bring up the argument of the potential child's indoctrination as their main concern in this debate. Relatively, often one notes voices in the press saying that some teachers of religious education in Poland are not adequately prepared for this task. However, this accusation seems to be inaccurate due to the fact that for many years only a person with theological and pedagogical expertise could become a religion educator.

Classes addressing religious topics at public preschools are scheduled for two meetings a week and their duration is adjusted to children's developmental abilities. In the case of the youngest children (3- and 4-year-olds), the class lasts for about 15 minutes, while for older preschoolers its duration is about 30 minutes.

Undoubtedly, the attempt to teach Catholic religious education in a multicultural, secular, and postmodern society is a great pedagogical, didactic, catechetical and pastoral challenge difficult to face. The strong influence of mainstream mass media promoting utopian visions of happiness, inappropriate value systems, magical thinking, and various postmodernist concepts do not favor the implementation of the Christian reality of faith.¹

At the same time, many parents, guardians, and grandparents seem not to know the ways in which they can initiate authentic processes of religious initiation, the development of faith and Christian life. The aforementioned obstacles gain even greater significance when parents, grandparents, and guardians are inadequately engaged in Family Catechesis.² Moreover, the lack of participation in religious practices, in particular family prayers and attendance at Mass, becomes the reason why so many children are not introduced to the foundations of religious education in the family environment. Some parents, finding the excuse of their insufficient theological knowledge, believe that teaching children about the reality of faith should be carried out by the Church or (pre) school. However, one should remember that both institutional and home catechists who introduce a child into the mysteries of the faith face the reality which goes beyond materialist and empirical categories. They enter the mysterious dimension of God's existence which demands acknowledging the religion-specific epistemology. The logic of faith follows different principles than the logic of materialist epistemology.³

¹ See D. Strinati, *An Introduction to Theories of Popular Culture*, London and New York 1995, pp. 221-245; M. Dziewiecki, *Wychowanie w dobie ponowoczesności*, Kielce 2002, pp. 14-42.

² See J. Stala, *Rola katechezy dorosłych w formacji katechetycznej rodziców*, in: *Katecheza dorosłych we wspólnocie Kościoła*, ed. K. Misiaszek, Warszawa 2002, pp. 159-174.

³ See E. Osewska, J. Stala, *W kierunku katechezy rodzinnej*, Kielce 2003, p. 15; *Religious Education / Catechesis in the Family. A European Perspective*, ed. E. Osewska, J. Stala, Warszawa 2010, UKSW; *Education and Creativity*, ed. E. Osewska, Warszawa 2014, UKSW; *The Contemporary Family: Local and European Perspectives*, eds. E. Osewska, J. Stala, Kraków 2015, UPJPII; *Focus on Family and Education*, ed. E. Osewska, Split 2016, Crkva u svijetu; Z. Marek, *Wychować do wiary. Zagadnienia wychowania religijnego dziecka w wieku przedszkolnym*, Kraków 1996, pp. 57-59.

1. Gradual Children's Education into the Faith

Preschool-age children's education in the faith has to be linked with general education. This is stressed by the General Directory for Catechesis: "Infancy and childhood, each understood according to its own peculiarities, are a time of primary socialization as well as of human and Christian education in the family, the school and the Church. These must then be understood as a decisive moment for subsequent stages of faith."⁴ In this sense, religious education in early childhood should respect human values and develop them through the processes of socialization and a child's education, both general and religious.

In preschool-age, religious education, the actual teaching, being focused more on the interpretation of child's experience rather than informing about religious doctrine, seems to be a little bit less important than educating. New content should be included into the natural process of experience, reflection and searching for the answers to questions about the surrounding world, people, and God. Shared exploration and the experiencing of basic religious values seems to be highly beneficial.⁵ Introducing a preschooler into the paths of religious life allows for showing the truth that God is Somebody who loves everyone and every child. Only after recognizing the love of God, are young children able to see that they are the children of God and respond to the love of God with their own love. The integrity of content rule in religious education aimed at preschool children demands the gradual introduction of God as someone close and present, as a Giver of many gifts and Jesus as a Friend, Master, and Teacher who not only suffers and dies for the people but also resurrects and lives. The primary aim of catechesis for young children is guiding children to the authentic meeting with God, taking into account their peculiarities of physical, psychological, and religious development.

At preschool, a child acquires a plenitude of experiences which need to be acknowledged and developed in religious education. A young child, by means of his/her activity and its religious interpretation, has a chance to discover the invisible reality. It can take place by noticing God in the surrounding world, in life experiences and events, and by listening to the message of God directed

⁴ *General Catechetical Directory* 178.

⁵ See J. Stala, E. Osewska, *Anders erziehen in Polen. Der Erziehungs- und Bildungsbegriff im Kontext eines sich ständig verändernden Europas des XXI. Jahrhunderts*, Tarnów 2009, Polihymnia; E. Osewska, J. Stala, *Die katholische Schule zu Beginn des 21. Jahrhunderts am Beispiel Polens und Englands*, Warszawa 2015, UKSW.

at people. The main aim here is the awakening of the sense of faith and its deepening, gaining the ability to recognize the traces of God in the surrounding world, understanding signs and symbols as well as listening to one another, acknowledging other people's needs and having mutual cooperation.

The majority of educationalists and religion educators agree that to successfully introduce a child into the mysteries of faith one should abandon presenting God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit only in a speculative way. Introducing the religious content in an entirely theoretical way without associating it with the elements of the child's life not only from the family environment but also from the social life in which he/she participates, should be abandoned as well. A peculiar task both for family members and religion educators is to combine, unite, and connect everyday, human experiences with the reality of faith.⁶

Consequently, enabling the child to have his/her first Christian experience is the basic step in searching for and finding God. Acknowledging the achievements of modern developmental psychology and trends in the field of religious education pedagogy and family pedagogy, the first task of Christian parents and educators should not be necessarily to teach about the catechism content, but rather to provide the child with the environment full of love, trust, and joy, which would lead to them searching for "traces of God."⁷

Apart from good relations between parents, guardians, and educators, religious education in childhood relies on providing the child with experiences which, on the surface, do not have the direct relation with religious experiences but which become the catalyst in Christian growth. This is important, especially in contemporary times when a child develops in a situation where the external environment does not favor religious development, when the mixture of magic and advertisement presented in the media impedes the differentiation between the magical and the real world, between what is real and unreal, visible and invisible. The attitude and lifestyle of catechists and preschool teachers who acknowledge God as actually existing but invisible helps children believe in His presence and brings them closer to what is going to be experienced face to face in the future but what now remains unclear. The process of initiation of faith is full of educational values, predominantly due to its existential overtone, its

⁶ See G. Hansemann, *Wychowanie religijne*, Warszawa 1988; K. Leslie, *Faith and Little Children*, West Mystic 1990; Th. Martin, *Christian Family Values*, New York 1984.

⁷ See E. Osewska, J. Stala, *W kierunku katechezy rodzinnej*, Kielce 2003, pp. 183-194.

nature of deep experience which guarantees reaching the real depths of faith. It can be compared to the process of learning where introduction into the mystery matters more than transferring knowledge.⁸

2. To Be or Not to Be in Religious Education at Preschool

In the context of these considerations, one should ask preschool teachers about the ways in which they perceive the value of religious education, if and to what extent they cooperate with parents and religion instructors, whether they favor the presence of catechesis at preschool and whether they notice its positive influence on children. To obtain the answers to these questions, in April and May 2018 a research survey was conducted among preschool teachers from Malopolska and Silesia region. At Polish preschools, the majority of teachers are female. A group of 60 women participated in this research. For anonymity reasons and to emphasize the subjective character of respondents' utterances, the teachers' opinions include only the first names of the interviewees. Many preschool teachers are in favor of the presence of religious education at preschool but they support their opinions with different arguments. It is thus worth referring to several individual responses.

Lidia: "Among multiple arguments which speak for the presence of catechesis at preschool, the aspect of shaping the humanity is the most convincing to me. Even before children acquire full knowledge and skills, they find themselves in the preschool environment where they have to assimilate norms and rules which allow for proper functioning among peers. Religious education can facilitate transferring the preschool norms to a large extent and makes children aware about what is unnoticeable but of great significance in the development of a human being. The world of values and the Absolute is invisible, and very often it is only during religion classes where the reference to such universal values as love or goodness appears." This response indicates that preschool teachers appreciate the presence of religion classes and consider them as an important element in the process of person's formation in a complete way. In their

⁸ See J. Stala, E. Osewska, *Fundamentalne podstawy i obszary katechezy rodzinnej*, Tarnów 2000, pp. 87-101; E. Osewska, *Religious Education from the Perspective of Central and Eastern Europe*, w: *Toward Mutual Ground. Pluralism, Religious Education and Diversity in Irish Schools*, eds. G. Byrne, P. Kieran, Dublin 2013, pp. 133-143.

considerations, teachers focus predominantly on showing preschool children that catechesis is the real formation strengthening the education to faith and the respect of social norms.

In the preschool teachers' responses, the argument of the lack of or weakening of religious education within families is recurrent. The situation leads to the necessity to take more educational effort by preschool teachers and religion instructors who are responsible for the education to faith at preschool. Agnieszka: "The modern family is preoccupied with day-to-day life where worldly, material matters are the most absorbing. Preschool as a place facilitating the development of a child to a large extent is a perfect place to transfer knowledge about faith and values, which are the topics addressed rarely by families.

Well-thought catechesis is a solid introduction to life as it skillfully combines educating with transferring knowledge. The spirituality of a three-, four-, or even a five-year old child attending preschool is often very limited and it is in the preschool group where children are introduced to prayer and devotion."

On observing the economic, social, and cultural changes, preschool teachers notice the problem of parents' excessive preoccupation with providing their children with constantly improving material conditions, forgetting about the processes of education, including education to faith. Some teachers express their concern very strongly. Beata: "We live in the world of great hypocrisy. Teaching children how to live in the hypocritical world is a task for everyone who respects life. That is why the attack on the truth about the good and the evil destroys the conscience of a child. Education to truth at preschool should be combined with catechesis." It can therefore be assumed that the necessity to search for truth in the postmodern world and acquiring the skill of differentiating the truth from the lies mentioned by the teacher above is in line with the aims of preschool religious education.

The preschool environment is regarded by the surveyed teachers as crucial not only in for a child's social and ethical development but also for the religious formation. Anna: "What is necessary to develop as a person is learnt at preschool: how to live, what to do, how to behave, look, stay awake, think, act. That is why preschool education cannot disregard a child's spiritual education. The relevance of preschool education reveals itself especially where teachers, by means of their work and their own example, make a great impact on the child's development in every sphere, including the spiritual one." It is worth noting that in this response, the interviewee refers to the preschool teacher as a persona who becomes the authority and the role model for a child by giving

good example every day. Interestingly, the respondent does not limit the influence of the teacher to shaping the personality of a child to any specific aspect but emphasizes every possible dimension of a child's education where spirituality becomes equally important as any other sphere of development. According to Anna, not only religion instructors but all teachers together contribute to the integral development of a child by giving their own example. A similar belief is shared by another preschool teacher, Joanna: "While working as a preschool teacher and observing my pupils, I can notice that religious education contributes greatly to the development of friendly attitude towards people. For instance, it is achieved by referring to my pupils' everyday life experiences and interpreting them by means of simple, clear, and correct language, free from diminutives and infantile forms."

It seems that preschool teachers notice not only the need for the presence of religious education at preschool but also for the close cooperation between preschool teachers and religion instructors, predominantly, in the field of shaping a child's pro-social behaviors. Thus, it can be concluded that the similar interpretation of students' experiences shared by all preschool teachers, including religion instructors, enables the child to accept the similar world view and gradual discovery of God. A similar opinion on the need for cooperation between preschool teachers and religion instructors in the situation of limited interest from parents in this respect is expressed by another Respondent – Magdalena: "There is no point complaining about the lack of rules and norms in preschoolers' homes. Simply, it is better to implement them into the children's lives along with the religion instructor. Working together as guidance counselors, we can achieve a lot."

3. Children's or Parent's Faith and Lack Thereof

The interviewed preschool teachers indicate that some parents have certain dilemmas connected to the decision about teaching religion at preschool. Isn't it too early? Wouldn't my child be indoctrinated? Won't they get in my child's head? Isn't it enough that my child begins religious education at primary school? Can my child be considered a believer or not? Some parents are also concerned about additional charges for religion classes at preschool. Therefore one should explain that every child has the right to religious education in every age group

and religious education at public preschools is taking place at the parents' request and is free of charge.

The respondents stress the importance of reminding the parents that the interest in spiritual matters is revealed quite early among preschoolers. Hanna: "I noticed that first questions about God and religious matters are asked by children around the age of three. Omitting this period in child's development is difficult to make up for in the later stages of religious development. That is why I believe that religious education should be part of the curriculum from the early age. It is just like with learning a language which is acquired naturally. Of course, it cannot be a school lecture, therefore a religious instructor should use different types of motor play, games, songs as well as some form of theater. He or she should base the transfer of knowledge on experiences. I don't think that it is too early to teach religious education to 3-, 4-, or 6-year-olds." Ewa emphasizes the fact that limited religious education in families should make preschool teachers address religious matters in every age group. "Back in the days, religious truths were taught at home – now parents are afraid that their children are too young to understand those truths. Children are learning about science, technology, and media, so why are the truths about God more difficult to comprehend? 3- and 4-year-old children have a preschool curriculum which has to be implemented and do not learn about theologically complicated matters at the beginning of their religious education. Unfortunately, many children up to the age of 6 know very little about God, that is why catechesis is their first source of information about God in many cases."

A preschooler has a chance to discover God by the contact with the environment, but crucial for this encounter are those people who are closest emotionally, their vision and lifestyle,⁹ not only parents, grandparents, and guardians, but also teachers. Their attitude towards religion, love and concern for a child and well-balanced cooperation between them lead to establishing solid foundations for a child's education to faith because it is the very example of grown-ups that influences children stronger than words.¹⁰

An interesting opinion which legitimizes teaching about Christianity at preschool is shared by another respondent, Katarzyna: "The voices in the debate about religion at preschool emphasize the existence of nonbelievers. The parents

⁹ See J. Wilk, *Znaczenie pierwszych doświadczeń dla religijnego wychowania małego dziecka w rodzinie*, Lublin 1987, p. 94.

¹⁰ See J. Wilk, *Pedagogika rodziny*, Lublin 2002, pp. 87-102.

who do not believe in God simply do not agree to their children's participation in the class. A 3- or 4-year-old child does something else during this time with another teacher. Is the child going to be happy about it? It is a crucial question here. How will he or she react when the majority of children listen about God and they do not? One has to think about what is more hurtful for their child and what influence it would have on them. If one wonders "Isn't it too early?", he or she should rather ask "Isn't it too early to introduce young children into the complicated considerations of grown-ups about the very existence of God?" Preschool is the complement and extension of what parents do. For those who are bringing their children up in faith from the first moments of their lives, it is natural that the children's faith is deepened by play with their peers. After all, children from a very young age ask themselves what church, cross, and sin are. The majority of parents in Poland are Christians going to church with their offspring. This elementary religious education begins in their homes from very early childhood since many 3-year-olds know how to make the sign of the cross."

Another teacher stresses the need to implement religious education at preschool as it strengthens the process of educating a child to values. Krystyna: "A strong moral value system and the ability to follow its principles in everyday life is the most important capital we should provide children with. Teaching children about values is a task for both parents and teachers. I am more than happy that religious education is made possible at preschool and that we can tell the good news about Jesus Christ to children, parents and even grandparents during the Grandpa's and Grandma's Day in January."

4. Possibilities and Practical Solutions

Some preschool teachers emphasized specific examples of actions referring to the spiritual development of a child. Ilona: "The correct formation through catechesis at preschool to the life of prayer should instruct the child to an individual, trustful, and joyful conversation with God. Child's first prayer should be expressed in their own words, under the supervision of adults, of course. If only we could choose whatever we want so easily... Unfortunately, we cannot fight against nature but our life forces us to make certain choices, including those connected to child-rearing."

Another respondent stressed the importance of preschool celebrations referring to religious holidays. Aurelia: "Currently I work with a group of 3- and

4-year-olds, and when I create thematic decorations for my classroom I do not omit religious topics. For instance, before Christmas I hang the pictures representing Jesus, Mary, and Joseph. Children were very curious about the story behind the birth of Christ in a lowly stable. “Merrily to Bethlehem the shepherds came” has become their favorite Christmas carol. Seeing this great interest among my students, I brought the costumes of Joseph and Mary and a doll played the role of Baby Jesus. Those children who wanted to participate became Joseph, Mary, angels and shepherds. Children acted their roles for parents in our mini Nativity play with the Christmas carols in the background... The joyful atmosphere and the children’s and parents’ experiences united us.”

Preschool teachers strongly emphasize the role of catechesis in the process of social and moral formation of a child. This opinion is supported by the following responses. Gabriela: “In the contemporary world, where all values are gradually disappearing and a constant materialist race is going on, we should remind our children about the basic rules and open their hearts to other people. The attitude of respect towards the beloved ones (the elderly, poor, disabled, sick, and suffering) teaches the child how to cooperate with others and how to help others the way they can, and it also makes us more sensitive to other people’s needs.”

Teachers participating in the study stress the disparity regarding the attitude towards religious education among different preschools in southern Poland. In some of them, teaching about religion is naturally integrated into general preschool education, while in others it has been marginalized. Maria: “Throughout my professional career I had a chance to work in two preschools where the attitude towards religion and religious practice differed dramatically. The first preschool was situated in the rural area, while the second – in the urban area. Just like when we meet a person and the first impression he or she matters a lot, in the case of the first day at work we can be either positively surprised or disappointed. In the first preschool, I was enchanted by the custom of mealtime prayer and blessing from the very beginning. Children were almost nagging me about it and very quickly taught me one of the short mealtime prayers with a smile on their faces. Making prayer an obvious and natural element of their everyday routine was truly charming for me. During the classes which I conducted within the framework of preschool core curriculum, I was repeatedly astonished when children referred to the Holy Bible. It was an amazing experience and a positive surprise. In the second preschool, my attempt to begin mealtime by a short prayer was met with strong criticism from the staff. I was also reminded that such

practice is not welcome. It was caused by the fear that parents sharing other beliefs could be making complaints. As a young teacher, I was so frightened by this incident that I accepted the Principal's "request" about praying at preschool and I have never done it again." This response indicates that general customs and traditions, often included in the preschool's policy or simply implemented and respected by preschool teachers, is what matters to a great extent.

The teachers' responses imply that all of them declaratively and practically support the implementation of preschool catechesis in every age group, beginning from the children at the age of three. However, it needs to be integrated accordingly with the developmental abilities of preschool children. The respondents have presented a very insightful observation of the state of the Polish family. Bearing in mind the weakening of religious practices in the family environment, they agreed that undertaking initiatives connected to educating about religion at preschool seems to be a good idea. The atmosphere of care, kindness, respect, and safety, and also that of order and harmony being created in the preschool environment contributes to developing children's trust towards themselves, others, the world, and God. It helps in discovering the values and norms of the Christian life.

Many research participants stressed the fact that people in Poland live respecting the Christian cultural tradition, hence, the presence of religious symbols, celebration of religious holidays and festivals as well as merging cultural and religious realities is visible also at preschools. Discarding religious elements in the process of education would lead to abandoning the whole cultural heritage. Many respondents shared their personal experience connected to working as a preschool teacher and emphasized the importance of cooperation of everyone who is involved in the process of educating children at preschool. The example of teachers who in a natural way give their testimony that they belong to Jesus inspires children to act accordingly to Christian principles, not only at preschool but also among their peers, family members, Church community, and in the social environment.

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