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Religious education an important dimension of human's education

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Abstract

Discussion and direct observation in schools developed over a significant period of time, a general study of the curriculum for religious education, ideas coming from teachers in different contexts, all related to a press event, were reasons to explicitly trigger our attention on how to make religious education in the schools of Romania.

We organized structured observation and discussion in urban and rural schools and we had the opportunity to involve 174 teachers enrolled in an in-service training within a study of religious education approach in the schools of Romania. This investigation was based on a questionnaire - and focus groups. The teachers' sample represented different specialties from different school levels and different ranges of teaching experience. They belonged to three counties in central and south-eastern Romania. Conclusions of this study highlight the importance and the ticklish trait of religious education. Religious education appears as important dimension/ component of education with important effects on the moral health of the nation, and as a factor of influence of human wellbeing. The paper presents core ideas revealed by the mentioned study.

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1. Introduction

The third millennium of human society came with a new and specific image; complex problems arise. Two concepts are intensively presented in literature: internalization and globalization. Internationalization involves sets of national values which acquire such intensity that they tend to exceed the national boundaries with a wider recognition. They are naturally extended throughout the world. Globalization can be considered a phenomenon with an opposite direction. The process of internationalization involves values coming from different fields: social, moral, religious, scientific, and political and this is not an easy process. The internalization process is highly complex, dynamic and continuous. Naturally, out of the values treasure that have had the power of become international values, there can be selected some of them which show their power of having an impact not only in a certain geographical area but on the whole planet; these can become an overall benchmark, able to be considered values in each of the national contexts that make up the international complex plan. It is assumed that the new millennium will bring a globalized world where "anyone can be someone", whatever which culture or nation the person belongs to. The only condition should be the person's ability of contributing efficiently and effectively to the development of human society, sharing the same sets of basic values. The educational process achieved in national contexts, but with a real openness to the world, to the values and challenges from beyond the national monoculture, could help the internalization process. Education itself is a process with internationalization trends, which could

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mean “expanding and enriching curriculum, building bridges between cultures” (Beazley, 1992 apud Matthews, J. 2002).

Education is the social phenomenon of extreme complexity, essentially human that involves two categories of actors: educators and learners. The educational process ensures values’ transfer from an old generation to a new one. The products of the educational are expressed through the quality of the educated person’s profile that ensures the support of human society development. The possibility of the educated humans, to give this support without national boundaries constrains became a specificity of contemporaneousness. This involves a huge responsibility for education.

Religious values belong to the set of values transmitted through the educational process as a complex whole. Religion has a great impact on the day to day life and it seems to be the strongest anchor of humans, original inhabitants and new comers. This could be considered as a positive aspect. But the religious education becomes a thorny issue in this context. All these aspects represent the fundamental of our interest for the paper’s topic.

2. Specificity of spiritual and religious education as components of educational process

Educational process has been defined as “the entire process of social life by means of which individuals and social groups learn to develop consciously within, and for the benefit of, the national and international communities, the whole of their personal capacities, attitudes, aptitudes and knowledge. This process is not limited to any specific activities”. UNESCO, 1974 (Abdelfattah A., 2001:1).

Education has to be done in accordance with the human rights. One of the important human rights is represented by the freedom of religion; this freedom implies everyone’s right of being educated within the spirit of the personal religion and everybody’s duty to be tolerant with the others’ religious beliefs.

There are a lot of different religious beliefs in the world. But essentially they have some core values which could and should be pointed out within the educational context. Over the periods of childhood and youth, the parents, the specialized educators and the communities should grow children in a nurturing and unambiguous environment. Religious education can receive other nuances if we are able to see only the core issues of the religion, and focus the educators’ action within the formal education context on developing core and common values for all the learners no matter to what religion they belong.

3. Religious education for all together within a tolerant and formative educational environment

3.1. Research bases of an analysis of presumed difficulties

The objectives of this investigation were to identify and analyze the difficulties and the obstacles in front of a new vision of teaching-learning Religion within the Romanian schools.

We presumed, as a hypothesis, that a mentality structured on essential values in order to promote this new vision is not developed yet.

The investigation concerning the level of acceptance of a new vision of teaching – learning Religion in school has been done with a number of 174 teachers from three counties of Romania: Brasov (43%), Buzau (33,9%), and Covasna (17,8%). The most part of the subjects were female (66.7%). We tried to involve teachers with a wide area of expertise because religious education is a topic that implies intimate connections with all the other taught subjects. Thus, the sample covered all the school levels from early education to high school, and representatives of different subjects: Romanian language, technological education, Mathematics, English language, history, physics, French language and economics (in order of frequency). Most of them had an experience of teaching from 3 to 15 years.

The subjects of the inquiry were involved into an in service training that offered the proper context of doing our study using questionnaires and focus-groups.

3.2. Selected results

There are 18 recognized religions/ cults in Romania even if the dominant religion is the Christian- Orthodox one. In this situation, there is the possibility to have in almost each class to have children belonging to different religions, especially in some parts of the country.

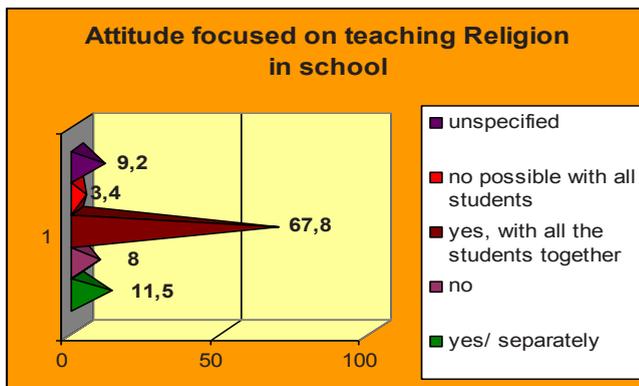


Fig. 1 Teachers’ attitude about religious education

The Religion Education has been introduced within the National Curriculum after 1989. Separated teaching classes were conceived for different religion cults, but not all the official religions asked for being introduced within the official curriculum. First, we have investigated the teachers’ opinion about introducing Religious Education within official curriculum.

Our National curriculum involves the Religious education for all the school levels (primary, low and high secondary). The existence of core values within different religions is a fact highly accepted; accordingly, it might be easy to find out a lot of common ideas and topics, focused on developing the same kind of competencies without being in conflict with any religion. We have investigated the teachers’ opinion about the possibility to realize the religion class with all the children, no matter what religion/ cult they would belong to.

Several possibilities/ alternatives in organizing the Religious Education within the curriculum were suggested aiming to find out the teachers' opinion: *separately* for each type of religion, *with all the students* together focusing the topic on common elements in an ecumenical way, *not at all*. The registered results show a high frequency for the introduction of Religious education in national curriculum *but with all students together with a common curriculum based on shared fundamental moral – religious values* (67.8% of subjects’ answers); the following values represented the preference for separate teaching activities according to the students’ cult. There are only 8% of teachers who consider that it is not suitable to teach religion in school. (Fig. 1)

Teachers consider that it is possible to put together all the students with the condition to not aim to teach the specific ideas of a religion or another. An intercultural approach of religion supported by a high tolerant spirit can offer the educational context of developing students’ curiosity for understanding each other’s, accepting differences by acknowledging the common values.

The intercultural education pleads for a holistic vision about education, promoting the pluralism and the harmony of differences. Within a social and religious context enough heterogenic the presented alternative might be developed. The religious education syllabi involve within their structure and philosophy intercultural aspects with an obvious focus on the spiritual dimension of the personality. The debates emerged the idea that the specific cults’ concepts and philosophy should be approached in the church context, while the school offers the openness to the

universality, tolerance, and a wide acceptance of cultural and religious diversity, based on a better understanding of the specificity of each culture and of each religion. The idea that the teachers of religion and the priests, no matter to what cult they belong, should be an educational team for the best of a nation and of the human being appeared as a core one for an enough large majority of our subjects.

Our research results were completed by direct observation in classroom. This action was facilitated by our status as professors in charge of the students' field training or as members of panels for the degrees in education that imply activities of direct assistance of teaching process. This status offered us the opportunity to carry out our inquiry succeeding to create context of structured observation and discussions following a predesigned pattern. Interesting findings can be emphasized. First of all, the idea of the necessity to create a true committed religious attitude was highlighted. For example, the religious moment at the beginning of a school day should be a less festive one, some teachers said. In a class-team, students can belong to different religions or cults, or some of them could be atheistic students either; this moment should address equally to all these categories being a silent one. Students should pray for themselves, saying in their mind a specific pray for the own religion or, thinking to something pleasant if the student is an atheist. This moment ought to have a huge psychological importance in order to prepare the student's mind and spirit for a committed learning during the entire school day. Praying doesn't mean to say in a mechanic way some religious words; it means to believe and to feel.

The topics chosen to be taught also were emphasized as issues of an ecumenist approach of the religious education in school. Suitable and accessible topics should be selected accordingly to the age of the students; the idea of the necessity to find common topics or topics offering the possibility to be scrutinized from the different religions points of view was stressed, as well. Some possible topics to be approached were named: love; responsibility; charity; liberty of thinking; helping attitude; purity; devotion; the sacredness of all life; the inherent worth of each person; the importance of caring human relationships within a loving community; the enrichment of service to others etc. This kind of topics should be scheduled on the different levels of education being approached accordingly to the psychological specificity of the students' development on different ages. They must be supported by knowledge attentively selected from all the represented religions with core aspects common or not dramatically differentiated. Students could present themselves the Saints celebrated in a specific day, common or not for their religions, talking about them, emphasizing the reasons they are considered Saints for, and pointing out moral values very important for the human being existence.

Holly Days of different religions might be opportunities for students to present different specific traditions, informing each other, valuing the huge treasure of these traditions, learning to understand and accept the real values. It means to teach them to live in diversity, love the others, and help when necessary.

For the high school level, the curriculum could approach topics selected from the history of religions. The students' cognitive development offers the possibility of an effective approach of these kinds of topics. 75.3 % of investigated teachers agreed this idea and only 8.6 % of them considered this approach too difficult or inappropriate (16.1 % are unspecified answers).

This ecumenical educational approach of religion should develop students' competences like: competency of understanding, and further accepting the difference between specific aspects of different religions or cults, the capacity to analyze, compare and value in a positive way the core concepts, rules and traditions of different religions, the tolerant attitude, the real capacity to love the human being next to you, the capacity to value in a positive way the cultural values based on different religions or cults. The results cannot be negative, especially when the world of today and tomorrow tends to be a globalized one.

The problem of religious textbooks was also discussed; a large number of teachers have emphasized a low degree of compatibility of the textbooks' contents to the students' age.

A thorny aspect was represented by the issue of the students' assessment for religious education. Both our questionnaire and the focus groups have investigated this aspect. Teachers emphasized that it is useless to mark religious knowledge; on the other side, religious behaviors are quite impossible to be marked. The results of religious education are implicitly expressed in the overall behavior of students that has its own assessment criteria. Thus, if only 18.4 % of the 174 questioned subjects consider appropriate to have marks for students' acquisitions in religious education field, 79.9 % of our subject find it as unsuitable.

4. Conclusion

The general impact of our debate was a sign of the importance of the religious education in school and, more than this, of the importance to do something in order to create bridges between people, help them to understand, accept and finally love each other.

Our approach is only the first step of a wider and deeper inquiry intended to be developed.

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