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BUILDING MORAL VALUES AMONG STUDENTS IN THE PRIMARY EDUCATIONAL STAGE IN THE PROCESS OF STUDYING RELIGION

Abstract: *The report represents pedagogical and moral-ethical problems related to the teaching of religion in the initial stage of primary education in the Bulgarian educational system. The results of an empirical study were analyzed, which aims to reveal the current state and tendencies in the implementation of the overall educational activity of the religion teacher in primary classes, as well as the moral attitude of the Bulgarian younger generation towards the Christian teaching. The subject of analysis is also the educative potential of the educational content, as well as the specific pedagogical and methodological features of the religious education. A special attention is paid to the role of the family in the complex process of the overall education of the contemporary child and to the building of its spiritual and moral essence.*

Keywords: *religious education, Christian teaching, moral values, moral education*

IZGRADNJA MORALNIH VREDNOSTI KOD UČENIKA U RANOJ FAZI OSNOVNOG OBRAZOVANJA U PROCESU IZUČAVANJA RELIGIJE

Sažetak: *Izveštaj se bavi pedagoškim i moralno-etičkim problemima koji se odnose na nastavu religije u početnoj fazi osnovnog obrazovanja u obrazovnom sistemu Bugarske. Analizirani su rezultati empirijskog istraživanja koje ima za cilj da otkrije trenutno stanje i tendencije u sprovođenju ukupne obrazovne aktivnosti nastavnika religije u nižim razredima osnovne škole, kao i moralni odnos mlađe generacije prema hrišćanskom učenju u Bugarskoj. Predmet analize je takođe i vaspitni potencijal obrazovnog sadržaja, kao i specifične pedagoške i metodološke karakteristike verskog obrazovanja. Posebna pažnja posvećena je ulozi porodice u složenom procesu ukupnog vaspitanja savremenog deteta i izgradnji njegove duhovne i moralne suštine.*

Ključne reči: *versko obrazovanje, hrišćansko učenje, moralne vrednosti, moralno vaspitanje.*

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The role of religion in the complex process of building moral values

The world in which today's children grow up and are educated is surprising and unpredictable with the dynamics of the social processes that take place. The school and the family are faced with the difficult task of preparing the young person for appropriate actions and behaviour in a dynamically changing environment. The education system is expected to function in such a way as to create conditions for the overall development of the child's personality at the various stages of his or her growth. The changing needs of society require corresponding changes in the aims and objectives of education in modern schools. The efforts of the pedagogical community are directed towards finding innovative solutions to traditional problems related to the education of the modern student. Our research interest is focused on one of the important aspects of education related to the development of moral values in students at the primary stage of primary education. We want to reveal the role of religious education in the complex process of forming the moral image of the modern child.

Our main thesis is related to our conviction that religious education forms spiritual and moral qualities that are fundamental for the overall development of the personality and to a large extent determine the nature of relationships and interactions in the social environment. Our research is concerned with revealing the level of moral concepts of good and evil formed in students at the primary school level, the nature of their moral attitudes, their attitudes towards the subject of religion, as well as the role of the family in the formation of spiritual and moral values.

In the various stages of development of Bulgarian society and state, the Christian religion has occupied an important place in Bulgarian education and in the spiritual life of the nation. Christian values play their role in the formation of moral qualities and have an important meaning in our modernity. We see how spiritual values are neglected and how misunderstood tolerance and militant materialism dominate interpersonal, intergroup and international relations.

The understanding of good and evil is at the heart of morality and ethics and is linked to existentially important questions about the nature of suffering, happiness, the meaning of life and salvation, justice, peace and the preservation of the world, love of neighbour and love of God, success, failure, guilt and forgiveness, hope, the kingdom of God, etc. The pedagogical process at the level of primary education should, by its organisation and content, contribute to a great extent to the formation of a comprehensive view of the world around the pupils and to the formation of their world view. Moral education is an integral part of educational activity, and the teaching of religion has its own contribution to the complex process of building the moral foundations of the personality.

As M. Kyuchukova states in the extremely large wealth of ideas and theories explaining the meaning of human existence, the modern person faces the enormous challenge of finding the right answers to the exciting questions about consciousness and existence, and about human relationships (Kyuchukova, 2021, 171). The family, the school and other institutions bear the great responsibility of providing the spiritual and material comfort that the child needs at primary school age. One of the basic laws of personality development is the inverse relationship between age and the rate of spiritual development. The younger the age of the child, the higher the rate of spiritual development. This also determines the great importance of educational actions, influences and interactions within the organised and purposeful pedagogical process and in the informal conditions of the out-of-school environment

Religious education provides an opportunity to lay the foundations for a child's moral behaviour at primary school age. This is achieved by making sense of the moral messages revealed by religious knowledge. In the secular school environment, religion is presented as a significant area of human experience that reveals moral and ethical ideas that are important for society and the individual.

The specificity of religious education and the logic of educational interactions

In the work of teachers, according to E. Vasileva, three main levels can be outlined in the process of forming value orientations that represent the logic of educational interactions: need-motivational, emotional and rational (Vasileva, 2009). At the stage of primary education the emphasis is on the complementarity of the rational and the emotional in the pedagogical process. In the course of pedagogical interaction at the teacher-student and student-student levels, the skilful inclusion of the logical and the situational in the educational process positively influences the cognitive and emotional-active aspects of students' behaviour. In religious education, the strong emphasis on the emotional conceptualisation of the ideas presented enhances the effect on the moral education of the individual.

According to E. Vasileva, the child in the primary school period "is already able to realize basic moral needs and feelings with a positive orientation" (Vasileva, 2009: 34). This is a prerequisite for successful educational interaction of primary school-age children with significant adults – parents, educators and other professionals.

"Moral needs, as a component of the overall system of human needs, are the most persistent impulses and powerful drivers that condition specific behavior in certain situations. Their uniqueness is expressed in the selfless striving of man to create good for the sake of others, even at the cost of sacrifice. As creative beginnings, they are the foundation of human goodness. They are also the most stable

motive for moral behaviour" (Vasileva, 2009: 64). This strong potential of moral needs successfully unfolds in the context of Religious Education and leads to the conscious assimilation of moral ideas, the formation of attitudes, attitudes and values.

Moral values, as the basis of moral culture, determine and motivate moral behaviour and the individual's position in society. "In any case, however, morality encompasses a set of spiritual realities related to the concepts of: good, evil, love, honour, duty, will, dignity, humility, pride, justice, falsehood, shame, injustice, virtue, etc." (Vasileva, 2009: 59).

In the teaching of religion, we find a specificity that is expressed at the level of content, but also at the level of organisation and methodology. This is related to the ideological and moral saturation of the content of the formation and to the specific conditions in which the student falls when he gets to know and empathise with the messages of Christ's teaching. "Christian morality is expressed in the following of Jesus Christ, in the fulfilment of the moral model; Christian ethics ... contains in itself the spirit of Christ and the grace of God, which renew man, transforming him into a new personality capable of developing virtues" (Panchovsky, Kirov, 1996: 192).

In the next part of the report, the above-mentioned reflections on the development of moral beliefs, attitudes and values of pupils in the primary stage of education through the educational potential of Religious Education in Bulgarian schools will be supported by the results of empirical studies conducted by the authors of the report in 2023 and 2024. Here we present just one of the series of empirical studies we have conducted.

Religious education in Bulgarian Schools - from the perspective of Parents and Theologians

The subject of analysis in this paper is not only the specific pedagogical features of religious education at the content and organisational-technical level, but also the educational influences and interactions within the family, which create important preconditions for the effectiveness of moral education. We carried out a survey among parents to find out their opinion on the problem of building moral values through religious education. An online survey of parents and an interview with theologians and teachers of religion were conducted.

The online survey of parents aimed to find out their opinion on the influence of religion on the development of moral qualities and behaviour, as well as the attitude of the Bulgarian family towards Christian teaching. On the basis of this survey, important issues on the subject under consideration from the perspective of parents are revealed. Thirty respondents took part in the survey, of whom 47% were between the ages of 35 and 44, 23% between the ages of 24 and 43, and 9% over the age of 44. The majority of respondents, 90%, were married, 7% were

single parents and 3% were planning to start a family. Of these, 80% had tertiary education, 17% secondary education and only 3% primary education. The sample we have is typical of the young, active part of the population in Bulgaria. Fortunately, at this stage of the development of Bulgarian society, we observe a preserved attitude towards the family as an institution through which the reproduction of society is carried out by the power of education. Another important feature comes to the fore - the value of education. The higher educational level of the majority – 80% of respondents – is also an indicator of the attitude towards education, at least as a formal feature of society. For 17 of the parents surveyed, education is a necessity, 14 of them define it as a high value, and for two it is a priority in life. Parenthood is a conscious choice and a fact of life for 90% of respondents.

When asked "How do you feel about your children's education?," the most important factor was the desire for children to receive the best possible education, cited by 19 of the respondents. A significant 43% of parents seek additional educational opportunities for their children and 13% rely on the quality of education in public schools.

In terms of the factors involved in educating their children, 63% of respondents insisted that they were fully involved in their children's education, while 47% said that education was a joint responsibility of the family and the school.

Of particular interest for the present study are the responses to the questions directly related to religious education. The vast majority of respondents, 87%, identified religion as a very influential factor in children's upbringing. In a different position are 13% of respondents who believe that religion can influence the education of young people only to some extent (10%), and 3% – who deny such an influence. A significant number of parents, 77%, are in favour of the inclusion of religious education in modern Bulgarian schools, while 20% of them are only somewhat in favour of it, and 3% are not against it but have a different position. Regarding the inclusion of their children in religious education, 80% of the parents give a very positive answer, 17% – with some hesitation, and 3% have a different opinion. A large majority of respondents, 63%, say that Religious Education contributes to a great extent to the formation of moral qualities, attitudes and values in pupils, and 33% think that this educational influence is only to a certain extent. All respondents stressed the main role of the family in the process of forming moral values in young people. According to parents, the moral qualities formed first in the family and then in the process of religious education are the basis for the spiritual well-being and future development of their children.

The children of 89% of the parents surveyed are not involved in religious education, probably because many schools do not offer it as an optional subject. According to the majority of parents, the emphasis in religious education should be on concrete examples of moral behaviour and on an understandable interpretation and presentation of religious moral values in contemporary life.

According to the survey, almost all parents believe that the acquisition of basic Christian virtues is necessary for the overall development of the child's personality, making him an example for others, an active and conscientious citizen of society and of the future. The most important virtues and moral values that parents wish to instil in their children are: responsibility, obedience, respect for teachers and parents, honesty, love of God, love of one's neighbour as oneself, charity and mercy. According to the parents, the moral qualities formed first in the family and then in the process of religious education are the foundation for the spiritual well-being and future development of their children.

Five theologians, three of them professors of religion, were interviewed for the study. All the questions are directly related to the role of religion in primary education and the formation of moral values in the course of education. The interview is structured and consists of 8 questions.

The analysis of the interview data showed a great similarity in the positions of the interviewees. All the theologians who took part in the interview expressed the opinion that the family has the most important role in the moral education of children. It is in the family that the assimilation of social norms, moral requirements and patterns of behaviour takes place, mainly through imitation. For this reason, almost all stressed that the adoption of the Christian faith begins with "home education". *Purposeful moral education in the family is also a prerequisite for effective moral education in religious education*. Without exception, all of them pointed out that the role of the religious teacher is extremely important for the formation of moral qualities in the pupils. They stress the importance of his personal example and his deep conviction of the value of Christian virtues. Positive biblically social interaction between teachers and parents is also necessary. Religious education, according to the interviewees, forms moral values, but certain conditions are necessary for this, the most important of which is family education. The education of the child in basic Christian virtues also depends on how attractive and interesting the content of the education is, and how based it is, without overdoing the doctrinal-religious content.

According to all the interviewees, the teaching of Christian virtues is compulsory and necessary for pupils in primary education. In order to avoid aggression among children, to avoid falling into various dependencies, to avoid neglecting and abandoning the necessary respect for authority, "children should be infected with the faith of Christ."

Conclusion

Religious education with its content characteristics and ideological-moral messages, creates conditions for the formation of moral feelings and attitudes in primary school pupils. The pedagogical communication is based on the biblical

faith and the basic common human values. Religious education enables pupils not only to become familiar with the Christian teachings of the Bible and the life of the Lord Jesus Christ, but also to commit themselves to the timeless moral values of Christian morality. To achieve the lofty goal of forming and building moral values, much more is needed than knowledge of Church rules, rites and customs. The education of students in the process of religious education must be based on the principles of Christian moral values and biblical content.

An important indicator and the main educational factor for the formation of moral qualities in children is the family. It is there that the most favourable opportunities and conditions are created for the transmission and assimilation of the parents' way of life, standards of human behaviour, formation of moral consciousness and spiritual-moral principles. In modern social conditions, there are a number of negative influences on the structure of the family in its traditional form. These are liberalism, gender ideology, including the drafting of legal norms and decrees that contradict the Christian, moral, ethical norms of the Bulgarian family. The traditional family is an important prerequisite for the formation of moral values in children and for the formation of a positive attitude towards religious education, where this very model is adopted and based on the Christian faith. The work of promoting spiritual and moral culture is based on involving both adults and children in an accessible understanding of the main traditional spiritual values in the context of Bulgarian national identity.

The words of Jesus Christ to the apostles in the Bible are still relevant today, addressed to both parents and teachers:

"Let the little children come to me and do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of heaven" (Bible, Matthew 19:14).

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