

Spiritual values of non-formal education

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Abstract: Religion has always played an important part in shaping individuals. Religion enhances the best qualities in humans, shapes behaviours, as it sets connections with ethics and morals. Teaching religion in schools adds value to the educational process due to its formative role upon students as religion is the one to set points of reference in one's family life and in society. In order to achieve global and complete education, the regular religious education/instruction delivered in schools should be accompanied and supplemented by religious non-formal religious education.

The purpose of this paper is to identify the most important ways of providing, delivering and achieving non-formal education. The objectives of this paper focus on describing said ways together with the factors which influence the presence of said ways in students' lives. I believe results shall highlight the fact that family, school, the Church, students' social living environment and background are sources of non-formal religious education.

Key words: Non-formal education, religious education, morals and religious values, Religion school club, educational partnerships

1. Religious education – a component of nonformal education

Throughout their lives, individuals are simultaneously or successively influenced by their actions and education. There is no doubt that learning is present in people's lives and changes in their personalities occur constantly – regardless of their development stage. As a result, education and learning prove to be vital elements in people's lives.

Professional literature talks about the concept of "types of education" which are: formal education, non-formal education and informal education. Education by itself cannot be provided without considering the various forms it takes, and their interdependence and interconnection is obvious.

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Non-formal education " comprises all educational activities taking place outside the classroom (extra+para+pericurricular activities) or through optional or non-compulsory activities" (Cucoş, 2006, p. 44). Non-formal education focuses on students, is carried out under an institutionalized framework outside the education system, the activities it comprises are coordinated by qualified personnel and the educational activities – although flexible – reach their expected end. Non-formal education includes activities taking place both outside the classroom and outside of schools: the first category incorporates school clubs on school subjects/ interdisciplinary school subjects school clubs or thematic school clubs, competitions, contests, national contests, artistic or sports groups/teams, etc.; the second category includes site visits, excursions, camps, clubs, going to shows, etc.

The interest students show towards certain school subjects is more than often the stepping stone for the enrichment of knowledge. Their pleasure in discovering new stuff, in finding out more information, in finding answers and solutions to problematic situations, their joy and enthusiasm are some of the features of non-formal education and religious education is part of the above categories.

2. Ways of providing and delivering non-formal religious education

Through the values it promotes, the religious education delivered in schools may trigger a desire to find out more about the world we live in. In this respect, the Religion school clubs, with a religion-themed excursions, religion camps can facilitate the process of acquiring new and more diverse and complex knowledge, and also bring together students with common interests. The Church – important institution in society – always seeks to help and guide those who are searching for God and priests can definitely participate in shaping the young generations, and their contribution is beneficial from an educational perspective as "a religious take on the world places individuals and mankind on a path of moral rectitude" (Cucoş, 1999, p. 93).

Since religious education focuses on values, promotes charity work and helping those in distress, love, respect, truth, it would be best students could accommodate it in their lives and interests as the positive impact upon their development is visible. The orientation in pedagogy in the last decades – which insists on the need of an "axiological education" (Joiţa, 1999, p. 40), meaning an education focused on authentic values – is based upon and promotes generally accepted social values. Religious education carries and generates such values that have an impact on one's both body and soul as men are complex human beings.

"Religious values are integrative. They integrate, unify, bring together in a coherent and global unit all values within man's conscience" (Vianu, 1998, p. 117). By their universally valid and « alive » /permanent character despite the passing of time, the values promoted by religion find their place in the mind and interests of students, no matter their age.

56 middle school students and 52 high school students have been surveyed with regard to the role religious values may have in their lives. When asked "Do you believe religious teachings can influence your behaviour?" their answers were mostly positive, as shown below:

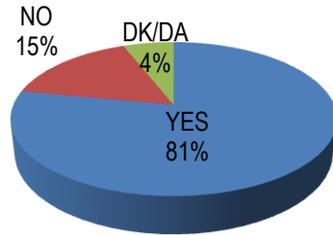


Fig.1 Chart showing students' opinions on whether religion-related notions can influence their behaviour

Families play a significant part in this outcome, children being oriented towards morality by their parents and grandparents – the people closest to them. By opposing good with bad, leading by example, or having age-appropriated discussions on such matters, families set the grounds of moral personalities and characters.

When asked "Was it within your family that you acquired your first knowledge of religious matters?" students answered mostly affirmatively:

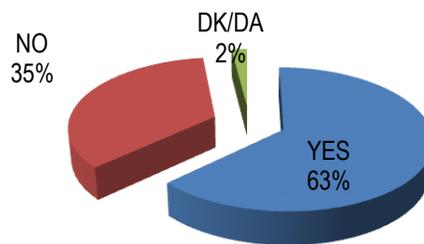


Fig. 2 Chart showing students' answers with regard to families' part in getting them familiarized with religion-related notions

Teaching and instilling moral values and principles does not come down only to developing, debating and illustrating certain values, norms, or moral rules but it also depends on the manner all these are incorporated in the system of knowledge and values, and the manner in which they mirror themselves in one's behavior. Affects (emotions, feelings, etc.) which accompany the elements of morale determine their appropriation by individuals, acting from within upon conduct/behaviour. Affectivity is the energetic sub-layer which makes it possible for norms and moral rules to be expressed in one's conduct/behaviour. The correlation between the cognitive component and the affective one has specific age and context characteristics. That way parents and close people to children can guide children on the path of morality, in a tactful, skilful, patient and loving manner, through short stories and appropriate explanations. "Children who are raised within families sense from when they are still in their parents' arms the parental love, see through their own eyes the power of love and learn from their parents' words the

language which enables them to decipher their thoughts and feelings, and so they activate and grow the seeds of the gifts within their souls" (Felea, 2009, pg, 24).

Non-formal education – a form of education to which students participate voluntarily, wanting to learn more, where initiatives are welcomed, supported and promoted, and positive feedback – even if not a purpose in itself – is very much welcomed, has strong educational and formative impact. Religion school clubs are additional activities to which children participate voluntarily as they consider and feel they must know, and are able to know more on religious notions and themes but also because there are good communication channels between them and their teachers/instructors. Teachers, in turn, relying on good religion curriculum, can bring additional information by adjusting and adapting the stories based on children's needs through the examples they provide for debate, by engaging students in discussions since dialogue is a fundamental means of communication.

Religion school clubs – activities taking place within schools, under the guidance of the course coordinator or instructor – are designed for the participants. The Religion teacher, familiar with his students and thus their expectations, develops together with them the topics of the Religion school club, and, in doing so, creativity is constantly encouraged. Also, there is an emphasis on establishing a natural connection between what students know and what they want to find out, between what they can do and what they wish to be able to do. Designing opportunities and contexts in which students take decisions on their own in difficult, conflicting situations and circumstances develops thinking autonomy.

Depending on the topics debated, the Religion teacher may co-opt in his activity, various professionals, teachers of Romanian/ Philosophy/ History/ Pedagogy/ Psychology/ Visual Arts/ Musical Education/ priests/ ethnologists/ ethnographers/ museographers / men of culture/ writers, etc., all bringing their contribution to the development of students. Interdisciplinarity enables broadening one's cultural horizon and one's access to other fields of knowledge. "The conclusions is that the right timing, people and circumstances must be identified in order to receive and disseminate the Word" (Cucuș, 1999, p.85).

Activities taking place within Religion school clubs can be done as part of partnerships too. Such an educational partnership which would involve the Religion teacher and the Romanian teacher helps students in "deciphering" and understand the text. It is possible to discover the beauty of the Romanian language by studying religious texts too and, in turn, religion may be present in the literary texts too, especially as some Romanian – but not only – writers, have theological education background and their works mirror that. Lucian Blaga, Ion Agârbiceanu, Ion Creangă, Gala Galaction, Tudor Arghezi and many others have graduated from theological schools or have been active religious people. In fact, most writers write animated by their belief that literature is some means of achieving formal instructions and education, of bringing knowledge closer, and a writer is "an educationalist if not a teacher" as Romanian writer George Călinescu states (2003, pg. 601). Through their work, each writer brings their own contribution in educating those who read their works. Through their complexity, characters sum up moral traits and the Religion teacher along with the Romanian one, tactfully and skilfully submits these characters to a detailed analysis enabling students to expand their knowledge. For each of us, the books we have read became points of

reference for our day-to-day lives. We have all learned how important it is to listen to our parents, to remember and consider the advice they have given us, to help those in distress/need, how important it is to defend justice and the truth, etc. – all these have an impact on our development from a moral and human perspective.

Through the help of History teachers, History has its own place in the moral and religious education of students. Throughout time, religion has been within the Romanian territory a factor of union, having a major contribution in maintaining our identity as people and as a country. By finding out information about an event, a monastery, a religious establishment from a historic perspective, children understand the connection time sets between people and places.

The relation a Religion teacher can establish with a Visual Arts Teacher can have as objective, for instance, painting icons on glass. Getting close to God can be done in several ways and joy is part of the path to divinity. Religious exhibitions, conversations with painters are means of spiritual enrichment.

Priests are servants of the Church. By their devotion and their desire to get closer to God, priests have chosen or were chosen for the mission to spread faith. A priest's participation in a Religion school club weighs heavily and him getting involved in explaining some tales or teachings always remains with those present, in their minds and souls.

The Religion school club is a good opportunity for developing a sense of community belonging and a type of community-oriented behaviour. The attention given to children in distress, to orphans, to abandoned children, to poor families and the elderly, etc. shapes and makes students more attentive to the world around them and their support is not just material or financial but more of an emotional nature.

Teachers/instructors can prepare students for religious competitions and contests. Such events can be organised within a class of students or of a school but most certainly competing with students from other schools can increase the students' interest in such activities, the amount of and complexity of the topics taught, which in turn increases the involvement, motivation and successful results of students.

Libraries – whether school libraries or public ones – have their own contribution in providing non-formal religious education. Religious books and stories have been written out of children's desire to find out more and the accessible layout of the text and the incorporation of pictures increase significantly their appeal.

School festivities, musical and religious plays are complex activities which combine traditions with talent. Children express their feelings and emotions through songs, poems and plays and the beauty of the moment stays with them for a long time.

Religious school trips, excursions are also means of spiritual enrichment of students. Such activities may be initiated by instructors but also by students' families. The Horezu Monastery, the painted churches of the Northern Moldavia (the *Adormirea Maicii Domnului/The Death of the Virgin Mary* Church of Humor village, the *Tăierea capului Sfântului Ioan Botezătorul/The Beheading of Saint John the Baptist* Church of Arbore village, the *Sfântul Gheorghe/Saint George* Church of Voroneț village, the *Învierii Church/ Church of Resurrection* of Sucevița village), the wooden churches in the Maramureș region, the fortified churches in the Transylvania region are on the UNESCO

World Heritage List for Romania. These assets of the Romanian people enchant those who visit them and by sharing information about them with children, local people and priests become co-participants in providing knowledge and in achieving spiritual fullness.

Non-formal religious education is naturally completed by churches contribution and families are those who more than often guide children towards this type of education. This historic institution has always had as objective educating people as the first schools have operated under their guidance. Priests have always been the ones to impart teachings, moral principles of life, and students, by participating to religious service, complete and enrich the knowledge bestowed upon them at school during Religion classes, at the Religion school clubs, etc. In fact, Religion textbooks take inspiration from the Holy Books, and their authors observe the principles the Holy Books are based upon.

As non-formal education also includes radio and T.V. shows especially designed for students as well as school magazines, students can inform and form themselves through these means too.

3. Conclusions

Non-formal activities carried out both in and out of schools blend together with the activities specific to formal education and with the characteristics of informal education. In a world of constant progress, teachers/ instructors cannot "barricade" themselves in schools as if in a citadel but they must get through to the community through different means. It is thought that non-formal education is "or/and carried out outside the statutory framework of schools, having a certain degree of autonomy, differentiated objectives, involving other social factors, including compensation attributions towards schools, specifics-orientated, and in tight partnership with schools" (Ilinca, Herlo, Binchiciu, Uzum, Curetean, 2005, p. 75). Schools establishing partnerships with families, churches, cultural institutions can only have a positive impact on students, each strengthening in their own way the development of moral personality.

All in all, non-formal education gets children in touch with real life, with other people, expanding their knowledge and life experiences. In order to get such results, involvement, interest, enthusiasm, curiosity, energetic, communicative and full of initiatives people are a prerequisite. Everything counts: from the type of relation teachers establish with their students, to teachers' receptivity to children's needs, the attention given to age and individual specificities, etc. As shown in this paper, non-formal religious education can be delivered and achieved both in and out of schools, and whether a Religion teacher is present or not depends on the manner this type of education is provided. There is a single common purpose for everyone involved and this purpose focuses on students as they are the elements that trigger all actions mentioned above.

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