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DESIGNING AND IMPLEMENTING MORAL EDUCATION IN ROMANIAN PRIMARY SCHOOL

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Abstract

Moral education is a complex activity through which the individual is transformed, both cognitively and especially in an affective-volitional way. Teachers exert a strong moral influence on students, not only making them behave in a certain way, but also making them want to do so. Through the present research, we aimed to find out whether the teachers receive training that supports them in designing and carrying out moral education activities, and to identify the way in which they are carried out in primary school. We administered an opinion questionnaire to 161 primary school teachers and conducted a series of analyses based on the responses. The research revealed that 35.4% of the respondents think that they did not receive a proper initial training, meant to support them in the activities of moral education they carry out with students, and even the offer of the programmes of continuous education for this segment is not satisfactory for 32.9% of them, and 46.6 % think that no importance is attached to this side of education. The sources used to design moral education activities are examples of good practice (80.1%), websites for teachers (73.9%) and personal experience (73.3%), while methodological guides and journals are the least used (31.7% and 21.1%, respectively). As moral education methods, teachers prefer moral conversation, moral example, didactic play, and explanatory reading, and the method that is used most rarely is dramatization.

Keywords: Moral education, primaryschool, professionaltraining

1. Introduction

Teaching in today's socio-cultural contexts, marked by an increasing value decentralization (Cucoş, 2017), is not a simple task. The directions in which the educational system evolves are determined by the rapid transformations that occur in the development of society. The teacher has to adapt much faster, compared to the previous stages of educational development, to all the changes that come, including through the increasingly accelerating progress of science (Sava & Dănilă, 2019).

Such an incisive penetration of electronic devices in people's lives brings, besides its many benefits, also disadvantages, such as the fact that the influences to which children are subjected are more difficult to control, and the use of media by parents leads to an increase in the interest that children show towards these devices (Opriş, 2017).

Many times, moral education is less valued in families, some of them suffering from the departure of the parents abroad, or when the parental control is not enough (Opriş, 2020), and the models that children come in contact with, especially in the online environment, are at odds with the values transmitted by school or the ones parents promote at home. Therefore, research conducted in recent decades and educational practice show that the role of the teacher in the child's moral development must increase, being forced to cover the contribution that the family environment fails to have in the formation of consciousness and civic conduct (Krettenauer, 2021).

2. Problem Statement

Moral education is the systematically organized activity aimed at the process of transforming the individual according to the values, norms and moral principles that he gradually learns and then imposes on himself. There is a cognitive and an affective-volitional side of this process.

The achievement of moral education depends on those around the child, the meanings society attaches to values and, not at least, the way each individual adapts to social norms (Curren & Ryan, 2020).

In school, one of the greatest challenges is the established relationship between knowledge and behaviour (Dewey, 1972). On the one hand, teachers have to impart knowledge about values, norms and moral principles, and on the other hand, they have to design and create concrete situations in which personal relationships are established and certain behaviours are manifested. Many aspects of school life are themselves components of moral education (Maftei, 2020). Research shows that even the interaction between teachers has an impact on the moral development of the student (Hansen, 2001), as does the simple discussion of values that the teacher has with students (Blatt & Kohlberg, 1975). Research also shows that, lately, the contribution of the family to the realization of the moral-religious foundation of the child's personality has diminished and that society expects the school to make up for this (Opriş, 2020).

In order to achieve its objectives, moral education in school must awaken in the students the need for desirable behavioural actions. Children are tomorrow's adults who will influence society for at least a generation (Opriş & Scheau, 2015), so the teacher's mission is a complex one, since he/she must help the student to know what the world in which he lives expects from him, to make him behave in a certain way

and especially to make him want it. In fact, the aim is to consciously shape the moral personality of the learner, in accordance with the requirements of society (Nicola & Farcaş, 1999).

Primary school is a very important period in a child's moral development. The emotional life is an intense one, as it is during this age segment that the foundations of personal and moral feelings are laid, foundations on which character traits will later be built. Values such as respect, fairness, responsibility, conscientiousness are emerging (Neacşu& Suditu, 2020). Also, the need to start moral education at an early age is justified by the ease of forming automatisms at the basis of behavioural skills (Boldirescu & Petrovschi, 2016).

At primary school level in Romania, moral education is not only carried out in specific subjects such as personal development or civic education, but also through the other school subjects, with values being transmitted through their content. Extracurricular activities carried out with the explicit purpose of forming students' conscience and moral behaviour are also of great importance in this respect.

In terms of training the primary school teaching staff in Romania, the problem of the lack of programmes of continuous training was highlighted by Gabriel Albu (2014), through the research realised in 2014, that shows the fact that management programmes, computer-based training, as well as the active participatory learning programmes come first, and the moral side is completely neglected, although a real need to prepare teachers in this respect is obvious.

At the international level, Janet Orchard (2021), claims in a study carried out in 2020, that it is necessary to focus on the values and ethics in the professional formation of the teaching staff, not only because of the complexity of the relationships in school environment, but also because of the role that teachers have in the moral formation of those they teach.

In this context, the paper aims to investigate, on the one hand, the extent to which initial and in-service education programmes meet the needs of teachers who carry out moral education activities, and on the other hand, the way they are designed and implemented in primary classes, as well as the difficulties that teachers face in this endeavour.

3. Research Questions

Through our research, we aimed to find out whether primary school teachers receive relevant training to support them in the moral formation of students, how the instructional-educational process in the field of moral education is currently carried out in schools, whether there is a correlation between the age or level of training of teachers for primary education and the sources used in the design of moral education activities or the methods used in order to form the moral conscience and conduct of the young school children.

4. Purpose of the Study

The present research aims to carry out an analysis of the initial training of teachers in Romania on aspects subsumed to moral education, as well as of the needs regarding continuous training on this classical dimension of education. The research was carried out starting from the following hypothesis: training of primary school teachers does not currently cover the needs and challenges they face when

designing and carrying out moral education activities in school, in contrast to the communist period, and teachers with less work experience feel this lack more acutely.

The research also aims to identify the sources that primary school teachers use when they design such activities and if they prefer certain methods when carrying out activities with the specific purpose of the moral formation of students, depending on the level of training, work experience or the age of the respondents.

5. Research Methods

The research data were collected using an online questionnaire applied to a number of 161 teachers working in primary education throughout Romania, and the collected data were then statistically processed through the SPSS program and analysed in relation to the hypothesis and the assumed objectives.

Respondents are mostly female (95.7%) and aged between 25 and over 55, with high school (1.9%), post-secondary school (1.9%), bachelor's (59.6%), and master's (34.2%) or doctoral degrees (2.5%).

6. Results

In order to identify the extent to which initial and in-service training meets the needs of teachers in terms of their preparation to shape the moral conscience and conduct of students, respondents were asked to rate, from 1 to 5 (1 – lowest value, 5 – highest value) statements about how they were supported in their training to achieve moral education in school.

Thus, in the case of the statement *"In the initial training I had a teaching subject/a course in the curriculum that trained me in the realization of moral education in children"*, 22.36% of the respondents gave a mark 1, 13.04% gave a mark 2, 12.42% gave a mark 3, a mark 4 was given by 21.74% of all those who participated in the survey, and the maximum mark was given by 30.43% of the teachers, as reflected in Figure 1:
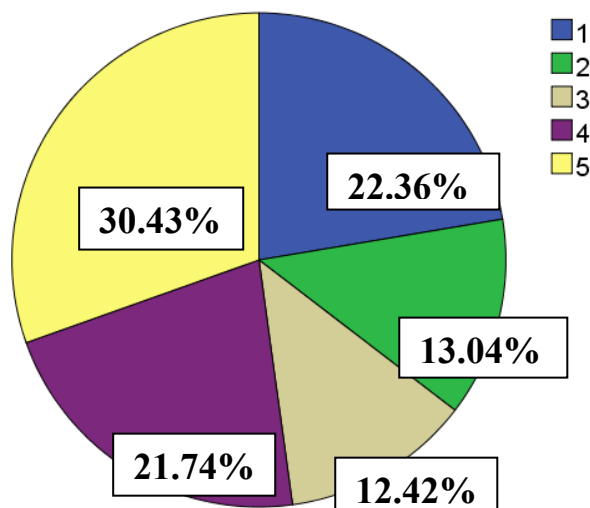
Figure 1. Marks given to the existence of a course in initial training aimed at the field of moral education

Correlating the responses with teacher's work experience, we could observe that the most of the 5 and 4 marks were given by the category of teachers having over 25 years of work experience and those between 16 and 25 years of work experience (Table 1).

Table 1. Marks given to the existence of a course in initial training aimed at the field of moral education, according to the work experience

		1	2	3	4	5	Total
	under 5 years	3.11%	0.62%	0.00%	0.62%	3.11%	7.45%
Work	5 - 15 years	6.83%	1.24%	1.86%	4.35%	1.86%	16.15%
experience:	16 - 25 years	4.97%	5.59%	3.11%	8.70%	9.32%	31.68%
	over 25 years	7.45%	5.59%	7.45%	8.07%	16.15%	44.72%
	Total	22.36%	13.04%	12.42%	21.74%	30.43%	100.00%

Regarding the provision of in-service training courses to support teachers in designing and implementing moral education activities, 19.9% of respondents gave a grade 1, 13% a grade 2, 22.4% a grade 3, 24.2% a grade 4, and the highest grade was given by 20.5% of teachers who responded.

When analysed by age segment, it can be seen that the primary school teachers who gave this statement the highest scores, of 4 and 5, are in the 46 and 55 age group (29.4%, respectively, 25.5%) and over 55 age group (32% and 28% respectively). This could be translated by the fact that the teaching staff trained during the communist period benefited from an initial training with a greater emphasis on moral education than those trained after the 1990's.

The respondents who gave the lowest scores were mainly post-secondary school graduates (66.7%), but also high school graduates (33.3%), with the latter category scoring no 4 or 5.

On the other hand, for the statement *"I informed myself on these aspects, because of the low attention paid to this dimension of education in initial/continuing teacher training"*, almost half of the respondents gave the highest score (46.6%), 28% of them gave a grade 4, grade 3 was the choice of 16.8% of the respondents, 5% chose grade 2, and the minimum grade was given by only 3.7% of the participating teachers (Figure 2).
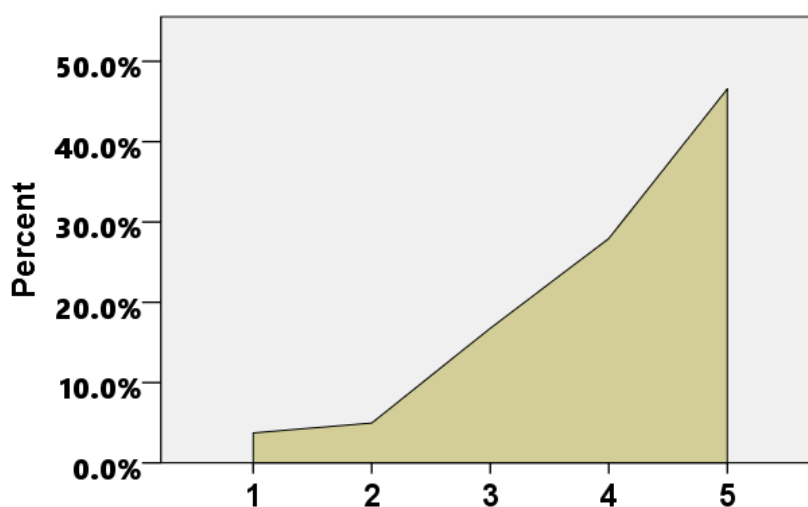
Figure 2. Scores given to the need for information on their own, due to the scant attention to moral education

The majority of teachers rated the statement 4 and 5, regardless of age or level of preparation.

The data collected show the respondents' opinion on the interest given to moral education, both in the initial training, through the curriculum for the preparation of future teachers, and in the continuous training, through the programmes provided by the institutions in charge. Although the importance of carrying out activities aimed at forming pupils' moral conscience and conduct is recognized, those who have to do it lack the necessary support and have not been sufficiently guided in this respect, and are thus forced to obtain information from sources that are not always official, the consequence being a moral education that sometimes depends on the perception and availability of the teacher leading the class of students, and on the importance he or she attaches to such activities.

Regarding the sources that teachers turn to when designing moral education activities, respondents had to choose 3 out of 5 possible options: their own experience, methodological guides, specialized journals, examples of good practice and websites for teachers. Most people opted for examples of good practice (80.1%), with websites for teachers in second place (73.9%), followed quite closely by their own experience (73.3%). The lowest scores were for methodological guides and for journals (31.7% and 21.1%, respectively) (Table 2).

Table 2. Sources used by teachers to design moral education activities

source	percentage answers
examples of good practice from the work of colleagues	80.1%
websites for teachers	73.9%
own experience	73.3%
methodological guides	31.7%
specialized journals	21.1%

Linking the age of the respondents to the choices made in terms of the source used, it can be seen that those who choose their own experience are predominantly teachers over 55 years old (84 % of them), examples of good practice are preferred by the respondents aged between 26 and 35 (93.3% of this age group), and websites for teachers are the preferred source for all young people under 25 (Table 3).

Table 3. Preferred sources for designing moral education activities, by age of respondents

category of age	own experience	methodological guides	specialized journals	examples of good practice from the work of colleagues	websites for teachers
under 25 years old	60%	40%	20%	60%	100%
26-35 years old	53.3%	33.3%	33.3%	93.3%	66.7%
36-45 years old	80%	26.2%	20%	80%	69.2%
46-55 years old	66.7%	39.2%	19.6%	78%	78.4%
over 55	84%	28%	20%	80%	76%

Depending on the last form of education completed, it can be seen that those with doctoral degrees prefer examples of good practice and the websites, those with a master's degrees and bachelor's degrees use mainly their own experience and examples of good practice as sources, teachers with post-secondary schools unanimously chose specific websites, and high-school graduates show preference for their own

experience and examples of good practice (Table 4). This can be explained by the fact that, in general, primary school teachers graduating from Pedagogical High School, have more experience than other categories, who have benefited from a wider range of forms of education in Romania after the 1990s, at the age of their initial training.

Table 4. Preferred sources, according to teachers' level of training

level of training	own experience	methodological guides	specialized journals	examples of good practice from the work of colleagues	websites for teachers
PhD	25%	50%	50%	75%	75%
Master's degree	78.2%	40%	20%	78.2%	67.3%
Bachelor's degree	72.9%	28.1%	20.8%	81.2%	77.1%
post-secondary	33.3%	0%	33.3%	66.7%	100%
high school	100%	0%	0%	100%	66.7%

In order to identify the most frequently used methods of moral education, respondents were asked to indicate the frequency of use of moral conversation and storytelling, moral example and exercise, didactic play, dramatization and explanatory reading, choosing between *rarely, often* and *very often.* The answers show that the methods teachers mostly use in moral education are moral conversation (57.1%), moral example (52.2%), didactic play (48.4%), and explanatory reading (46%). Among the methods often used are moral storytelling (53.4%) and moral exercise (55.3%), and the method about which 41% of the respondents tell it is rarely used is dramatization. One of the reasons could be the fact that it requires more time in order to be put into practice.

In terms of teachers' preferences for a particular method, according to age groups, it can be seen that all the primary school teachers in the very young age group, under 25, use the didactic play very often, 80% of those between 26 and 35 years old, as well as 72.5% of the respondents between 46 and 55 years old prefer moral conversation, moral storytelling is more popular among those under the age of 25 (60%), and moral example is used mostly by teachers aged 46 - 55.

According to the last form of education, the methods most frequently used by teachers with doctoral degrees are moral conversation (100%), and moral example (75% of them), while those with Bachelor's degrees prefer didactic play (50%) post-secondary school graduates equally use the didactic play and the moral conversation (66.7%) very often, and high school graduates find moral example (100%), and moral conversation (66.7%) more suitable.

7. Conclusions

Analysis of the data confirms the research hypothesis, initial and continuous training of teachers for the moral formation of the students from the recent decades are not seen by primary school teachers as ones to significantly support them in the achievement of the finalities of this dimension of education.A percentage of 35.4% of respondents gave grades of 1 and 2, and 52,17% gave grades of 4 and 5, the most of them with doctoral studies (75%), and the least having post-secondary education (0%).The fact that not even a graduate of post-secondary school declares himself satisfied with his training, in relation to the moral education, should notify the leaders in education to reconsider the initial training offered by these

institution, in which primary school teachers train.On the other hand, when answering the question *"I informed myself on these aspects, because of the low attention paid to this dimension of education in initial/continuing teacher training"*, the teachers affirm that they actually carried out the training themselves.

The possibility to participate in in-service training courses, organized with the explicit purpose of training teachers to design and carry out moral education activities was rated highest by only 20.5% of respondents, and considered as non-existent or almost non-existent by 32.9% of the teachers surveyed, which gave grades 1 and 2. The lack of training programmes, meant to help teachers in this respect is highlighted even more clearly by the fact that almost half of primary school teachers (46.6 %) consider that little importance is given to this side of education, and they are forced to inform themselves on issues related to the moral formation of their students.

It is also noted that the sources used by teachers are mostly examples of good practice from the work of colleagues, specific websites and their own experience, while methodological guides and specialized journals are quite rarely used. One explanation is the rather low supply of these on the Romanian market. The most commonly used teaching methods in moral education at primary school level in Romania are: moral conversation, moral example, didactic play and explanatory reading, and the method most rarely used in the classroom is dramatization.

The research is relevant by the fact that it sounds the alarm about the mismatch between the initial and also continuous formation of the primary school teaching staff, and their needs on the design and implementation of the activities of moral education. It also, highlights the fact that the editorial supply in this area is quite reduced on the Romanian market, or that the existing materials cannot be considered a real help to the teachers in their practical activity.

Although it is unanimously acknowledged that moral education is of great importance from the social point of view, as well as in terms of children's personality development, it has not yet received the attention of educational decision-makers. The need for increased interest in this area is all the more apparent in the current times which are characterized by a marked relativity of values and an obvious tendency towards superficiality.

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