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**NON-CONFESSIONAL NON-FORMAL RELIGIOUS
EDUCATION IN THE PROJECT OF FINNISH SCHOOL OF
SIBIU**

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Abstract

Since education involves interrelationship and freedom, sharing and empowering through research, the project of full man education, namely mind, body and soul cannot be ignored by the exigencies of a modern and active school in the current socio-cultural dialogue. Teaching religion in the multilinguistic and multicultural context of the Romanian-Finnish School in Sibiu is a challenge that determines new research in the religious education field and methodology in order to optimize the teaching process. The class of spiritual and religious education aims to “befriend” child to himself as “homo religious”, releasing him from the ideologizing his consciousness be it religious or of any other kind. It also contributes to the moral, social and spiritual development of the child and prepares him/her for a responsible religious pluralism, offering an alternative to live the values of communication, communion, and spirit of justice, specific to the religious field. This study sums up the first three years experience of teaching religious education in the primary Finnish School of Sibiu and presents some of the findings of that period, during which we have been looking for an appropriate approach of religious education to respond both to the requirements of the child-centered educational vision of the Finnish School and the relationship between particularity and pluralism. The currently research is ongoing, since the cultural, linguistic and religious landscape of Finnish School in Sibiu has significantly changed in the present year.

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1. Introduction

Taking into account that religion contributes to both cultural and moral education of man; that a responsible citizen is a citizen with a strong identity, who knows and understands the civic and ethical dimension of religion; that the European culture is based on the Judeo-Christian values; and moreover the development of the spiritual intelligence is one of the requirements of maturation and valuation of human being's life-experiences and fulfillment, a holistic project of educating man, namely body-mind and spirit, cannot be missed out in a curricula of a modern school, active in the socio-cultural dialogue. Finnish School in Sibiu (FSSB) as a product of Finnish education transfer in the Romanian field, offers a space of multicultural and interreligious experience, including children with different cultural and religious backgrounds, encouraging meaningful interpersonal relationships, freedom, responsibilities, happiness and the development of skills that permit lifelong learning. In this pluralistic context and integrative understanding of education, the religious education should play an important role. This study sums up the first three years experience of teaching religious education in the primary FSSB, when we have been looking to find an appropriate approach of religious education in order to correspond both to the requirements of the child-centered Finnish educational vision of the School and the relationship between particularity and pluralism. The currently research is ongoing, since the cultural, linguistically and religious landscape in FSSB has significantly changed, especially in this third year, when children of different cultural, religious or free-religion backgrounds have come to learn here.

2. Problem Statement

2.1. Approaching religious education

Very important for the content and process of religious education is to define the term 'religion'. There are particular approaches to the study of religion influenced by the attitudes of the society concerning the subject. Therefore, we speak about anthropological, sociological, historical, theological, philosophical, and psychological approaches, which lend themselves to particular kinds of educational programs. In education, religions are usually considered "as metaphysical worldviews, as cultural systems, as sources of social bonding and identity, as traditions of spiritual wisdom for life, as belief systems, as «world religion», as «ways of life», as «ways of salvation», or as «beliefs in and/or expressions of the Sacred»" (Hession, 2015, p. 88-89).

The social understanding of cultural and religious realities (Necula, 2017); the relationships among state, churches/ religious communities and educational institutions; as well as diverse ways to understand education are influential in shaping the model of teaching religious education in basic and compulsory schooling system. Religion is confessionally taught in most of the European states, since Judeo-Christian values (Hayon, 2009; Hannam, 2010) are recognized to be at the heart of European culture and civilization. Of the 46 member states of the Council of Europe (in 2007), only in three states religion is not taught in public schools (France, Albania, and Macedonia). Religious education is compulsory in 25 states, in the rest it is optional or voluntary (ECHR held on October 9, 2007, para. 30). In most of the countries, it is confessionally taught (Basilica News Agency of the Romanian Patriarchate). In this case, the religious communities are responsible for it; content, teacher and children belong to a common faith of a specific confession and children are separated in different faith groups. Nonconfessional model

occurs when religious education is usually a compulsory subject for all children. In this case, education is provided by the state, which is 'neutral' in respect to worldviews including religion. One may observe that "there is nothing neutral or value-free about any system of schooling, secular or faith-based; they each propose a certain vision of reality and of human life as the most true or real" (Hession, 2015, p. 42).

In Finland, secular state, the Evangelical Lutheran Church is awarded a special position in legislation and plays an important role, influencing the public life, organizing the content of religious education in public schooling, establishing the holidays of the country. The majority of the population is religious affiliated predominantly with the Evangelical Lutheran Church. On the background of increasing secularization, from the 1950's with a 95% membership rate there has been an emphasized decrease to the 75,3% in the 2013 and 72% in 2017 census (Merenmies, 2017; The Church in numbers, 2018). The Orthodox Church of Finland also held a special status but has a steady membership of 1% of the population. On the other hand the percentage of the population with no religious membership grew from the meagre 2,8% in the 1950's to 10,2% in the year 1990. In 2013 this number was at 22,1% (Merenmies, 2017). The percent of "the others" grew up from 0,5 percent in 1950 to 1,5 percent in 2013 and it is considered low compared to the number and variety of religious communities – especially communities of Muslim immigrants – that has greatly grown during the same time (Merenmies, 2017). Pupils and students receive religious education according to their own religion, if the denomination is registered in Finland. The contents of religious education in each religion are based on that particular religion, but other religions and worldviews are studied as well. National Framework Curricula for religious education is written for Evangelical Lutheran, Orthodox, Catholic, Islamic, Jewish, Buddhist, Christian Community, Latter Day Saint, Free Church, Adventist, Baha'i, Hare Krishna and Herran kansa ry religious education. Children who do not belong to any religious group can choose between Religious Education and secular Ethics (Religious Education in Finland, 2018). In 2012 91,9% of pupils in comprehensive school took part in Evangelical-Lutheran religious education, 1,4% in Orthodox, 1,5% in Islam, 0,5% in other religions ja 4% in secular Ethics. According to some studies, many Finnish children are 'officially' Evangelical Lutheran but 'don't really believe in anything' and the same is true for their parents (Merenmies, 2017, p. 7). The religious education is a compulsory subject both in comprehensive Finnish schools (7-16 years) and in senior/upper secondary Finnish schools (16-18 / 19 years). It is "an informative education offered by the society, the objectives and contents of which differ clearly from the religious education offered by religious communities", according to the National Core Curriculum for Basic Education and the National Core Curriculum for Upper Secondary Schools (Religious Education in Finland, 2018). The objectives of religious education in schools are to obtain a broad and diverse general education regarding religions and worldviews; get familiar with one's own cultural heritage and other worldviews and developing an ethically responsible attitude in life; help to understand the meaning of religion to an individual, and understand effects of religion in local, national and global communities. According to studies, Finnish people appreciate unbiased religious education (Religious Education in Finland, 2018). In this perspective, teachers do not have to belong to any denomination and they are educated in universities.

Romania, secular state awards the Romanian Orthodox Church (Necula, 2017) as well as the other Churches and denominations that are recognized in the national history of Romania and in the life of the Romanian society an important role in legislation (Law no. 489/2006, ch. 2, art. 7 (2)). The religious

education is assured through legislation both in state and in private schooling system. 'Religion' as subject is part of the common "trunk" and taught in Romanian schools for all 18 recognized cults (Methodology of organizing the teaching of the Religion subject in pre-university education, 2015). Parents or guardians have the right to opt out for the minor children's religious education, according to their own beliefs (Law no. 489/2006, ch. 1, art. 3 (1)). In the state schools, the teachers are named with the agreement of the cult they represent and according to the law. If a school cannot have religion teacher belonging to the cult the pupils are affiliated, they are permitted to prove the study of religion with a certificate of their cult. The cults have the right to found and administrate institutions for training of worship personnel, religious teachers etc. (Law no. 489/2006, ch. 1, art. 33 (1). They elaborate their curricula and syllabuses for pre-university theological education and syllabuses for teaching religion, which must be endorsed by the Ministry of Culture and Religious Affairs and approved by the Ministry of Education and Research (Law no. 489/2006, ch. 1, art. 34 (1). For higher education, curricula and syllabuses designs are elaborated by educational institutions in agreement with the cult approved by the university senates (Law no. 489/2006, ch. 1, art. 34 (2).

In 2015, there was a sharp debate in Romania about religion as a confessional compulsory subject, which generated a massive reaction of the parents. More than 2 million of them enrolled their children in the religion class. Since the percent of the children enrolled was over 90, the consultation had a 'referendum value', according to the Romanian Patriarchate (Gheorghita, 2015). The Press Office of the Romanian Patriarchate explained that religion and history of religions classes should remain distinctive and of the same importance, since knowing your own religious culture is a necessary stage to understand other religions (Basilica News Agency of the Romanian Patriarchate, 2015).

3. Research Questions

The main research questions of this paper are: What should be the content of the religious education in FSSB in order to answer children's needs and develop their spirituality, worldviews, faith and values, taking into account also parents' exigencies? How should it be taught to fit the profile of the new generation? Should the children be separated in different religious education groups in the school or should they learn together, sharing their own experiences and trying to understand the main important religious values as well as the differences as signs of personal identity?

4. Purpose of the Study

The study aims to present the first three years' experience of teaching religious education in the primary FSSB. It was a period when we looked for an appropriate approach of religious education in order to correspond to the requirements of the child-centered Finnish educational vision of the School, to the parents' expectations as well as to the relationship between particularity and pluralism. In this regard, we tried to find the appropriate contents and methods to help both the spiritual growth of the children and their spiritual intelligence. The currently research is ongoing, since the cultural, linguistically and religious landscape in FSSB has significantly changed, especially in this third year, when children of different cultural, religious or free-religion backgrounds have come to learn here.

5. Research Methods

For this study, we used the Grounded Theory that implies both quantitative and qualitative data, namely direct observation, dialogue, spoken words, images, which helped us to describe the profile of the religious education in the project of primary Finnish School of Sibiu.

6. Findings

One of the first findings is on the one hand, the influence of the image of the religion promoted by media on the adults' attitude to the religious education. On the other hand, the parents' religious education and background influence the decisions concerning their pupils' religious education. In the first two years, all the children of FSSB attended the religious education classes. Religious education was non-confessionally taught and focused on Christianity and Judaism values and common faith. In this regard, the school policy for religious education seems to be in agreement with the decisions of the Romanian Patriarchate, according to which knowing your own religious culture is a necessary stage to understand other religions. In order to accept the specific of other cultures someone should first be educated in his/her own culture and tradition, otherwise education becomes only a source of syncretism and confusion (Basilica News Agency of the Romanian Patriarchate, 2015). Therefore, the school informed the parents that if in the public schooling system religion is optional, in Finnish schooling system, religion is compulsory in both primary and secondary schools. FSSB provides Orthodox confession religious education once a week. If there are at least four children affiliated to another confession, it will be analyzed the possibility to receive religious education of that confession.

Pupils' religious and cultural backgrounds were not very diverse in the first two years. The great majority of the children were Christian and most of them and their families were non-practicing Christian. The children said that they usually entered a church and attended a religious service on baptism, weddings or memorial service occasions or during the great Christian Holidays, namely Christmas and Easter. There was also a child with a different family background, who did not know the religious significance of Christmas. From the very beginning and maybe under the influence of the different and almost violent reactions towards religious education of the last years, peoples of the school staff made the suggestion that some contents connected with terms like hell, devil, sin, death to be excluded. It was not necessary, since they were not proposed in the syllabus for the Orthodox Cult. At this point, it is worth mentioning that the theater teacher taught an interesting special lesson to the pupils of the 2nd grade about the temptation of Christ. Later on, a family decided to withdraw the child from the religious education, after the lesson about creation, for their beliefs were different. The child was enrolled again in the religion class in the second semester at her wish and with the consent of her parents. Another child was withdrawn from the religious education class after the lesson concerning angels, for his parents did not believe in angels, although they were Christian. For he was only one of that kind, he remained in the classroom during the religious education class, but did not attend the class. A thirds child was withdrawn when a text of a childhood prayer (Little Angel) was uttered by the teacher together with the pupils at the end of two religion classes. In all the three cases, the parents motivated their decision with the fear of indoctrination, a term usually associated with 'religion', conveying the connotation of 'brainwashing'. Although we do not discuss here child's religious upbringing from the perspective of the fundamental

human rights nor of the parents' or guardians' right to determine it, we dare only to assert together with the German philosopher of education Jürgen Oelkers that “«we have only one criterion for whether education is indoctrination or not, the criterion of understanding»” (Hession, 2015, p. 99).

Now in the third year, the linguistic, cultural and religious landscape in FSSB is much more diverse. Romanian children or children born in mixed families and grown up in other countries, as well as foreigners, whose families decided to settle in Sibiu for a while or permanently, are brought together in FSSB. This pluralistic context determine to think more both about the content of religious education in the school according to each pupil's background, and about the methods, which should be adapted to the contemporary profile of this generation (Necula, 2017), in order to befriend him/her with himself/herself as “homo religious”. At this point, we can consider another finding concerning the interrelatedness of religion and education. What should be the model of religious education: learning religion, learning about religion or learning from religion? We cannot choose one of the two conception of education in religion and spirituality, namely “from the outside” and “from the inside” (Schreiner, p. 7-12), but combine them, letting the “insiders” express themselves and sharing their experiences with the “outsiders”, which usually are free-religion. Usually there are some areas of contents for the religious education: ultimate questions related to mystery of life, good and evil, values that help pupils to develop their view of spirituality; then history of religions, which is very appreciated by the pupils; and the significance of events and models from both the past and present. Identifying and applying appropriate methods and means to optimize the process of learning is a priority (Carrello, 2018). FSSB provide children-centered education, using the same syllabus as the state schools, but personalizing and adapting it to learning contexts for each pupil and his/her own rhythm of knowledge accumulation. Moreover, FSSB teachers are learning facilitators and attend continuous training programs all over the years (Finnish School Sibiu, 2018). In this regard, non-formal education is a great source of pertinent and effective methods for the contemporary generation profile. Learning from experience by playing or doing something, are some of the most efficient pedagogical methods (Șerbănescu, Misu, 2010) – adapted to the socio-psycho-motor characteristics of the group, to the space and time conditions and available resources.

Perspectives include multiple understandings of the role of the religious education. First of all, as “the political dimension of religion has become a decisive dimension of European policy” (Schreiner, 2013, p. 5) it is considered that the religious education and ethics can attend to children's active citizenship (Poulter, 2011; Hession, 2015), promoting values like communication, freedom of expression, spirit of justice and communion, which are religious values. Religious Education provides information and necessary skills for interreligious dialogue, respect and love the other human beings. Secondly, the importance of the religious education is related with the role of the spiritual intelligence, according to the policy of our school. As the former definition of happiness and success has changed and the spiritual intelligence is proved to play an important role in both individual and community life, the new holistic approach of education put the stress not only on those subjects that develop IQ as usual. The new integrative understanding of the education transfers to the religious education an important role, since it contributes to the “formation and transformation of the individual and of the community” and “draw children's attention to the spiritual dimension of life” (Hession, 2015, p. 102). Our school educational efforts are to equip the children with social and relationship skills, intelligences and attitudes to succeed at school and throughout their lives (Walker, 2018). Moreover it encourages the development of children's

spiritual intelligence, for it gives them the capacity to value their experiences of life, both success and failures.

7. Conclusion

The first three years taught us that the adaptation of the contents and methods to child-centered education in the contemporary pluralistic context is a requirement of the educational dynamics and a way to exceed and avoid both labeling and disjointed ideological camps in all compartments related to school and child's daily life. Sibiu, center with a long tradition in Christian pedagogy, not only Orthodox, which has become the 'house' for the Finnish School in Romania, can contribute to find a pertinent way to approach the religious education and choose a teaching model. Of course, the permanent transformation of the cultural and religious landscape of FSSB is a challenge to continue researches in the field of pedagogy, methodology, theology and social sciences.

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