



Alternative Forms and Systems for Religious Education in Primary Schools in Sweden

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Abstract

Religious education is an effective tool for organizing primary school children's spiritual and moral development. Primary religious education aims to teach interaction and achieve constructive dialogues with others. Teachers have a responsibility to make classes appealing and learning accessible by taking the age range and cognitive skills of primary school children into account in the planning. Introducing a mixture of alternative forms and systems for teaching may be the best way to achieve this. Approaches from several alternative education systems could be used to expand religious education teaching practices in primary schools. The systems that are to be discussed further here are homeschooling, unschooling, world schooling, outdoor education, online learning, Montessori, Froebel, Amonashvili, and Waldorf.

Keywords: religious education, primary school children, alternative forms and systems

Introduction

Religious education in primary school is of great importance in the European education system today. It is a powerful tool for the moral and spiritual development of the younger generation.

Some researchers (Barker C., 2012; Britzman D. P., 2003; Gee J. P., 2014) are convinced, that contemporary education needs new approaches to engage pupils. In this way, elements of the alternative education systems could be useful for teachers of religion, making classes more interesting and engaging for pupils.

Purpose

Discovering the educational potential of key alternative forms and systems is the main goal of this research.

Methods

This research presents the results of the analysis that deals with the organization of religious education in primary school. These results are a base for the design of further experimental work.

Results and discussion

Today there are popular alternative forms and systems of education that can easily be compared with the ‘traditional’ educational system.

The traditional system of religious education is effective, but the use of elements of Alternative Forms and Systems could make religious education classes simpler for children’s understanding and make the process of moral and spiritual development more comfortable.

The educational potential of the most popular forms of alternative education, and how teachers could use them, will be presented.

Homeschooling is based on “do what your mum and dad tell you to”. A teacher could use parents’ authority in classes, for example, if the subject is a family tradition (culture, religion). Parents (with help from a teacher) could expand their child’s view of society by organizing meetings with members of other religions and cultures through excursions to local places of interest. This is leading by example (Gerzon, 2016).

Unschooling suggests “following for students’ desires and needs”. It is relevant for primary schools because of pupils’ ages and level of development. To be more effective a teacher could ‘hear the voice of students and try to account for each child’s learning needs. For example, if a teacher knows a pupils’ learning preferences, for example, to draw or mold from plasticine, it should be used in the learning. The teacher could make class time more flexible. Lessons in religion could then become more creative and productive. Pupils could then be more motivated to attend ‘class’ if they are given greater freedom to learn in their way (Gerzon, 2016).

World schooling was proposed by Eli Gerzon and it is based on “the whole world is your school ... when one actively experiences and learns from the world around: home, family,

friends, strangers of all backgrounds, libraries, parks, sports, forests, schools, towns, and course the world and the world wide web” (Gerzon, 2016).

A teacher of religion in primary school could use elements of this system to form pupils’ skills, build a dialog between members of different cultures and religions, and help pupils understand deeper behavioural motives and the needs of others. A teacher could explain to pupils (using talks, videos, cartoons, etc.) that every action influences the environment and other people, presenting the universal principles of coexistence in the world.

Outdoor education is popular in modern primary schools. A teacher could use elements of it in religion classes when they talk about respect for the environment. In lessons, teachers could talk with pupils about respect for people and their surroundings – nature, animals, insects, etc. Pupils are then prepared for understanding and building a constructive dialogue with the outside world.

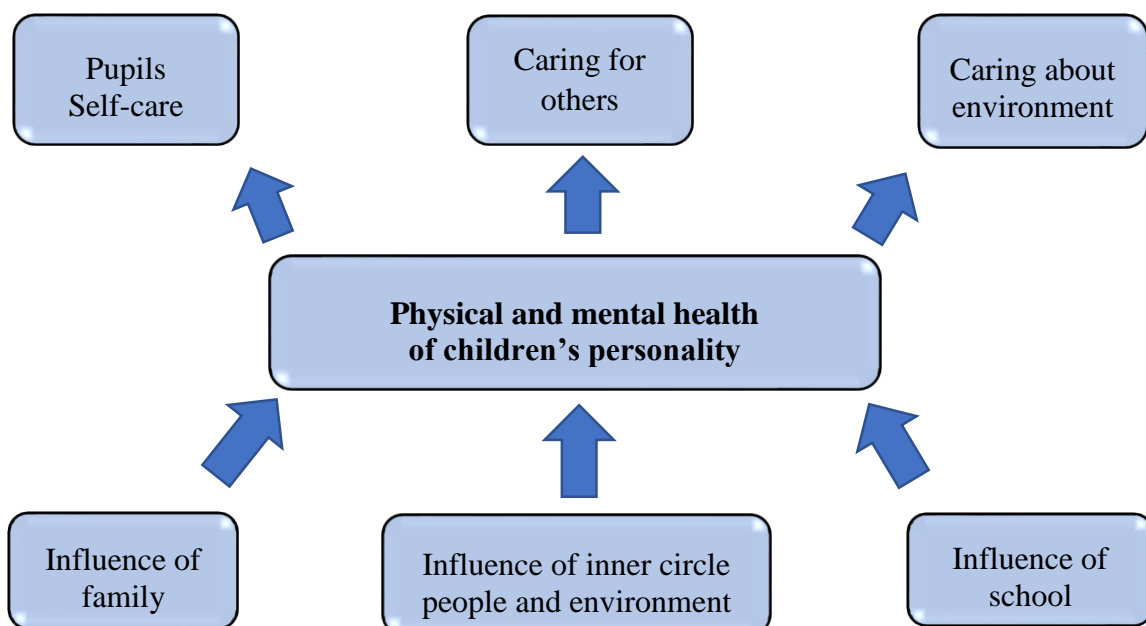
There are many ways to organize the effective cognitive action of primary school pupils in religious classes. Usually, pupils learn about different religions and cultures through reading books, watching cartoons, etc., but elements of outdoor education could make these forms of learning more engaging and more effective.

A teacher could use elements of outdoor education, if not the whole system, they could for instance conduct a lesson outside (providing chalks and allowing children to draw in the schoolyard), organize an excursion to a park, and listen to a story told by the teacher (depending on the teacher’s imagination).

There are many outdoor education systems in the world of which elements could be used during religion education in a primary school. One example is the “School of Joy”, suggested by Vasyl Sukhomlinsky. One of the main goals of “joying school” is to let children “pass through an emotional school: a school educating kind feelings” (Sykhomlinsky, 2009).

Looking closer at Sykhomlinsky’s educational views we notice that they contain a few theories and could be shown in a scheme (Figure 1).

Figure 1. The main conditions of physical and mental health of children’s personality



The main points of Sykhomlynsky's theory that religious education teachers could use in practice (for making school educational projects effective) are:

- *students should be able to notice the beauty of the environment world and not only observe but create their beauty* ("caring for the living and the beautiful gradually became part of the children's lives"; "child's heart is sensitive to appeals to create beauty and joy for others, but such appeals must be followed by work");
- *teachers should be attentive to students' health – very often student failure is a result of a physical health problem, not because of mental problems* ("the observations of many years have convinced me that in many cases, so-called mental retardation is due to some general indisposition that children themselves are not aware of, rather than to any physiological changes or impairment to the function of the cells of the cerebral cortex");
- *teachers should use the influence of family, surrounding people, and the environment during the educational process as effective tools of form the moral and spiritual qualities of each student* ("if a child does not care what is going on in the heart of his friend, mother, father or any fellow citizen with whom he comes in contact, he will never become a real human being" (Sykhomlynsky, 2009).

In modern primary schools, environmental interaction and related educational projects are also popular. For example, the project "Ecosensory glade" was implemented at Bohdan Khmelnytsky Melitopol State Pedagogical University (Ukraine). The purpose of the project was:

1. provide favourable conditions for the development of natural sensations;
2. improve various types of perception of children of primary school age: visual (colour and spatial), auditory (musical and phonemic), tactile (physical-mechanical and spatial), olfactory, and taste through the means of nature;
3. educate students about different cultures and religions, form their aesthetic feelings, and moral and spiritual development, and give value to the nature of the native land using various literary genres (riddles, proverbs, colloquialisms, legends, fairy tales, poems).

"Ecosensory glade" is an eco-pedagogical phenomenon, the purpose of which is to popularize a valuable attitude to nature and develop respectful attitudes of pupils' toward the environment. This space is a sensory-enriched natural environment. The sensory garden consists of 5 eco-sensory zones with a certain design solution. The task of each zone is to promote interaction between humans and nature and a more acute sense of the surrounding world.

The name of each zone reflects its character. The zone responsible for the development of the visual is called "Sharp Eyes", for hearing – "Active Ears", touching – "Skilful Hands", tasting – "Interesting Tongues", and smelling – "Inquisitive Noses". It should be emphasized that each of the zones is conventionally divided into two sectors: "sensory" (where the child is offered special didactic games for the senses) and "ecological" (where a positive attitude to the surrounding world is created with the help of natural objects and using the artistic word).

Each zone is characterized by separate educational games – visual, auditory, tactile, gustatory, and olfactory, from which a single system of eco-sensory didactic exercises is formed. Also, in the creation of each of the listed zones, an important role is played by the selection of plants of various types, for the sake of joint interaction between pupils of primary

school age and the environment. That is, a list of certain plants is selected, which by their properties stimulate the child's sensory system, directly influencing one of the senses.

Project implementation stages:

1. Determination of the goal of the city social project 'Ecosensory meadow'.
2. Form a team of volunteers.
3. Preparation for the presentation of the city social project 'Ecosensory glade' project.
4. Search, select, and preparation of the site for planting a lawn.
5. Preparation and implementation of the project estimate.
6. Practical implementation of the project.
7. Demonstration of the master class, the opening of the meadow. Expected results of the project.

Improvement of the sensory sphere of children of primary school age – visual, auditory, tactile, olfactory, and taste perception, formation of ecological awareness in them using nature and literature.

Online learning is popular and proves useful during pandemics (and associated distance learning). Teachers must find effective methods for distance learning and religious education is no exception.

During online learning, teachers of religious education should be oriented to the general results of pupils' learning (that includes digital education), such as:

- *student's self-managing* – using digital technology to manage self and selflearning;
- *staying well* – being responsible, safe and ethical in using digital technology;
- *managing information and thinking* – using digital technology to access, manage and share content;
- *being numerate* – using digital technology to develop numeracy skills and understanding;
- *being creative* – stimulating creativity using digital technology;
- *working with others* – working with others through digital technology;
- *communicating* – using digital technology to communicate. (Key Skills of Junior Cycle).

It is also possible to achieve this using digital technologies during religious education – sites, computer programs for creating learning of varied content, presenting results of pupils' teamwork, etc. For example, a teacher could lead an online excursion to places of religious importance around the world (when the teacher talks about one of them it could be not just reading text about it or showing some illustration, but showing in the video in real-time or something like that, it depends on teachers' fantasy and possibilities).

The **Montessori educational system** is popular all over the world. Marie Montessori considered it the element of the spiritual and moral development of the child. Also, the scientist says, "that will awaken realization of the power of man and the greatness of civilization should be presented in a form that will stir genuine emotion, for feelings of this kind should exist today together with the feelings of religion and patriotism" (Montessori, 1999). That is the one of important things of Montessori's pedagogical theory.

The main point of the Montessori pedagogical system is "help me do this myself", but if we talk about religious education it should sound like "help me understand what God is to me".

The teachers' personalities are very important for the organization's religious education. As many scholars testify (Britzman, 2003; Green, 2015; Christensen, 2019; Gee, 2014, Malm, 2004, Barker, 2012) Montessori insists that before teachers go to class, they must take care of their own "virtuous and moral, physical grace, observing, reflecting and guiding" (Christensen, 2019).

Also, religious education teachers could use Montessori didactic material in their classes. For example, when pupils learn to read, they could read a text about kindness or other cultures. When pupils work in pairs (which is an important part of the Montessori didactic system) the teacher could explain how important it is to help each other and be tolerant of mistakes. Or when the teacher talks about religion's symbols with pupils, they also can use sensory bells, which are intended for children's hearing development.

There are a lot of ways to use elements of the Montessori educational system to get resources for religious classes in primary school. It depends on the teacher's imagination and professionalism.

Elements of the **Froebel educational system** could also be used during religious education in primary school. Froebel's system is traditionally intended for preschool education but using elements of it could diversify the educational process. "The gifts functioned as tools with which to awaken and develop a child's recognition of the common, God-given elements found in nature" (Provenzo, 2009).

The basis of the Froebel system is 'gifts', which the author suggests using. All these materials are three-dimensional objects. Each object consists of different parts. A teacher could use, for example, the fourth «gift». At first, he should remind pupils what is cub, get a touch that, decompose it and get 27 different pieces. The teacher could offer children to make a bright pattern, which is one of the symbols of some cultures or religions.

Using elements of the Froebel system would significantly diversify combinatorial exercises and expand the range of pupils' spatial ideas during religious classes.

The **Amonashvili system of education** (or human pedagogy) contains elements that could benefit the organization of religious education.

First, what human pedagogy is and its traits should be explained further. The author of human pedagogy is Shalva Amonashvili, a Georgian educator, whose main theory posits that children's needs should be the center of the educational process. The moral and spiritual development of children according to Amonashvili is based on a few principles:

- belief in the child's abilities;
 - respect for the child's personality;
 - focus on goodness and fairness;
 - teacher is the creator of the lesson;
 - cooperation between the teacher and the pupil;
 - student-teacher communication should be based on good wishes and should aim at flourishing the individual strengths of the student;
 - if we want to be called the teacher, we must lead the way with our spirituality and morality, our wisdom and love, humanity and godliness;
 - great trust and respect for children and the development of their cognitive skills;
- (Basiladze I. & Panchulidze S., 2018)

A teacher could use one of many pedagogical techniques in religious classes. One example is squatting when talking with children (the teacher should be “on the same level” with a pupil). Another is to “talk in a whisper”. Here, pupils close their eyes, put their heads down, and listen attentively to the teacher’s question. Then, the pupils ‘answer’ by showing the right number of fingers for the answer, or that corresponds to an answer. The teacher goes around showing who has the correct answer by touching to children’s fingers.

By further educating themselves, which is consistent with the Amonashvili teachings, in the study of the pedagogical theory, a teacher could find a lot of practical advice that could be of use in the classroom.

Research suggests the **Waldorf educational system** has “a diverse repertoire of methods that strongly touches the area of religious education: from the immense importance of imagery for children’s understanding of the world to the high value of narrative mediation of the world to the numerous symbolic forms of action that enrich the lessons and also shape school life as a whole” (Willmann, 2021).

One of the principles of Waldorf pedagogy is the implementation of intersubject connections. The refinement of sensory skills could become part of a religious education class, for example, children playing games in a circle, performing choreographic exercises, moving along the contour of a triangle, etc. Views on the development of auditory perception, as Rudolf Steiner explains them, deserve close attention. Steiner originated eurythmy (a movement art), a specific combination of texts, music, and movements, for which he proposed observing the rhythmic correspondence between the sounds of speech (music) and movements, to accompany the telling of fairy tales with music, to allow the pupils to play instruments themselves (if they desire), speak patter words with clapping, etc. The teachers also engaged pupils in modeling and gave them an idea of the spatial and physical-mechanical properties of the materials from which certain products were made.

Teachers of religion could turn their attention to their pupils’ folk culture, creativity, and spiritual development. Role-playing games that teach pupils to communicate in society and negotiate would serve an important function in this. Simple handmade toys made of natural materials could also be used.

Communication between teacher and pupil should be developed, accounting for the child’s temperament (sanguine, choleric, phlegmatic, or melancholic), as well as differences in the types of perception (visual, auditory, kinetic) and types of signaling system (artistic, mental, mental-artistic).

Elements of the Waldorf system are among the best to encourage intra-subject communication in religion lessons.

Conclusion

Following analysis of the main alternative pedagogical systems, some conclusions can be reached.

In my opinion, the all listed alternative forms and systems are very useful for the whole of primary education and for religious education in particular. The teachers should use alternative methods for religious education in primary school, whilst considering pupils’ unique characteristics and age. Of course, all alternative forms and systems for religious

education have their own “pluses” and “minuses”, but, in my view, one of the important teachers’ task is find out and use the strong side and congest the weak side of each system.

After comparative analysis likewise could be stated, that one of the effective ways to diversify religious education is to use elements of many alternative forms and systems of primary school education. Using it, teachers should turn their attention not only to their methodological components (some exercises and practical tasks, for example) but also to the main theoretical basics of the system (attitude to the children’s needs, child’s place in the educational system, interaction between teacher and their pupils), which are important factors for the organization of effective religious education in a primary school.

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