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The Educational Programs of Catholic Religion/Religious Education for Preschool Children in Slovakia

Abstract: This paper focuses on the educational programs of Religion/Religious Education within pre-primary education, in Slovakia, outlining the legislative view on the issue. It characterises the curriculum of Religion/Religious Education in pre-primary education and the Framework Educational Program of the subject of Catholic Religion/Religious Education for pre-primary education. It deals with the competencies of spiritual formation in a Catholic nursery school. In the conclusions, it provides its own recommendations and methodological ideas, applicable in the educational programs of Religious Education within nursery schools.

Keywords: pre-primary education, nursery school, Religious Education, educational programs.

Introduction

The entry of a child into nursery school can, in most cases, also be associated with his first entry into society. The child copes with a lot of changes and demands are placed upon him since the nursery school is the first link of the school system in which the child begins to fulfil the objectives of upbringing and education.

The main objective of the upbringing and education within a nursery school depends on the objectives of the upbringing and education, referred to in Act. 245/2008 Coll. on Upbringing and Education (School Act) and on the amendment of certain acts. The education in nursery

schools provides the basic skills leading to the fulfilment of the objectives of upbringing and education, under this Act. The main objective of upbringing and education in the nursery school is the achievement of an optimal cognitive, sensorimotor and socio-emotional level, as the basis for a school education in primary school and for life in society (National Educational Programme for pre-primary education in nursery schools, 2015, p. 5).

Pursuant to § 15 of Act No. 245/2008 Coll., the teaching of Religious Education or Religion is allowed in nursery schools. It is carried out by a pedagogical employee with the appropriate professional and pedagogical competencies. In Catholic schools, education is carried out according to educational programs, in accordance with special regulations.

Based on an agreement between the Slovak Republic and the registered churches and religious communities, each registered church or religious society in Slovakia can teach Religion/Religious Education. The teaching of the Catholic Religion/Religious Education is carried out on the basis of the approved curriculum, which was submitted by the Catholic Church, in accordance with the Charter of Human Rights, the Constitution of the Slovak Republic and pursuant to an agreement between the Slovak Republic and the Holy See on a Catholic Upbringing and Education (Furman, J., 2013).

The aim of the presented paper is to handle the issue of the educational programs of Religious Education for preschool children at both a theoretical and methodological level. We suggest the objectives and content of Religious Education and we briefly address the methods and methodological suggestions for practice in nursery schools.

The Framework Education Program of the subject, Catholic Religion/Religious Education, for pre-primary education

Education in the family and in the nursery school is connected by the common interest for the child and the development of his personality. Some educational principles of family education are basically identi-

cal to the nursery school education, for example, in issues of social learning. Teachers, just like parents, provide children with models of behaviour in the widest possible sense. The whole social environment of the nursery school represents models of social relations in natural situations for the children (Guziová, K., 2002).

The child's parents must agree with the teaching of Religion/Religious Education in the nursery school and the educational process is then planned accordingly. The relevant planning directive for the teacher is the Framework Educational Program of the subject Catholic Religion/Religious Education for pre-primary education.

The Conference of Slovak Bishops, on 16th March 2010, issued the final approval of the Framework Educational Program for Catholic Religion in nursery schools, regardless of the type of school (No. KBS/65/16.3. 2010/MS). In accordance with the Framework Educational Programs for nursery schools, methodical manuals of Catholic Religion/Religious Education are offered for the age categories 3–4 year olds, 4–5 year olds and 5–6 year olds. These are the three methodologies in one batch and together they form 708 A4 pages, including 380 pages of text and 328 pages of attached images – colour images, puzzles, templates and worksheets (Catholic Educational and Catechetical Centre, 2016).

The age group of 3–4 year old children in nursery schools

This group of children still shows a low degree of independence, however, gradually they acquire habits and skills of self-serving and acquire their own identity. The children are moody, their emotions are unstable and they can be upset due to completely trivial things.

The children are gradually developing gross motor skills and the coordination of movements, their fine motor skills develop and their handling of objects improves.

Within them there a concreteness of thinking and visual thinking gradually begins. Perception is characterised by syncretism and globalism, the child is unable to analyse perceived objects. They gradually develop

sensory perception, the child distinguishes the shape and surface of things by touching, recognises smells and tastes, discovers basic colours and responds to the rhythm of music with movement. Their speech is developing and their vocabulary expands. Attention is short-lived and unstable, the child quickly changes the subject of his interests. He is able to play for a short time in a simple way but he still cannot play with his peers.

Content is divided into three themes: 1. God, the Father, 2. Son, 3. Holy Spirit.

The objective of the class is "to experience pleasure from the fact that I am loved." A symbol of the class is the house. It gradually appears in themes and symbolises protection, safety, family and love.

The educational program defines four levels of the symbol:

1. *Factual level* (what the symbol says about itself): The house is big, small, is made of brick or wooden.
2. *Subjective level* (what does it say to me): The house as a place of protection, safety, care, love.
3. *Objective level* (what does it tell us): Every person desires to belong somewhere, have a place in the family, their home.
4. *Religious level* (what does it tell us about the experience of God and man): In the house of the Father, there are many dwellings.

Content standard consists of the following topics associated into the following thematic units:

1. *God the Father*
 - God the Father created the world.
 - God the Father created man out of love.
 - God the Father forgives us every betrayal.
 - Love saves.
 - God, out of love, blesses Abraham.
 - God loves Joseph.
 - God the Father also leads us through danger.
 - God the Father gives us the law of Love.

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- God looks at our heart.
 - We express love for God through the Psalms.
 - God continuously covers us with his love.

2. *Son*

- Mary teaches us to expect the Lord Jesus.
- God sends us His Son.
- Bowing shepherds.
- Jesus in the house of the heavenly Father.
- The power of Jesus over nature.
- Jesus – the Good Shepherd.
- The Last Supper.
- Holy Week
- The resurrection of Jesus – Jesus is alive.
- Sunday – a celebration of the resurrection.

3. *Holy Spirit*

- Jesus promised us and sent the Comforter.
- The Holy Spirit dwells in my heart.
- Mary teaches us to receive the Spirit of Love.
- The Spirit of God fulfils my heart with love.
- The Spirit of God teaches me to love God and people.
- The Holy Spirit fulfils my heart with joy.
- The Spirit of God teaches me to make others happy.
- The Spirit of God creates from us the family of God's children.
- The Spirit of God teaches us to celebrate.
- The Spirit of God teaches us to celebrate our Heavenly Father.

4. *Additional subtopic*

- Saint Nicholas.

For each topic, cognitive, affective and psychomotor targets are elaborated. The following are examples. In the theme of *God the Father created the world*, the objectives are as follows:

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- *Cognitive*: To name the things created by God.
 - *Affective*: Using images to realise the love of God in creations.
 - *Psychomotor*: To observe God's creation in nature. Create an exhibition from things created by God.

In the theme of *God the Father created man out of love*, the objectives are as follows:

- *Cognitive*: To name the first people.
- *Affective*: To be happy about the creation of the first people.
- *Psychomotor*: Through a dance, imitate Adam and Eve's joy of creation and of the coexistence with God.

Age category of 4–5 year old children in nursery schools

In children aged three to five years, significant changes take place in their perceptual-motor, cognitive and social-emotional areas. Children become more independent and ever-ready to learn plus hygienic, work and moral habits, as well as the basics of cultural behaviour, are already quite well established in them.

They are more stable in emotional areas, with signs of cognitive, moral, aesthetic and social feelings occurring in them. Children can easier acquire the rules within the group, they are engaged in group games and they better liaise with other children. We can already talk about signs of cooperative behaviour.

Gross and fine motor skills, as well as movement coordination, are improving and thinking is purposeful. The child learns about the wider world through direct observation and sensory experiences are being formed. He is capable of noticing details, especially those which elicit certain feelings or emotional experiences within him.

The child is vivid and mobile, curious and likes to explore. Fantasy and imagination, speech and thinking are developing within him and this means that the sensorimotor and cognitive experiences of the child are

widening. He recognises the outside world only superficially, he cannot understand the facts, events and logical relationships.

Content is also divided into three themes: 1. God the Father, 2. Son, 3. Holy Spirit.

The objective of the class is *“in obedience, to discover the goodness of God.”* The symbol of the class is a tree. The tree is symbolising protection, a gift and life. This symbol is defined in four levels:

1. *Factual level* (what the symbol says about itself): The tree – small, big, is part of nature, a fruit tree, a broad-leaved tree...
2. *Subjective level* (what does it say to me): The tree – protection from the sun, represents new life, gives a person fruit – it is a gift...
3. *Objective level* (what does it tell us): The tree – every person desires to be gifted and also be a gift to others...
4. *Religious level* (what does it tell us about the experience of God and man): The tree – as a branch, cannot bear fruit by itself, neither can you, unless you abide in Me (a person is like a tree, about which God takes care of).

The content standard consists of the following themes, associated into the aforementioned thematic units:

1. *God the Father*
 - God created the world both good and beautiful.
 - God forgives us our disobedience.
 - God saves Noah.
 - A man listening to God.
 - A boy listening to God.
 - God helps us.
 - God gives us an angel.
 - God forgives us.
 - God listens to our prayers.
 - God heals.
 - God shows us the way through angels.
 - God sends His Son.

2. *Son*

- The meeting of Mary with Elizabeth.
- The wandering of Joseph and Mary.
- The wise men and their great gifts.
- Jesus as a child listens to Joseph and Mary.
- Miraculous fishing.
- Jesus – the Good Shepherd.
- The Last Supper.
- Holy Week.
- The resurrection of Jesus – Jesus is alive.
- Sunday – a celebration of the resurrection.

3. *Holy Spirit*

- Jesus sends us the Holy Spirit.
- The disciples, together with Mary, believe the words of Jesus.
- The Spirit of God teaches us to listen.
- The Spirit of God teaches us to pray.
- The Spirit of God teaches us to obey those who care about me.
- The Spirit of God teaches us to obey the Heavenly Father.
- The Spirit of God teaches us to help others.
- The Spirit of God gives us wisdom.
- The Spirit of God purifies our heart.

4. *Additional subtopic*

- Saint Nicholas.

For each topic, the cognitive, affective and psychomotor targets are elaborated and again we give examples. In the theme, *God created the world to be good and beautiful*, the objectives are as follows:

- *Cognitive*: Determine, with the help of the teacher, what God created and what people have created.
- *Affective*: To observe the perfection of the laws of nature, given by the Creator.

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- *Psychomotor*: Colourfully highlight both created and man-made things.

In the theme *God forgives us our disobedience* the objectives are as follows:

- *Cognitive*: To find the message of a fairy tale, with a focus on obedience and disobedience.
- *Affective*: To appreciate the actions of positive characters from a fairy tale and from a Biblical story.
- *Psychomotor*: To shape the habit of obedience.

Age category of 5-6 years old children in nursery schools

These children are already quite independent and their developed skills enable them a relative independence from the adults. Feelings are even more stable; the children are able to control excitement or emotions.

They are very curious. They carefully gain new information and this ability gradually improves within them. They are interested in the world of nature and society. They are gradually discovering context and the relationships between objects and phenomena, and abstract and conceptual, or verbal – logical or symbolic thinking starts within them. They are becoming more patient, able to remain within an activity for a long time and complete a given activity. They already have the basis of a sense of duty and development in the area of social communication and cooperative behaviour also starts here. The children quickly and individually establish contacts with their peers, as well as with adults. In games, they can individually plan, organise, identify roles and agree on their progress. They are getting rid of egocentrism and the way of decentration (detachment from each other) begins to apply within them.

The content is also divided into three themes: 1. God the Father, 2. Son, 3. Holy Spirit.

The objective of the class is *"I trust God, who loves me."* The symbol of the class is the Sun. It symbolises joy and gives a feeling of safety. It represents the presence of God the Father, from Whom children are happy, Who sees and hears them and is continuously with them.

The four levels of the symbol are as follows:

1. *Factual level* (what the symbol says about itself): The Sun is a light.
2. *Subjective level* (what does it say to me): The Sun as a symbol of joy.
3. *Objective level* (what does it tell us): The Sun as a symbol of Community.
4. *Religious level* (what does it tell us about the experience of God and man): Jesus as the Sun, towards which we are directed.

The content standard consists of themes divided into thematic units:

1. *God the Father*
 - God has entrusted heaven and earth to me.
 - What is the greatest work of God.
 - The first people.
 - God leads Noah.
 - God gives Abraham a son.
 - The expectation of a child.
 - God leads Joseph even though he is in prison.
 - The Israelites trust God.
 - God listened to those who cry out to Him.
 - God trusts me and calls me.
 - God blesses us.
 - God heals trusting.
2. *Son*
 - The expectation of the promised Messiah.
 - Nicholas.
 - God is looking for a mother for his Son.
 - Simeon and Anna.

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- Jesus loves all the children.
 - Mitigation of the storm.
 - Jesus – the Good Shepherd.
 - Supper with the Saviour.
 - Holy Week.
 - The resurrection of Jesus – Jesus is alive.

3. *Holy Spirit*

- Jesus sends us the Spirit Comforter.
- The Spirit of God fills us with joy.
- The Spirit of God frees us from fear.
- The Spirit of God teaches us to trust God.
- The Spirit of God teaches us to trust the good people.
- The Holy Spirit is our Comforter.
- The Spirit of God fills us with courage.
- The Spirit of God fills us with strength.
- The Spirit of God develops within us the correct desires.
- The Spirit of God purifies our heart.

For each theme, the cognitive, affective and psychomotor objectives are elaborated. Again we give examples. In the theme *God has entrusted heaven and earth to me* the objectives are as follows:

- *Cognitive*: To describe the creation of the world.
- *Affective*: Be inspired by the beauty of nature and admire the strength and wisdom of the Creator.
- *Psychomotor*: To create a play area of living nature.

In the theme, *The greatest work of God*, the objectives are as follows:

- *Cognitive*: Give reasons why man is the greatest work of God.
- *Affective*: Be happy about the creation of man.
- *Psychomotor*: Together, create a human figure.

The competencies of spiritual formation within a Catholic nursery school

We present the competencies of spiritual formation in a Catholic nursery school, as defined by the School Educational Program of the A. Bernolák primary school and nursery school, in Martin, which serves as a preview of the draft plan of spiritual formation, within a Catholic nursery school, beyond the subject of Religious Education.

Children aged 3–4 years:

- Express joy.
- Express love.
- Are able to pray a short prayer.
- Pray for their loved ones.
- Pray within the community of children, families and the faithful.
- Make the sign of the cross, bow in the church or chapel.
- Keep quiet in the church or in the chapel.
- Sing children's spiritual songs.
- Make contact with the priest, greet him.
- Are capable of saying simple responses.
- Distinguish between good and evil.
- Ask for forgiveness.
- Help others, with the assistance of an adult.
- Behave in the group, according to the rules.
- Ask for forgiveness and know how to forgive and to express remorse.
- Do good deeds.

Children aged 4–5 years:

- Behave in the group, according to the rules.
- Ask for forgiveness, express remorse.
- Do good deeds.
- Pray through the singing of spiritual songs.
- Pray for a specific intention.

- Apply actions associated with a visit to the chapel or the church.
- Take part in the celebration of Holy Mass.
- Greet with a Catholic greeting.
- Help others, behave emphatically.
- Evaluate their own actions.

Children aged 5–6 years:

- Express a prayer individually, through the singing of spiritual songs.
- Express prayer in their own words.
- Listen to the word of God.
- Pray to the patron Saints.
- Participate in the celebration of Holy Mass through singing and responses.
- Distinguish between the prayer of the Holy Rosary and the Stations of the Cross.
- Help others, listen to them, put others first.
- Ask for forgiveness and forgive.
- Express remorse.
- Take responsibility for their actions.
- Express hope (through words, drawings...).
- Work with a children's Bible.
- Ask for the Gifts of the Holy Spirit.
- Express a prayer in silence, become quiet.

Preschool children and children at a younger school age complete a difficult, but necessary, process of separation and individualisation, and also they socially single out as an individual and a personality (Račková, 2007).

Other methodological suggestions applicable in the educational programs of Religion / Religious Education in nursery schools

In the final subchapter, we would still like to add some of our own observations and suggestions on the issue of Religion/Religious Education

in pre-primary education within a nursery school. Here are ideas for literary, musical, dramatic and artistic activities.

Literary activities. In particular, the reading of the Bible for children, whether in the morning in the communication circle with a subsequent analysis of the reading or in the afternoon, before naptime.

In literary activities, work with the Old Testament narratives and work with parables can be highlighted. Children also like the stories about the birth of Jesus and the life of Jesus during his public ministry (healing, miracles, etc.).

Musical activities. We highlight not only singing songs with religious themes, but also the singing of religious songs. The teacher also has to choose songs with text that the preschool children would be able to understand. Practicing the song is preceded by thorough work with the text, so that children could playfully acquire new concepts and calmly develop a relationship towards singing religious songs. Most rewarding in this respect are the songs, which are associated with different times of the liturgical year, for example: Advent, Christmas, Easter.

Drama activities. Just as with literary activities, here it is also very good to work with parables. Art craft activities may follow on the back of dramatic activities, inducing pleasant experiences among the children. The authors I. Rochovská and D. Krupová (2016), referred to the reconciliation of art and drama activities in their publication, *Umelci v materskej škole* (Artists in Nursery School). They work with The Parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-32). They use the original biblical text.

An interpretation of the work of art from the well-known Dutch painter, Rembrandt, entitled *The Return of the Prodigal Son* was used with the children in the nursery school.

The objectives of the activities were as follows:

- To express, in their own words, what is painted in the picture.
- To find links between the picture, The Return of the Prodigal Son, and the biblical story of the Prodigal Son.

- Intently look at the picture and talk about the major and the minor characters in the picture (What are they wearing? What face do they make? What do their gestures express? In what way are they similar and different?).
- Express the correlation between the storyline of an image and its artistic presentation (the artistic expression of poverty, wealth, joy, sadness, envy...).
- Through art (drawings), express love and goodness.
- To visually interpret (inscenate) the picture, The Return of the Prodigal Son (Rochovská, I., Krupová, D., 2016).

The teacher has revealed to the children that the work is inspired by the biblical story of the Prodigal Son. She read the story while the children were shown the work of art in front of them on an interactive whiteboard. This was followed by a discussion on the image and work. Here are some interesting observations of the children (CH), who answer the questions of the teacher (T).

T: *Who is it?*

CH: *The younger son.*

T: *How do you know he is younger?*

CH: *Because he is on his knees.*

CH: *He is kneeling down, because he took him back.*

T: *What kind of **clothes** does the son have?*

CH: *Ugly.*

T: *Why does he have ugly clothes?*

CH: *Because he travelled a long way.*

T: *What did the father do, when the son returned?*

CH: *He accepted him.*

T: *And how did the painter paint this in the picture? How do we know that he accepted him?*

CH: *Because he is holding him.*

T: *He is holding him, hugging him and blessing him.*

T: *Let's look closer at his **feet**. What is the difference between them?*

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- CH: *He has one shoe on and one shoe off.*
- T: *What happened to his shoe?*
- CH: *It came off.*
- T: *Why did it come off? Why did the shoe come apart?*
- CH: *He walked for a long time.*
- ...
- T: *What does his **head** look like?*
- CH: *It is injured.*
- T: *Does he have hair?*
- CH: *No.*
- CH: *A little bit.*
- T: *And do you think that this younger son is rich or poor?*
- CH: *Poor.*
- CH: *Poor.*
- T: *And when you look at the **clothes** of his father and his son...*
- CH: *Rich.*
- CH: *Rich.*
- T: *I will tell you one more thing; the younger son has something behind his belt. Look, he has a **dagger** there. It is a rare dagger. When this son was leaving his father, was he rich or poor?*
- CH: *Rich.*
- T: *What do you think, why did he not sell it?*
- CH: *Because it is from his father.*
- CH: *That was his only memory.*
- CH: *If he would sell it, he would not have a memory... of the father* (Rochovská, Krupová, 2016).

After this theoretical part, the children were encouraged towards a *visual interpretation* of Rembrandt's works. The teacher was telling the children: *In the story, which is in the picture, the father showed his son the love in the fact that he has accepted him back, even though he was ragged and had spent all the money. He could send him away; he still had a second son. But he has forgiven him, accepted him, he showed him his love. Such*

a love is manifested by God to each of us. If you are a painter and you would like to paint love, what would you paint on that picture?

The children usually suggested that they would draw a love heart. The teacher wanted to direct them to come up with a story that they would paint. The children responded that it would be a story about love. They agreed that they could draw baby Jesus into the love heart, as a message of love. Subsequently, their task was to draw their ideas on A5 paper with crayons and to talk about them. The teacher clipped the finished drawings on a bulletin board and placed them next to a painting on the interactive whiteboard. There were mainly love hearts, flowers, a love heart shaped house, Mary with Joseph and the baby Jesus in the love heart (Rochovská, I., Krupová, D., 2016).

After the activities aimed at drawing, the children were stimulated towards the staging of the story. The teacher has prepared space in the classroom for the staging and she brought a lot of material - coloured fabrics, dark curtain fabrics, various hats and other props, which could be used. Children showed great enthusiasm and actively wanted to participate in the performance, debating which character they would like to portray. The teacher asked the children about their views on how they would create the background, what could the characters wear. First, they created a background from dark curtain fabrics and this was followed by the selection of two minor characters. The children were fascinated that they could depict the "invisible people" in the background of the picture; being cloaked themselves into dark curtain fabrics, where the only visible part was their face. Furthermore, they competed to see who would play the father's older son and younger son. Everyone wanted to participate actively in the staging of the picture. The teacher explained to them that the staging would be repeated several times and everyone would take part in the play. The children adapted the selection of clothes, so that they would look as much as possible like the people in the picture. When the visual aspect of the picture was ready, the teacher encouraged the children to try to figure out what the father and son might speak about when they met. Children who were in the position of the observer could think of how to make replicas (Rochovská I., Krupová D., 2016).

Conclusion

In some cases in the educational standards of pre-primary education content of a religious theme is included. In most cases, however, the teacher must look for connections that may be present to an unlimited extent. The content of pre-primary education is so varied that a creative teacher will find a number of elements of Religious Education in every educational field. After all, love for God, a love for thy neighbour – a fundamental principle of Christian religion – can be found absolutely everywhere (Akimjaková, B., 2014).

The aim of this paper was to summarise the situation in the area of the educational programs of Religious Education within a nursery school in Slovakia, in order to become the stimulus for comparisons with this issue in nearby foreign countries.

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