

Jakub Adamczewski

ORCID: 0000-0002-0152-3159

Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań

Let the Values Ring Out: Christian Education in English Lessons in a Catholic Primary School in Belfast

ABSTRACT

Christian education at school is not only carried out during religion lessons. This article deals with the issue of Christian education using the valuable musical repertoire in early childhood education based on the experience gained from a primary school in Belfast. At an early stage of education, when students have an integrated education, it is easy to refer to Christian values during everyday school activities. Is it possible to combine Christian education when teaching English lessons?

The article will present studies on language learning and using musical works that refer to spiritual values as they are understood by Max Scheler. Referring to the assumptions of Finnish music education and religious education, the values resulting from this solution will be presented. The examples presented will be discussed using references to literature that outlines the broader shape of Christian education in early childhood education. It will also be helpful to refer to the following categories: Catholic pedagogy, religious education, Christian education, spiritual values, or eurhythmics, which are the theoretical foundations of this article.

Keywords: Christian education, teaching English, singing, teaching music, religious education

KEYWORDS

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Introduction

The title of the article, which refers to the act of singing, is not coincidental. As an early childhood teacher, I know that you can sing not only musical notes, but also the multiplication table, the alphabet, or a cake recipe. Music has been present in human life since its inception and it has always played a major role in the comprehensive education of a child. In today's early childhood teaching, with sparse music education, we should not forget about its beneficial effect on a child's development. Early musical training helps to develop positive character traits (optimism, humor, and joy) and awakens sensitivity to esthetic experiences. The fact is that music activates our brain and facilitates the acquisition of the principles of spelling, grammar, mathematics, and physical education (Kisiel, 2007, p. 35). Thanks to music education, we learn to read faster, we have better memory and pronunciation, and we think more logically. It has also been proven that it helps children communicate more quickly and efficiently in a group or in a school class (Kisiel, 2007, p. 69). But can one sing about the values which are important in Christian education? What songs may be suitable for early childhood schoolchildren? How should we talk about what has already been sung with childish joy? These activities are part of the principles of Christian pedagogy, which—owing to its empirical nature—mainly deals with “researching practical forms of implementing Christian education in various informal and formal learning contexts by various people who undertake non-institutionalized and institutionalized educational work” (Olbrycht, 2013, p. 124).

The article will aim to hone in on a formal learning context—primary school—in which educational activities are predominantly institutionalized. The task of Christian pedagogy is also to verify whether the activities proposed by teachers are methodically and organizationally effective in the matter of Christian education. Its source is Christian doctrine, Church documents, and the anthropology and axiology that refer to the Christian religion. On the other hand, its benchmark values are best defined by normative pedagogy, at the core of which lies the Christian concept of man, values, and

culture, and which defines the goals and principles of actions geared towards comprehensive Christian education. It is also worth adding that Christian pedagogy can be divided into educational theories of individual Christian denominations, of which Catholic pedagogy is the most developed. In this article, I would like to report on the education practice that took place at a Catholic primary school in Belfast. In 2016, as a trainee teacher, I had the opportunity to observe and conduct music classes at one of the local primary schools in Northern Ireland. These experiences became the main motivation to write this article, which is to show an atypical approach to musical Christian education.

The principles of religious education and the meaning of Christian education

In addition to comprehensive elementary education, there is also religious education, which is very important in the life of a young person. In the literature, we find numerous examples of interconnections between education and religion, because the religious dimension is “the main factor motivating man to the effort of building his identity” (Nowak, 2012, p. 324). It is worth emphasizing, citing Katarzyna Olbrycht (2013), that the purpose of this education is to convey knowledge about religion as a cultural phenomenon, knowledge about one’s own and other religions, especially those that are worshipped locally. Religious education, however, is only one of three areas of religious upbringing. Apart from it, it is also upbringing to religiousness and upbringing for and in a particular religion (2013, p. 126). It is worth remembering that religious education in early childhood should serve to deepen children’s knowledge about their own religion, to nurture respect for other people and for their religion and culture. For me, the upbringing to religiousness described by Katarzyna Olbrycht is the essence of the activities that I will describe in detail later in this article. It is an education that prepares a child to sensitively interpret, understand, and respect the religiosity of each person, but at the same time it is an education that teaches the need to search for truth, goodness, and beauty, to be open to transcendence, to contemplate the world, to search for meaning, to be in awe of the world, which should lead to the discovery God revealing

himself in it. Religious education is connected with endorsing one's own humanity (Olbrycht, 2013, p. 128).

What should constitute the foundation of all these activities is upbringing in the Christian faith, which, based on the love of Christ, translates into the attitude of a person who understands the need to teach personal values. Christian education, to which I am alluding, can be perceived in both anthropological and personalistic terms (Cichosz, 1997, p. 177). The former one, based on the tradition of Aristotelian–Thomist philosophy, envisions education as a natural development of the human being, which is a continuous process guided by educators, leading through a series of actions to comprehensive development. According to Cichosz, the essence of this approach is to emphasize that education involves unleashing human potential for growth and supports a person in doing good deeds (1997, p. 180). On the other hand, the personalistic theory says that “the central moment of the educational process should be the human being as a person” (Cichosz, 1997, p. 180). Of course, this perspective is associated with the philosophy of existentialism and the final Christian interpretation. Literature often claims that every human being is on the path to becoming a person who is open to goodness, truth, and beauty, and to choices rooted in a hierarchy of values which sets the spiritual and absolute sphere as the highest priority. These values are understood in Christian education as God's love (Gadacz, 1993, pp. 108–109). Nevertheless, in all concepts of Christian education, the importance of a relationship based on dialogue between an educator, who is a personal authority, and a student, who develops by assimilating the value of social relationships, is widely reiterated (Buber, 1968, p. 460). According to Cichosz (1997), we can even differentiate two levels of Christian education, which are illustrated in the table below.

Table 1. Two levels of religious education

Level of education	Characteristics
Natural	Associated with an existential notion of the human being – the task and purpose of this education is to properly develop a human being, taking into account their innate abilities (physical, mental, and spiritual). It is a universal level of education, which stresses the inviolable right to education according to one's own predispositions, but focused on fraternal coexistence, unity, and peace on earth.
Religious	The right to religious education for the baptized and believers for whom the ultimate goal is reconciliation and union with God – the dimension of moral attitudes concerns the achievement of theological virtues (faith, hope, and love) through contact with God in the process of internal transformation.

Source: Based on Cichosz (1997, p. 183).

The mutual complementation of these levels leads to the full development of the human being, who, thanks to the gradual learning of Christ's teachings, becomes more perfect every day.

Christian values in early childhood education

The issue of values was discussed even in ancient philosophical thought. Plato developed a philosophical understanding of the concept of Ideas, the knowledge of which is a condition for the proper valuation of the things that surround us. On this basis, he distinguished three values—Truth, Beauty, and Goodness—which he considered the most important. Marian Nowak writes,

values express what should be and what we wish to be; they inscribe an ultimate sense into reality, show what is truly significant and what is worth pursuing. They are the pillars on which social, personal, and community life rests. Chief human behaviors are motivated and regulated by values. (Nowak, 2001, p. 393)

The German philosopher Max Scheler posited an order of five ranks of values that I have decided to refer to in the context of my experience in early childhood education. His hierarchy is made up of five types of values: absolute (the most important) values, spiritual (cultural) values, vital values, utilitarian values, and hedonistic values (Wołoskiuk, 2011, p. 186). I would like to devote my attention to spiritual (cultural) values, which can be broken down into the following

groups: esthetic values, cognitive values, such as knowing the truth, and moral values (good). I used to refer to this group most often in conversations with children about the songs that we sang together. However, it is difficult to list all Christian values, because, according to Marian Nowak, they are basically all human values enriched by the depth and meaning that God himself has breathed into them, and bearing upon the dignity and rights of the person.

Values in education, therefore, are viewed as signposts or tips or are simply demonstrated in human attitudes. At the stage of early childhood education, it is the latter viewpoint that is the most illustrative for children. On a specific example of child or adult behavior, they can understand the essence of a given value and relate it to their own behavior. Nowak (2001, pp. 423–424) also proposed interesting strategies for communicating values when talking to students. First of all, it is a strategy of dissonance that involves confronting the student with divergent ways of thinking and evaluating. The second one is the strategy of testimony, which aims to stimulate and trigger the identification mechanism in students, i.e., unconsciously incorporating another person's qualities and attributes. The last one is the simulation strategy, in which the teacher's task is to concretize the values to which the student may already be sensitive. These methods may be useful in the context of spiritual values, which we want to reinforce in everyday education.

Music education

The music classes that I conducted in English at the school were held once a week, every Thursday. Each week, the students listened to one new song and repeated the already familiar song that they had learned the previous week. My goal was for each student to master two songs fluently within a month. In every class, in addition to listening and singing, we used the song to talk about our moods and interpreted it together. These songs usually contained short, often repetitive phrases that children could learn quickly and easily. In most cases, we also put together a simple choreography to make singing even more enjoyable. In another article, I discussed the objectives of the music education which I had the opportunity to observe at a Finnish elementary school. Let me just point out that many of

these objectives are also carried out by Irish teachers. I think that they should also guide Polish teachers, who could supplement the teaching of other subjects with music classes. The Finnish core curriculum includes the following goals: interpreting the ambiguity of music in different cultures and in the activities of the individual and the local community; strengthening the positive experience of music and laying the foundation for interest in music, which can last a lifetime; developing critical thinking about musical reception and enhancing the students' expressiveness (Adamczewski, 2018, p. 259). In addition, our students should be aware of why we teach them this particular song and who wrote it. At the initial stage, i.e., when listening to the song for the first time, the teacher's task is to make sure that the students properly understand the song which they are singing/listening to, see its written form, and correctly pronounce the lyrics individually and in groups. It is also important that they can start and end the song themselves, with or without the help of the teacher. The next stage, which takes place in the following class, is preparation for conscious singing. At this point, the students already know the text, the title, and the author, and most of them can already articulate the lyrics correctly. In this part, I often use the methodology of Rudolph Steiner, who introduced eurhythmics to Waldorf education as an intermediary between word and movement. According to Jadwiga Wasiukiewicz, eurhythmics is nothing more than visualizing speech and sound through beautiful movement and color.

The combination ... is about the harmony of experience, action, and behavior. It transposes the speech of words into the speech of rhythm and gesture. When singing, we can externalize our inner experiences by means of visible forms of movement. The teaching objective of this subject, in addition to exercises which enhance the smoothness and gentleness of movement, is learning about one's body, expressing oneself better and more fully by movement, gesture, facial expressions, and improving spatial orientation—in short, “the spirituality of physical education.” Later, it is used to express the content of musical pieces and songs: it is a “visible language” and “visible singing” and it performs a refining and socializing function. (Wasiukiewicz, 1998, pp. 30–31)

The teacher's task, therefore, is to draw the students' attention to the meaning of the lyrics, to their message, and to test whether the students understand it. For example, do we all hear the joy or sadness in this song? Do we all understand why we are thanking God

in this song and not Santa Claus? We will need this so that later, when singing and acting out the songs with movement, students can think about the Christian values conveyed by the song and try to apply them to examples from their own lives. Below, I will present a few songs that we sang together during my teaching internship in Belfast. I will also mention the children's interpretation, which has repeatedly shown the cognitive maturity of children at this stage of development.

The musical repertoire that either I or the children chose was never arbitrary. The song should reflect children's vocal abilities and relate to their interests. It is also important that the song is lively, joyful, and musically diverse. A variety of instruments, clapping, and tempo changes all have a motivating effect on children. Most of the songs were created by people who are believers or who deal with religious education of children in English-speaking countries. A teacher seeking such songs will find hundreds of them on popular music websites. However, the teacher's role is to make a choice (sometimes together with the children) and prepare them earlier for recapping the song and singing or playing it on a musical instrument.

Valuable songs in English lessons

In this section of the article, I will present songs that refer to the three spiritual values mentioned above: esthetic values, cognitive values of knowing the truth, and moral values (knowing good). In addition to Scheler's classification of values, it is worth quoting the definition of spiritual values formulated by Józef Tischner, who regards as the penultimate ones in his hierarchy

values among which it is easy to recognize the Platonic triad: Truth, Good, and Beauty. In this triad, Truth is the guiding value because it enables one to evaluate the situation and act ethically. (Tischner, 1982, pp. 68–77)

In the literature, we also find the theory of Natalia Zhyhaylo, who defines spiritual values as the incorporation of faith, desires, ideals, and the spirit of a nation into the worldview of a human being, which sets the direction of personal needs and desires and determines our direction in life. It is the human being's realization of the humanistic

opportunity, the purpose of his or her human activity (Zhyhaylo, 2016, p. 293).

I will start by discussing a song connected with students' perception of esthetic values. The song was written by Raffi Cavoukian, a Canadian songwriter for children. His music has been appreciated all over the world, and his 13 albums of children's music have not declined in value despite the passage of time. One of the songs is *Thanks a Lot* (1980), which talks about the wonderful world around us. Due to the lyrical nature of the song, children eagerly sing it lying down, with their eyes closed, imagining everything that was created by God. In the excerpt below, we can see how the author of the song tried to arouse in children a sense of esthetics and gratitude for the surrounding world.

Thanks a lot, thanks for the Sun in the sky. Thanks a lot, thanks for the whispering wind. Thanks a lot, thanks for the birds in the spring. Thanks for the animals, for the land, for the people everywhere. Thanks for all I've got.

[Polish translation: Dziękuję bardzo, dziękuję za słońce na niebie. Dziękuję bardzo, dziękuję za szepczący wiatr. Dziękuję bardzo, dziękuję za ptaki przylatujące wiosną. Dziękuję za zwierzęta, za ziemię i ludzi dookoła niej. Dziękuję za wszystko, co mam.]

The song does not mention the name of the creator of all beautiful things, but the very content encourages children to ask questions about the creation of the world. At this point, I talk with the students about the things and people without whom we cannot imagine life. It is also an interesting idea to sing this song at the end of each week before the children leave for home. Then we give thanks for the whole week we spent together and for the things we learned or had the opportunity to see.

Values of knowing the truth

The song *Honestly Be Honest* (2015), created by the Christian organization INCKids, not only persuades children to tell the truth, but also to make music. The melody is simple enough for students to play accompaniment on their own instruments while singing along. The song is about the joy that God and human beings feel when we



speak the truth. It also emphasizes in simple words that telling the truth is important and everyone deserves to know it.

You might think that no one else will know, but the Lord our God will always know. Honestly, be honest and you'll see, when you tell the truth, how happy God will be. In everything, do your best to be true, and God will be so very pleased with you!

[Polish translation: Możesz myśleć, że nikt inny nie dowie się, ale Bóg zawsze będzie wiedział. Szczerze, bądź szczerzy, a zobaczysz, jak Bóg będzie szczęśliwy, kiedy powiesz prawdę. We wszystkim, co robisz, zawsze prawdę mów, a Bóg będzie z ciebie dumny!]

As I sang this song, I would try to twist the words that children already know to find out why it is important to tell the truth, even in the context of twisting words. We would also talk about how great truth is and whether it is always pleasant and nice. We also repeated the song together when a lie appeared in the classroom and we remembered why it is worth telling the truth. I remember well that the children talked about situations in which somebody had lied to them. When speaking openly about our feelings, we named them and tried to sing a song together using these feelings.

Moral values

In this case, the Christian musical group Listener Kids comes to the rescue with their album *Let It Shine* (2016), which includes the well-known song by an unknown author entitled *I've Got Peace Like a River* in a completely new arrangement. The children loved this tune because of its rhythm and simple, cheerful melody. The song talks about such values as peace, love, joy, and optimism, the amounts of which are compared to nature.

I've got peace like a river in my soul. I've got love like an ocean in my soul. I've got joy like a fountain in my soul. I've got peace, love, and joy like a river.

[Polish translation: Boży pokój jak rzeka wypełnia duszę mą. Boża miłość jak ocean wypełnia duszę mą. Boża radość jak fontanna wypełnia duszę moją. Boży pokój, miłość i radość wypełnia duszę mą.]

This song is also known in Polish under the title *God's Joy*. Ever since I can remember, it has enjoyed great popularity among children. While singing and “performing” the song together, we talked about values that are important to us: that everyone should feel good in the world. The children eagerly said that a world without joy, peace, and love would be a terrible and dangerous place. It is worth highlighting that these values have a beginning in each of us. When we are full of peace, joy, and love, we will see the world around us in this way.

Conclusion

Hundreds of interesting children's songs that talk about important values can be found on the Internet. However, the most important thing is to create situations that are conducive to developing our students' communication skills. Listening to and performing songs which promote Christian values not only contributes to “immersing the child in language,” but above all endorses independence in analyzing the lyrics. According to Barbara Murawska, “supporting the ability to understand a text requires the teacher to gradually develop independence in students in their efforts to understand the text, pique their interest in the text, and on the part of the students—to gradually take the initiative in building this understanding” (Murawska, 2014, p. 39). Once again, I would like to reiterate the importance of the teacher, who—in addition to teaching mathematics, English, or music—can willingly talk to students about the human attitudes that the world needs. Maybe thanks to these conversations our students will discover that God, who—through Jesus—can be an example for us to follow, is the personification of all these values. We must not forget, however, that it is primarily the family home which is the right and first place of upbringing that exerts influence on the religious education of our students. However, the school should have a compensatory function and fill in the gaps arising from the family background.

The purpose of this article was also to draw attention to the fact that the realization of values that we should impart to our students can also be accomplished by singing together. I hope that the activities I observed in Belfast will motivate other teachers to use every opportunity for courageous conversations with the children about

attitudes that are worth following. The lyrics presented in the article encouraged the students not only to begin their own music making, but above all to understand the written text that they wanted to talk about later. It is therefore a success not only from the perspective of music education, but also language education begun at an early stage. So let us sing values; let us sing a better world in which there is no shortage of spiritual values.

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ADDRESS FOR CORRESPONDENCE

Jakub Adamczewski, MA
 Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań
 Faculty of Education Studies
 e-mail: jakub.adamczewski@amu.edu.pl