

RELIGIOUS EDUCATION AND EXERCISE: QUALITATIVE EVALUATION OF A TEACHING PROGRAMME

Xanthi Albanaki, Georgios Katsanis, Kyriaki Vassilou

Model Experimental Senior High School of University of Macedonia

Proin Stratopedo Strempenioti, Neapoli P.C. 56701, Thessaloniki, Greece

Abstract

One of the issues that mostly concern scientific researchers is education, due to the fact that it is closely related with the moulding of the students' character. Similarly, the school syllabus is structured in such a way that it aims at the creation of lessons and activities which promote the moral development of the students, while at the same time draw attention to the role of the teachers. This particular activity (teaching suggestion) consists of a series of interventional co-teaching sessions during the lessons of Religious Education and Physical Education, attempting to correlate physical activities with moral values and religious notions. The activity in question was materialized during the school year 2013-2014 in the first grade of Senior High School, qualitative research and data analysis was carried out, in the form of semi-structured interviews, within the context of evaluation of teaching practices which are taking place at school.

Key words: religious education, physical education, qualitative research

1. INTRODUCTION

The educational system is the main institution that provides support to the individuals during the process of their social and cultural inclusion. That is why it plays an important role in creating the conditions for the acceptance and recognition of pluralism and the notion of "otherness" (Gotovos 2002). Moreover, it is the educational system that provides the safest framework for dialogue, communication and the forming of bonds, regardless of the various cultural backgrounds the students come from (Leganger-Krogstad 2003). It also favours the creation of the appropriate conditions for character development (Narvaez 2006).

Unfortunately, over the last years, delinquent behaviour at the school premises has become a very frequent phenomenon, while the negative and aggressive behaviour during sporting activities is largely related to the atmosphere created there (Sheldon & Aimar 2001), the emphasis mostly being on performance. This is also supported by a study conducted in Greece a few years ago (Diggelidis & Krommidas 2008).

Moral education includes procedures which aim at the moral development of the students' character, while morality in general expresses the bond between the individual and society or the environment (Vosniadou 1992). According to Lickona (Lickona 1991), character development aims at the building of traits of a good character, the virtues (which include moral knowledge), the moral sentiment and moral behaviour. At the same time, according to Ryan (1982), the teacher plays an important role in the creation of the conditions for moral development. In order for this to happen, though, according to Ryan (1982) again, the teacher himself should possess certain traits; for instance, he/she should give priority to the development of the students' moral character, hold clear moral views, take into account the students' standpoint towards various moral issues, encourage the students to talk about moral principles and ethics and finally he/she should create a friendly, positive environment in the classroom. Last but not least, the teacher ought to provide the students with the opportunity to engage in activities through which they will be able to treat each other with respect.

The activities presented in this article have been planned for the subject of Religious Education, their objective being to create a learning environment where students will be able to play an active role in

the learning process. At the same time, the different teaching approach of religious notions and moral values through experiential exercises encourages the students' active involvement. All the activities were designed to facilitate the communication among the team members as well as to blunt potential conflicts, to liberate students from various constraints and to enhance moral values.

2. PEDAGOGICAL CONTEXT

The activity was structured according to a specific theoretical background, so that the teacher could plan the pedagogical steps that would lead to the achievement of the teaching objectives. More specifically, in order to prepare the innovative action in question, the following dimensions were taken into account (School Innovation Network 2014).

2.1 Institutional dimension

As the influence of institutional roles on the learning outcome has been acknowledged, the students played an active role in the learning process, in this particular action (Volsk 1975). The knowledge provided during the activity was related to real life, the protagonists being the students themselves: without their involvement, nothing could be accomplished, therefore, no educational goal could be reached, either.

The teacher kept a journal in which she recorded the description of the activities before their materialization, the time required and the expected results (so that the learning process could be facilitated), but also the progress of the activities, after their materialization. The teacher's role was that of the facilitator, the one who inspired and encouraged the students.

2.2 Epistemological dimension and intersubjectivity

Learning that takes place in the same context in which it is applied (situated learning) facilitates students' understanding and arouses their interest. It is a social process which promotes active learning, since the students participate in "communities of practice", also known as "learning communities" (Lave & Wenger 1991). According to Brown et al. (1989), situated learning can create the appropriate conditions for cognitive apprenticeship (role model+guidance) as far as research is concerned. In this way, students are encouraged to acquire, develop and use cognitive tools through real – life activities.

The planning for the emergence and utilization of empirical knowledge and school knowledge about the world was made in such a way that every single approach could enhance the students' perception of reality. Both the teachers and the students adopted such an attitude that enabled them to view the world in various different ways: to describe it, to interpret it, to check it, to experience it, to analyse it, to depict it, to reenact it. And all this was done in more ways than one, using various "languages", that of theology, of law and of computer science. Finally, both the teachers and the students embraced different ways of perceiving and interpreting reality and committed themselves to using them. More particularly, the students were asked not only to talk about respect, religious notions and moral values, but also to demonstrate what they can actually do with all they have learnt, through their own work.

2.3 Description of the action

The action was carried out within 7 months' time in a Secondary School in Northern Greece. As far as this particular school is concerned, the students are accepted after taking and passing a special examination and, therefore, they do not necessarily come from the area around the school, but from various municipal districts. Because of the examination required for their entrance, the students have a very high level of knowledge, which accounts for a quite special student profile. At the very beginning of the school year, an attempt has been made to detect and accommodate the various student learning styles by taking into account the students' extracurricular activities. What was found is that this school's students have a variety of interests which are manifested through their participation in school clubs, competitions, educational programmes, school celebrations, choirs and theatrical performances. It should be emphasized that this process of getting a clear picture of the students' interests is by no

means considered finalised, as it is going to be pursued even further over the next years, in order for the teachers to reach more valid results.

The basic feature of this particular practice was the cooperation (team-teaching) (Murawski & Dieker 2004) between two teachers of different subjects: Religious Education and Physical Education in the 1st grade of Senior High School.

This particular team-teaching can assume different forms, beyond the traditional one, where the teachers instruct all the students at the same time, having assigned different tasks. In this case, team-teaching took various shapes, depending on the anticipated learning objectives each time. In all, the following methods were employed: a) Collaborative teaching (Learning Disabilities n.d.) where the two teachers present the subject and the various theories surrounding it, in parallel. b) Supportive team teaching, where one of the two teachers takes over, while the other one merely assists the teaching process, in a supporting manner. c) Monitoring teaching, where one of the teachers presents the subject, while the other one (monitoring teacher) monitors the whole process, moving around from student-group to student-group (Education Services n.d.).

During the activity, what was attempted was to associate the students' knowledge and skills (according to the educational objectives of the curriculum of the subjects of Religious Education and Physical Education) with the students' general interests, both within and outside school. As far as Religious Education is concerned, students come in touch with Orthodox Worship and Tradition and elaborate on religious and moral issues, in an experiential manner. In a similar way, they learn to process facts of ecclesiastical history and relate them to real life.

On the other hand, the lesson of Physical Education aims at the cultivation of social and mental virtues as well as the promotion of collaboration, team spirit, self discipline, will-power, patience, persistence, courage and a sense of responsibility. Ultimately, it aims at the development of the students' self-esteem and self-confidence, in other words, the formation of positive self-perception. Last but not least, a key objective is for the students to develop moral values (such as justice, meritocracy, self-respect as well as respect for the opponents, modesty, a wise attitude towards victory and defeat) and to learn how to express themselves in a free and democratic way.

Teaching was performed in groups, while the students were provided with a variety of stimuli which prompted them to take action with a view to creating a learning environment in which the students would be actively involved, both mentally and emotionally. Throughout the entire process, both teachers acted as coordinators, facilitators and inspirers, bearing full responsibility for all the different activities, which had been carefully planned beforehand according to the students' singularities and their unique mental, emotional or physical characteristics. The teachers had also taken into account the students' age, their personal interests and their prior knowledge (Schunk 2010). During the activities, the principle of the "accessible" was applied, which denotes the transition from the "known" to the "unknown", from the "particular" to the "general" and from easy tasks to more demanding ones. Each lesson was planned according to the age and the level of the team members, always taking into account the time available, while the teacher who acted as the inspirer or facilitator combined the various exercises, games and techniques according to the topic.

The teachers involved kept a journal, in which they recorded the description of the activities before their realization, the time required and the expected results, something which proved to be extremely useful and effective, since it functioned as a guideline for the following actions and, therefore, facilitated the learning process.

More specifically, in order for the teachers to establish a positive pedagogical climate in the classroom, trust-building exercises were used, which involved both the students' senses and their imagination and which were combined with sound stimuli (eg. bells, wooden clackers, etc). One such trust activity involved blindfolding games, another one required trust leans or trust falls, and so on, all of which took place within specific time limits, according to the instructions provided by the Physical Education teacher (Govas 2001). During most games, the students were blindfolded so that they could not see and, therefore, they had to trust their partners and rely on them completely. As soon as the

blindfolded student felt safe, the facilitator could ask the “guide” to gradually move away and go on to help another blindfolded student.

The areas covered were the family institution, man’s relationship to God and to other people, the notion of trust, temptations, the dangers of racism and the danger of religious sects. Elaborating on these issues was combined with trust exercises and synchronisation exercises and, at the same time, was associated with current events, such as the International Day of People with Disability. Needless to say that any ideas or suggestions from the students were more than welcome and were accepted with great enthusiasm.

More particularly, the practice went on like this: the students would initially be taught a unit during the lesson of Religious Education in the classroom and, the next time, the lesson would take place in the schoolyard, in a co-teaching session between the Physical Education teacher and the Religious Education teacher. At the times, the action took place the other way round: the students would attend the lesson of Physical Education first and then they would try to relate and evaluate the athletic activities with moral values and religious notions.

Ultimately, what the teachers attempted was to relate the previous experiences and the subject they taught with the cultural experiences of the students as a result of their social background. For instance, after being taught certain religious notions through physical activities (“We walk side by side”, “I learn how to follow you”, etc), those students who drew on experiences from the Greek-orthodox tradition had as a reference point something like a hymn sung during the wedding service: “O Holy Martyrs, who fought the good fight and have received your crowns...”. Moreover, when it came to informing the students about temptations and the various religious sects, the Religious Education teacher planned an activity during which half the students used ropes to pull the other half who tried to resist by giving much physical effort. That way, the students realized how much strength it takes for someone to remain stable and not change position, literally or metaphorically. Once more, the students who drew on experiences from the Greek-orthodox tradition would call to mind the phrase: “You have to carry your cross”, something that Jesus had said to imply that one has to bear the difficulties of life with strength and patience. On the other hand, the students who did not have a strong bond with the Orthodox worship would have as a reference point a sport such as hurdle race (a track event) or the phrase “life is a rat race with one hurdle after another”, where “hurdle” has a figurative meaning, or even Taekwondo.

It goes without saying that the students’ experiences play a very important role in the practice in question. However, the experiential approach to learning should not be characterised by extreme spontaneity, which could easily lower the quality of teaching. To avoid this potential danger, the teachers have chosen and used such communication activities that promote dialogue among students, but also self-criticism and self-awareness.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research hypothesis

What initially triggered the materialization of the interventional activity in question and created the need for the teachers to conduct further research was an educational speculation: “Could the implementation of particular activities in the teaching of Religious Education contribute to the cultivation and development of moral values, to the development of empathy in students and, ultimately, to a better understanding and assimilation of religious notions?”. According to Essinger (1991), “empathy” refers to the capacity to identify with or understand another’s situation or feelings, from their standpoint. Solidarity and lack of prejudices and stereotypes is really what education aspires to; more than this, society itself feels the need to change and become more “social”. This is the very same value that Ian McEwan (2001) underlines in his article published in ‘The Guardian’ on the aftermath of September 11 2001: “It is hard to be cruel once you permit yourself to enter the mind of your victim. Imagining what it is like to be someone other than yourself is at the core of our humanity. It is the essence of compassion and it is the beginning of morality.”

3.2 *Research questions*

The research hypothesis was developed around the following research questions:

- Could teacher-centered instruction potentially hinder students' grasping of abstract religious notions and moral values on a theoretical level?
- Can experiential activities help students develop a stronger sense of empathy?
- Can experiential exercises which involve physical activity and at the same time promote moral orientation lead to the moral development of students?
- Can experiential activities promote collaboration among students, both inside and outside of school? And, more importantly, could such activities reduce intense competition among students?

3.3 *Participants*

The research sample included 50 students of the 1st grade of Senior High School (A Class), 30 girls and 20 boys, who came from different sections (A1 and A2), with ages ranging from 15 to 16 years. The students in question were from various municipal districts of Thessaloniki.

3.4 *Instrument*

For the field study and the data analysis, the teachers employed the qualitative method and, more specifically, thematic analysis (Boyatzis 1998). The procedure took place in 3 stages. During the 1st stage, the interviews were recorded so that the information could be processed and codified. During the 2nd stage, what was examined was the effect of the variables that had been specified from the beginning and the potential need for any additional ones. During the 3rd stage, the second researcher checked the classification of the information and verified its validity and reliability.

Group interviews of 10-minute duration were chosen and were based on semi-structured, pre-planned questions and the parties involved were allowed to discuss other matters as well, something which resulted in sufficient factual material (Kvale 1996). The qualitative method of semi-structured interviews was deemed to be the most appropriate one, since it produces a wealth of data by creating an informal, friendly atmosphere among teachers and students, in contrast with questionnaires, which can be very impersonal tools of data collection (Cohen & Manion 1992).

Furthermore, this particular method provides the coordinator with the opportunity to explore various issues, some of which may not have been highlighted before. Group interviews were chosen because they were perceived as the most appropriate ones for students, since they save time and facilitate discussion. Teachers have the chance to detect what this experience means to the subjects and to gain more insight into the situation. To put it differently, the researchers are in a position to make a subtle interpretation of the collected material, but also to record the actual voices and opinions of the subjects, that is, the students. The interviews took place after the materialization of the activities and they were accompanied by comments about various matters (active student participation in the activities, team dynamics, collaboration, efficiency of the teaching method, goal attainability, possible modifications, and so forth). Once more, all the collected data were recorded in the teachers' journal. In addition, all the athletic activities were also followed by discussion and evaluation, while the teachers noticed and recorded the students' emotions, so that the effect of the variables on the students could be assessed, too (McDrury & Alterio 2002).

In addition, the teachers videotaped and photographed the activities in order to foster reflection ("reflective thinking"), having obtained the consent of both the parents and the students. Reflective thought has been defined as "active, persistent and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds that support it, and the further conclusions to which it tends" (Dewey 1910). More specifically, the teachers taped parts of six lessons of almost every activity, involving both student groups.

In order for the teachers to implement the intervention programme, the students were divided into two groups: the initial experimental group and the initial control group. After the implementation of the

intervention on the initial experimental group, the groups were reversed and the initial control group went on to receive the intervention. Twelve semi-structured interviews were carried out, with the consent of both the students and their parents, while it had been made clear that participation was on a voluntary basis.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In this unit, what is attempted is a general presentation and interpretation of the research findings which were the result of a comprehensive analysis of the data collected through the semi-structured interviews. Some representative samples have been chosen, as it would be impossible to present all the data and also because, in most interviews, there was a convergence of opinions. The questions posed to the students after the completion of the activities were the following:

- A. First question: “When you initially took part in the activities during the lessons of Religious Education and Physical Education, how did you experience your participation in relation to the previous teaching approach? (Did you feel nervous? Was it a pleasant experience? Was it unique? Did you encounter difficulties?)”
- B. Second question: “When you were initially asked to participate in these activities, did you have a crystallised opinion about people who are different, about people who practise other religions or about your perception of God?”
- C. Third question: “Before participating in these activities, did you possess the ability to understand others, especially those who are different from you?”
- D. Fourth question: “Do you believe that these activities have helped you understand other people, adopt their outlook on certain situations and perhaps justify their reactions?”
- E. Fifth question: “Did these activities help you grasp certain religious notions and moral values, such as faith, repentance, forgiveness, and respect for the opponent?”
- F. Sixth question: “Did these activities make you adopt certain moral values which you used to disregard?”

What follows is the analysis of three representative samples of students’ interviews:

A. Analysis of the Interview of student A

Student A is a boy who came from another school, in a different municipal district, and is a 1st grade Senior High School student.

When asked the 1st question (“How did you experience your participation in these activities?”), student A answered that these new techniques created a more pleasant atmosphere in the classroom and helped him see learning as a kind of game. For the first time, he felt free to move around during the lesson, touch his fellow students and be creative.

When asked the 2nd question, the student gave a positive answer, meaning he had certain crystallised opinions about religion and held stereotyped views of people who were different from him (people with special needs, people practising other religions, etc.).

When asked the 3rd question, the student answered that, before participating in these activities, he could not understand other people, especially those who were different from him.

When asked the 4th question, the student answered that these techniques have helped him understand others, adopt their outlook on certain situations and justify their reactions.

When asked the 5th question (“Did these activities help you grasp certain religious notions and moral values?”), the student answered that, before this intervention, he did not realize how much the lessons of Religious Education and Physical Education were related to real life.

Finally, when asked the 6th question (“Did you adopt certain moral values which you used to disregard?”), the student answered that he has now come to value human rights, to respect others and their religion and also to respect his opponents.

B. Analysis of the Interview of student B

Student B is a girl who also came from a different municipal district and is now a 1st grade Senior High School student.

For student B, her involvement in such activities has been a pleasant experience which came as a surprise, since nothing similar had taken place at school before. Regarding the 1st question, she mentioned that leaving her old school had initially made her nervous and caused her to feel guilty, as she could no longer be with her old classmates. When asked the 2nd question, the student admitted that she used to hold certain fixed, stereotyped views of people practising different religions or people with certain particularities. However, she thought that she did have a certain amount of empathy, since she spent and still spends a lot of time with students practising a different religion as well as students with particularities (although she did not mention what kind).

In her opinion, this intervention has helped her take a clearer look at reality and justify a lot of situations in everyday life. She also explained that she did not consider cultural diversity to be a problem when it came to her fellow students, since she was on familiar terms with them.

Finally, the student answered that, like student A, she also came to grasp religious notions in a much better way.

C. Analysis of the Interview of student C

Student C is a boy who lives in the vicinity of the school and is a 1st grade Senior High School student.

Regarding the 1st question, student C expressed the opinion that similar interventions should take place at school more frequently, because, this way, the lesson becomes more effective. Regarding the 2nd question, the student admitted that he held certain fixed, stereotyped views of his fellow students. As a result, he ended up viewing the other person as someone unfamiliar. Moreover, he thought that he was not able to understand other people’s opinions or justify certain attitudes or behaviours. However, he admitted that he has now come to grasp religious notions in a much better way. As a whole, the student found that the intervention was successful, since it has helped him relate certain religious notions with real life. He claimed that, his participation in these activities, as well as after them, he learnt how to respect the rules of team play more than before and also how to deal with defeat without losing his temper.

After the completion of the activities and the data analysis, 145 excerpts were produced. Taking into account the analysis of the interviews of all the students, the research hypothesis and also the variables set initially, it became clear that the variables used affected the cultivation of empathy in most students, regardless of sex and origin. More specifically, 40 out of 50 students viewed similar activities in a positive light and, after their completion, the students had also changed their attitude towards their fellow students in a positive way. For instance, they behaved in a more friendly manner, they did a lot of things together and they avoided conflicts.

Furthermore, after the completion of the activities, the students seemed to be less bothered by their fellow students’ different attitudes or values, since, by then they had already acquired empathy, namely the ability to understand others and accept cultural diversity. As a result, the students managed to collaborate, to engage in dialogue and set rules and, ultimately, to solve their problems inside and outside the classroom. It became evident that the subjects of the research had developed meta-cognitive skills as, both during the activities and after their completion, they were required to demonstrate what they can actually do with all the knowledge they had acquired. For instance, they had to set rules and boundaries in their relationships, to try and stay focused on their initial goals and to improve the quality of their relationships.

Besides, one of the main objectives of the intervention had been to promote communication among students and, thus, to facilitate their social adjustment and their physical and psychokinetic expression. When all of the above is achieved through the students' participation in the activities of Physical Education, a student can use the acquired skill and knowledge in other situations as well. If students lack sufficient empathy, the result may be the creation of erroneous opinions and problematic relationships inside and outside school. This conclusion has been reached because most students seem to have been affected by this particular variable.

After the analysis of the interviews, the teachers also detected that experiential activities and physical exercises create a safe environment, where students can move around and express themselves without being worried about their performance or about being penalised. The participants assumed different roles and entered a "No Penalty Zone" (Woolland 1999), trying to take tough decisions and live with the consequences of these decisions. Moreover, physical exercises proved to promote the students' socialisation.

The activities were designed so that the students could communicate in the best possible way and so that any possible conflicts could be prevented. In addition, the activities chosen aimed at making the students feel less inhibited, free from emotions or thoughts that could hold them back. Most of all, what the teachers became aware of was the fact that the students were quite stressed about leaving Junior High School, as well as about moving away from their familiar school environment and their old schoolmates. It is noteworthy that the anxiety the students felt did not become less by the fact that they had kept in touch with their old schoolmates, nor by the fact that they made new friends in Senior High School.

5. CONCLUSION

The present study attempted to evaluate a particular teaching practice which took place in a Senior High School of Thessaloniki during the lessons of Religious Education and Physical Education. The use of experiential activities enabled students to develop skills which would otherwise be hard to develop, especially through traditional teaching. In addition, experiential activities proved to work superbly in terms of class motivation and knowledge acquisition. More importantly, whatever students learn this way, they find it easier to remember for a long time (Albanaki 2013). The students' experiences function as the cornerstone in the teaching process. However, one has to point out that using experiential techniques can be very demanding and it requires flexibility and communicative abilities on behalf of the teacher, otherwise it can easily turn into the "Achilles' heel" of the teaching process.

The students entered a phase of cognitive or conceptual conflict (Nussbaum & Novick 1982) between what they believed judging from their social and cultural experience ("naive beliefs" or misconceptions) and the refutation of their views, as a product of the teaching approach. The students were asked to deal with problems such as the rupture in the family institution, betrayal, school violence, violence in sports, in other words, with broader social issues which they handled by relating them to units they had been taught during the lesson of religious Education and also to things they had learned through Physical Education activities.

The fact that two teachers worked together in designing and teaching the lesson ("collaborative teaching") has been of crucial importance as far as the learning process is concerned, something which is also supported by other researchers (Robinson & Schaible 1995). The interdisciplinary approach which was employed functioned as a good example for the students, since what we expected from them was to collaborate, learn to accept different attitudes and to be more tolerant.

Similar interventions help teachers collect a wealth of material which is authentic, as students cannot prepare themselves for what is going to follow or plan anything which is not spontaneous. They simply express themselves according to their previous experiences and reveal aspects of their character through imaginary but familiar stories.

In order for such activities to take place, the teachers have to be familiar with experiential techniques and, more than this, they need to devote a lot of time to their implementation. For these reasons, it is evident that training programmes can play a very important role in a teacher's ability to use experiential strategies and carry out interventions such as the one in question. Another presupposition is that all teachers, regardless of the subject which they teach, receive further training on didactics, so that they can face all the new challenges in a much better way.

The heterogeneity of the modern class as well as school violence and bullying are major contemporary issues and it is imperative that teachers take a firm stand as far as such phenomena are concerned. The school also has the obligation to promote activities that control violence and the dangers it entails. As for this particular practice, it basically aimed to reinforce the collaboration among students, both inside and outside school, through the use of experiential activities and also to control potential antagonism among them. Additionally, it had as a goal to develop moral values and encourage such behaviour that is desirable and useful in the everyday life of all teenagers, both in the school and the family environment: respect for otherness, faith, trust and patience, all in relation with Greek Orthodox Tradition and spirituality. Finally, the practice in question intended to cultivate the students' critical thinking ability, which is a necessary precondition for their being members of complex societies (Tsatsaroni & Kourou 2007).

Besides, two of the broader objectives of Religions Education have always been peaceful coexistence and acceptance of differences (Maghioros 2013). Ultimately, this ought to be the main objective of all school subjects.

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