

EDUCATIONAL POTENTIAL OF YOUNG PEOPLE IN SERBIA FOR RELIGIOUS DIALOGUE AND TOLERANCE

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*"Have your own thoughts, your own beliefs and values,
but don't be deaf and closed to the other and different"*
(Đuro Šušnjić)

Abstract: *Institutional education of young people for religious dialogue and tolerance in the Republic of Serbia began with the introduction of optional teaching subjects Religious Education and Civic Education in primary and secondary schools in 2001. At the same time, a radical reform of the educational system was started in accordance with neoliberal ideological principles and development strategies. Explicit and hidden religious and political contents can also be observed in many other teaching subjects that have undergone reform changes in teaching contents, especially in primary education. Religious education is conducted according to the confessional model for recognized churches and traditional religious communities living in Serbia. As a general goal of Religious Education, it was pointed out that it should provide students with a complete religious view of the world and life, as well as enable them to freely adopt the spiritual and life values of the Church or community to which they belong. Then, that this goal should be achieved in an open and tolerant dialogue, with respect for other religious experiences and views. In the tasks of Religious Education, it is indicated that it should develop in students the aspiration towards responsible shaping of common life with other people, peoples, religious communities and cultures different from their own. On the other hand, Civic Education is defined as education for democracy and civil society. The main goal of teaching in this subject is to acquire knowledge and develop skills for the role of a responsible citizen for life in a democratically organized and humane society based on respect for human and civil rights, the right to diversity and the development of multiculturalism. The teaching content in these, as well as in other complementary subjects, has been influencing the formation of basic value attitudes and rules of behavior for two decades, thus creating a new religious and political culture among young people that contributes to a more tolerant attitude towards many social issues and a better understanding of various social phenomena and relationships. It is a well-founded assumption that young people studying in Serbia have the educational potential for religious dialogue and tolerance.*

Keywords: *Religious dialogue, Tolerance, Education, Serbia.*

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Introduction

It is possible to talk about religious dialogue and tolerance from different theoretical and methodological aspects (Mojzes, 2002, Mršević, 2009, Bakić Hejden, 2022). However, in the function of this work, one very interesting matrix of professor Đura Šušnjić is pointed out, where he considers dialogue and tolerance through four analytical levels: 1) dialogue between believers of the same religion; 2) dialogue between believers of different Christian denominations (dialogue between Orthodox, Catholics and Protestants); 3) dialogue between believers of different faiths; and 4) dialogue between believers and those who do not believe or are undecided and indifferent in their faith (Sušnjić, 2008). Dialogue and tolerance in each of these relationships and for all of them together requires religious, moral and aesthetic upbringing and education, both in church and institutional education. That is why the subject of this work is focused on the institutional education of young people for religious dialogue and tolerance in the Republic of Serbia.

For religious dialogue and tolerance, as an ideal and value of a modern democratic society, it is necessary to systematize and continuously build religious and political culture in each concrete society. This is necessary in order for people to better understand and accept religious diversity and improve their humane attitude towards people of other faiths and other religions. In addition, as indicated in the Recommendations of the Council of Europe, it is also about young people understanding why religion is a source of faith for millions of people (CoE 2005). This can best be achieved through continuous education and training through the process of institutional education. Education for religious dialogue and tolerance is also given considerable attention in the UNESCO Declaration on the Principles of Tolerance, where it is indicated that education is the most effective tool for preventing intolerance: “educational policies and programs should contribute to the development of understanding, solidarity and tolerance among individuals, as and among ethnic, social, cultural, religious and linguistic groups and nations’ (UNESCO 1995).

In the process of transition, through the reform of education in the Republic of Serbia, religious and new political contents were introduced into teaching (Ivanović, 2015, 15). In Serbia, this was done in 2001, first by introducing special teaching subjects Religious Education and Civic Education. Religious education is organized according to the confessional model, where education is focused on a specific religion, transmission and adoption of its attitudes and worldview. This was done for recognized churches and traditional religious communities living in Serbia: Serbian Orthodox Church, Islamic Community, Catholic Church, Slovak Evangelical Church a.v., Jewish Community, Reformed Christian Church and Evangelical Christian Church a.v. The main reason for the introduction of religious teaching and civic education into the education system was the building of a new system of social values, especially the renewal of religious culture and the creation of a new political culture in

accordance with neoliberal political values and social development strategies. In addition, the introduction of religious teaching in schools was significantly influenced by the revitalization of religion, not only in Serbia and its surroundings, but also in the whole of Eastern Europe, both because of the collapse of the communist value system in which atheism was one of the supporting pillars, and because of the great social -economic and political crises and wars in the post-Yugoslav area in the last decade of the 20th century.³ In such circumstances, political and other conditions were increasingly created for the free operation of different religions, especially traditional ones, which exerted an increasing influence on the social and individual life of people, trying to ensure a more significant influence on young people, especially in the education system. All this contributed to the introduction of religious teaching in primary and secondary schools, as well as religious content in other complementary subjects, such as: Serbian language, Music education, Art education, The world around us, Nature and society, History, Geography, Sociology and etc., as well as the teaching program Mother tongue - speech with elements of national culture, which is implemented for members of national minorities in 16 languages.⁴

The education and training of young people for religious dialogue and tolerance in the Republic of Serbia can be recognized through the analysis of: the goals of education in the Constitution, relevant laws, curricula and programs; educational tasks, which are set in teaching programs and teaching contents, which are prescribed for individual subjects for primary and secondary education. The starting point of this paper is that in the Republic of Serbia, through the process of institutional education and upbringing, the educational potential of young people for religious dialogue and tolerance is created.

1. Religious dialogue and tolerance as goals of education

Religious dialogue and tolerance are conditioned by the culture, political tradition and socio-economic relations of a certain society, as well as the attitude of religious communities towards members of other confessions. In accordance with the changes in these parameters, the forms of religious dialogue and tolerance or intolerance change, as well as the ways of their expression, because "religious toler-

³ "Research has shown that, in contrast to the established trend of a general decline in church religiosity in the West (...) in transition countries, a process of strengthening traditional church religiosity of the collectivist type is taking place, which contains a certain manifest socio-cultural and national identification and a process of strengthening people's attachment to religion and the church (...) There was also an overall increase in the meaning and influence of religion and the church in social life" (Marinović & Bobinac 2007, 409).

⁴ This program is implemented in primary schools in the Republic of Serbia for members of national minorities in 16 languages: Albanian, Bosnian, Bulgarian, Bunjevac, Vlach, Hungarian, Macedonian, German, Romany, Romanian, Ruthenian, Slovak, Slovenian, Ukrainian, Croatian and Czech.

ance is determined by the socio-historical context” (Vasić, 2012, 338). In that milieu, religious dialogue and tolerance in the Republic of Serbia can be observed, which is visible through the analysis of: constitutional provisions related to human and minority rights and freedoms, especially freedom of thought, conscience and religion; educational objectives in relevant laws, curricula and programs for primary and secondary education; educational tasks, which are set in teaching programs; as well as in teaching contents.

In the Constitution of the Republic of Serbia, through a series of provisions, the constitutional guarantee of the expression of freedom of thought, conscience and religion is indicated (Constitution 2006, articles 43-49). Those guarantees are the strongest support for the development of a religious culture whose basic determinants are religious dialogue and tolerance. In this context, the provisions that indicate the encouragement and respect of differences are extremely important: “Through measures in education, culture and public information, the Republic of Serbia encourages the understanding, appreciation and respect of the differences that exist due to the particularity of the ethnic, cultural, linguistic or religious identity of its citizens” (Constitution 2006, Article 48). Consequently, according to the Law on the Basics of the Education and Training System, education in Serbia is based on the principle of equality and availability of the right to education and training in accordance with the principles of social justice and equal opportunities without discrimination (ZOSOV 2017, Article 7, Point 1).

The goals of education and upbringing, among others, stand out: developing feelings of solidarity, understanding and constructive cooperation with others; developing competencies for understanding and respecting human rights, civil liberties and the ability to live in a democratically organized and just society; development and respect for racial, national, cultural, linguistic, religious, equality, tolerance and respect for diversity; development of interculturality, respect and preservation of national and world cultural heritage, etc. (ZOSOV 2017, Article 8). In the educational outcomes, students are expected to “participate effectively and constructively in all forms of work and social life, respect human rights and freedoms, communicate assertively and non-violently, especially in the growing diversity of societies and conflict resolution” (ZOSOV 2017, Article 9, Point 11). Also, in the Law on secondary education and upbringing, as goals and general outcomes of education, the following is particularly emphasized: “respect for racial, national, cultural, linguistic, religious, gender, gender and age equality, tolerance and respect for diversity” (ZSOV 2017-2021, Article 9, Item 2).

In the Rulebook on the curriculum for the first and second grade of primary education, several paragraphs indicate that the goals and objectives of the education program are respect for human and civil rights and basic freedoms, as well as the development of the ability to live in a democratic society. There, it is particularly highlighted as the goal: “developing in children and students curiosity and openness to the cultures of traditional churches and religious communities, as well as ethnic

and religious tolerance, strengthening trust among children and students and preventing behavior that violates the exercise of the right to diversity" (NP 2004 -2018). This goal is explicitly highlighted in other regulations and programs for all grades of primary education.

In the curriculum, for the subject Religious Education, as a general goal, it is emphasized that it should guide students to "the content of faith and the spiritual experience of traditional churches and religious communities that live and work in our living space, to provide students with a complete religious view to the world and life and to enable them to freely adopt the spiritual and life values of the Church or community to which they historically belong" (NP 2004-2018). Then, that this goal should be achieved "in an open and tolerant dialogue, with respect for other religious experiences and views" (NP 2004-2018). In the tasks of religious teaching, it is indicated that it should "develop in students the aspiration towards responsible shaping of common life with other people, peoples, religious communities and cultures different from their own" (NP 2004-2018). The curricula of religious education for all traditional churches and religious communities in Serbia are defined in a similar way, and the teaching contents are in accordance with religious views, philosophy and experiences of the respective religious studies. These general goals and objectives of Religious Education are highlighted in other programs for all grades of primary and secondary schools. Also, they are present in later changes and additions to curricula.

In the Rulebook on the plan and program of teaching and learning for high school, in the part where the general goals of secondary education and upbringing are stated, at the very top of the priorities is indicated: "respect for racial, national, cultural, linguistic, religious, gender, gender and age equality", tolerance and respect for diversity" (PNUG 2020-2021). In the study objectives of many teaching subjects, ethnic and religious tolerance is indicated from various aspects, which will help young people in their professional and personal development. And in the subject of Sociology, which is studied in the third grade of secondary vocational schools and the fourth grade of high school, the thematic unit "Religion" is included, where topics on the basic definitions and functions of religion, monotheistic religions, secularization, religious fundamentalism and the revival of religions are studied (PNUG 2020-2021).

In many teaching subjects for primary and secondary education, explicit or implicit teaching contents can be recognized through their teaching contents that point to the acquisition of knowledge and the development of awareness of the necessity of religious dialogue and tolerance. This is particularly visible in the teaching subjects for primary and secondary school: Serbian language, Mother tongue with elements of national culture (for members of national minorities), The world around us, Nature and society, National tradition; Musical culture, Art culture, History, Geography, Sociology, etc., as well as extracurricular activities prescribed by the curriculum. In addition to explicit ideological content of a political and religious nature, many hidden ideological content can be observed in the curricula, which are

intentionally defined in such a way as to direct children towards religious tolerance (Bazić & Sekulić 2017, 68).

2. Effects of religious instruction

After twenty years since the introduction of the subjects Religious Education and Civic Education into the education system of the Republic of Serbia and then the education reform, their effects can hardly be reliably assessed, especially not in terms of the impact on the formation of basic attitudes among young people regarding the capacity for religious dialogue and tolerance. . That is why it is necessary to look for support on some relevant research that can provide at least an approximate picture of the real situation. In this function, on this occasion, three studies are pointed out.⁵

1. In the research in the primary schools of the Raška district in Serbia on the teaching of Civic Education and Religious Education (Bazić & Sejfović 2010), the parents of students who chose between Religious Education and Civic Education for their children were questioned. It was noted that Religious Education was more often the choice of parents in the younger grades of primary schools than Civic Education. In ethnically purer environments, a greater number of parents chose Civic Education, while in places where the ethnic composition of the population is distinctly mixed, the percentage of representation of Religious Education is much higher. According to parents, the main reason for choosing religious classes is their religious beliefs (88.92%), but the acquisition of new knowledge and the influence of these classes on the formation of personality are also highlighted as reasons (11.08%). Parents did not express a critical attitude towards the content of the teaching material for Religious Education and are more tolerant and restrained towards this subject, but great dissatisfaction with the teachers who teach this subject was also expressed. The reasons for the more frequent choice of religious education can be found in many factors, among which is the generally expressed tendency to revitalize the religion of all denominations throughout the country and the surrounding area, and thus the need of people for stronger religious and ethnic self-identification and expression. On Question: *Did the teaching of elective subjects meet expectations?*, the answers were received, which express that 32.91% of respondents are completely satisfied with the teaching, for 34.92% their expectations were partially met, and 26.14% of them achieved their expectations to a large extent. 6.03% of parents are not satisfied with the teaching of elective subjects. The changes that parents have noticed in their children, which can be linked to the influence of Religious Education or Civic Education, are mainly due to the fact that students have acquired new

⁵ Here, only the results of the research that are the function of this paper are indicated, not the methodological characteristics and their complete results.

knowledge (60.3%) and that there are some positive changes in their behavior and personality expression (17.34%). There were no other observations or they were not discussed (Bazić & Sejfović 2010, 354-355). This is extremely important, because at the beginning of primary education, teaching content about social values is the most prevalent and students use this knowledge to form rules of behavior and basic attitudes about their social identity and the values that are given importance in their social environment. These knowledge and especially the attitudes that are acquired in childhood generally remain for the rest of their lives in their behavior and cultural pattern.

2. In the evaluative research of the Institute for Evaluating the Quality of Education and Training of the Republic of Serbia (2013), the quality of teaching programs and the competence of teachers for Orthodox catechism in primary and secondary schools were investigated through the examination of religious teachers (ZVKOV 2013). In this research, it was pointed out that most of the problems that religious teachers have in teaching, especially in elementary school, are caused by the content of the program, where it is emphasized that many topics are not sufficiently didactically and methodically elaborated, that the age capacities of the students are not respected, and that the existing textbooks and manuals are not sufficient in the function of teaching. Then, that there are program limitations, on which religious teachers have no influence, such as: too many abstract terms, poorly elaborated content and extensive topics. There are other limitations related to the students' age capacities: insufficient prior knowledge of the history of religion and philosophy, which is necessary to understand the key concepts provided by the material, as well as the wrong assumptions of the program author about the students' prior knowledge. This is why it happens that students lose motivation for the subject, because the contents are unacceptable to them and cause discomfort due to the inability to understand the material. They believe that the achievement of teaching goals is adversely affected by the abstractness of the content, the lack of teaching aids that would serve to better understand the material, as well as the non-participation of students in the liturgical life of the Church. Here, they lose sight of the fact that students' participation in religious rites and rituals goes beyond the scope of secular education and that it would only introduce confusion among students. That's why they emphasized the need for a revision of religious teaching programs for primary schools, which will be followed by better quality textbooks. The revised programs, according to religious teachers, should also include new topics on biblical history, the relationship of the church to contemporary problems, Christianity and culture, Christian ethics and church history. They are very interested in introducing new topics that would be correlated with history, psychology, Serbian language and literature, art culture and civic education. Overall, religious teachers believe that there is a problem with adapting the topics and content to the age of the students, because depending on how much the students understand the subject, the content will be more interesting to them. The second group of proposals for the improvement of

Religious Education refers to the provision of didactic-methodical support in the form of instructions for concretizing activities within the topics.

Middle school Orthodox Catechism programs overall received better ratings from teachers than elementary school programs. However, teachers in secondary schools also point to certain topics that they complain are age-appropriate, insufficiently interesting for students, and have inadequate content. At this level of education, there are significantly fewer objections to age appropriateness, which can be explained by the fact that the intellectual capacities of students are now more ready to understand abstract content. Most of the obstacles faced by teachers in implementing the program are related to the lack of teaching aids and quality textbooks. The teachers believe that program revisions are necessary, and they have proposed specific topics that, in their opinion, can contribute to the quality of the program. For this level of education, a greater degree of freedom in the realization of the program is proposed through the introduction of new topics that students choose (ZVKOV 2013).

The vast majority of religious teachers who participated in the research (78.1%) believe that Religious Education should continue to be studied in schools as a separate subject for each denomination, in all grades of primary and secondary schools. On the other hand, one-fifth of religious teachers (19.8%) believe that religious education should be taught as a separate subject through a joint program, regardless of denomination, and that this subject should be represented in all grades of primary and secondary schools (ZVKOV 2013, 36). Therefore, only a fifth of the respondents believe that there is room for establishing a common core of religious teaching programs for all denominations, which could be one of the safer paths for the development of tolerance and respect for diversity in multi-denominational environments. The attitudes of religious teachers who advocate for a non-confessional model of religious teaching, in essence, seem to be ideal for acquiring educational competences for religious dialogue and tolerance and agree with the character of a democratic society. However, it should be borne in mind that religious teaching according to the confessional model is represented in many European democratic societies, so this model seems to be complementary to the goals of a modern pluralistic society. In addition, "neoliberalism and religion have common external ideological characteristics and goals that are reducible to the relativization of the state and the nation, tend towards supranational domination and become correspondent with contemporary globalization processes" (Bazić & Sekulić 2017, 79). And finally, religious teachers believe that the greatest advantages of the Orthodox Catechism course are that it has an educational impact on students. About 75% of the respondents estimate that the advantage of the subject is in the goals related to the development of a comprehensive view of the world, encouraging personality development and creating the basis for a responsible and engaged life in modern society (ZVKOV 2013, 31).

3. In the research conducted by the NGO Civil Initiatives (2020), high school students in the Republic of Serbia were examined, where an evaluative analysis of the effects of the Civic Education subject on the knowledge and attitudes of students

was carried out through a comparison with the results of students who attended this subject and those who chose Religious teaching (Pavlović et al., 2020). In this research, the level of acquired knowledge that students had the opportunity to acquire until the final grade of secondary schools was examined. There were a total of 25 questions included in this part of the questionnaire, but some questions contained multiple sub-questions, making a total score of 36 possible correct answers. The average achievement of students represents slightly less than half of the theoretical maximum score on the test (36), and the real range of achievement ranged from 0 to 32 points. However, no student was able to answer all the questions in the test correctly. Approximately 1/4 of the students (23%) had low achievement, i.e. below 25% of correct answers. Only eight students, or less than 1%, achieved excellent results. On average, those attending Civic Education showed higher achievement compared to those attending Religious Education. In addition to the overall achievement of the students, the analysis is also focused on the contents that the students have mastered, that is, on those contents that are less familiar to them. The research included a series of questions aimed at assessing the political culture of students and their level of information about the political environment and trust in social institutions, involvement in community life, developed civic values and attitudes towards other religious and ethnic communities, etc. From the multitude of such questions and answers, for the purpose of this work, we point out only some. First, to the question: *Freedom of religion means*, in the offered answers, the following results were obtained expressed in the following table.⁶

Freedom of religion means:	Religious education	Citizen's education
	Percentage (%)	Percentage (%)
11. Religious education in all public schools	6,2	3,9
22. Participation of believers in making political decisions	9,4	7,8
33. The right to profess one's religion	80,5	75,0
44. Separation of religion from the state	5,7	4,0
55. Without answer	3,7	3,8
In total	100	100

Therefore, the right to freedom of religion, as the right to profess one's religion, is clearly recognized by the largest percentage of students, which is also the question with the highest number of correct answers in both groups of students. More than

⁶ This table was created based on the results shown in: *Table 25. P24 Freedom of religion means*: (Pavlović et al., 2020, p. 24).

three quarters of students gave the correct answer, and the differences between the two groups are not statistically significant. The degree of political culture of the students was examined in more than 16 general questions about attitudes towards society and readiness for social participation, which contained a larger number of sub-questions (from 4 to 19) that covered certain aspects of the general topic. The highest percentage of students in both groups state that they are moderately informed about political events in the country, while in both cases there are more who consider themselves little or not at all informed, than those who estimate that they are very and very much informed (28%:17 %). The data indicate a trend towards the apoliticization of young people and a gradual loss of interest in political events. In addition, students who attend Civic Education rate their level of information as significantly higher.

The evaluation of the values that were offered to the students to declare how important they are to them personally, shows that most of the offered values are of great importance to both groups of students. Regarding some values, there is no significant difference between students who attend Civic Education and those who attend Religious Education. Family represents the most important value for both groups of students and there is no difference between them. Then, justice and personal freedom, friends, free time and home privacy follow. Significant differences appear in connection with other value orientations and indicate a somewhat distinctive value profile of both groups of students. Although all values are relatively highly valued, and those that are somewhat less important in this respect, in both groups of students, students who attend Religious Education value religion and tradition to a slightly greater extent, and students who attend Civic Education belong to the European culture, protection of minorities, media freedom, equality of all people and social justice. When it comes to trust in various institutions, groups and individuals, the data indicate that students have the greatest trust in themselves and their close people (parents and friends), although in them to a lesser extent, which may not be expected for this age. This is followed, albeit significantly lower, by trust in teachers, which is more pronounced among students who attend religious classes (37%:27%), and religious institutions (38%:50), which are more trusted by those who attend religious classes. Also, typical findings on institutional trust indicate that institutions of traditional authority, such as the church and the army, are the only institutions in which the citizens of Serbia have trust. This obviously also applies to young people. The attitude towards other ethnic and religious groups was concluded on the basis of social distance, which was examined through the willingness to enter into a relationship of friendship with members of other groups. The research also included an examination of the willingness to enter into a relationship of friendship with members of other marginalized groups, according to non-ethnic criteria. In this respect, the smallest social distance is present towards persons of other religions (Pavlović et al., 2020, 34-35).

Conclusions

For religious dialogue and tolerance, it is necessary to systematize and continuously build a religious and democratic culture based on humane, moral and aesthetic education and upbringing, which is acquired equally in church and institutional schooling, as well as through all forms of informal lifelong education. This is necessary in order for people to better understand others, accept religious diversity and improve their humane attitude towards people of other faiths and other religions. To this end, through the process of primary and secondary education, young people in the Republic of Serbia have been intensively trained for twenty years. This was first started with the introduction of special optional teaching subjects (Religious Education and Civic Education) in primary and secondary education, and then complementary contents in other teaching subjects. Students thereby acquire knowledge and adopt certain social values on the basis of which they form their basic attitudes and rules of behavior based on the postulates of religious and democratic culture. Education and upbringing for religious dialogue and tolerance is established in the Constitution, and then contained in the laws governing education and upbringing, curricula and programs; and, especially, in the teaching contents, which are prescribed for certain teaching subjects for primary and secondary education. Thus, through the process of education and upbringing, the educational potential of young people for religious dialogue and tolerance is created.

The effects of institutional education and upbringing for religious dialogue and tolerance in the Republic of Serbia can hardly be fully and realistically assessed. There are various studies on this that were conducted on different topics and in different time intervals, so some of them are analyzed in this paper. The results of these studies indicate: that Religious Education and Civic Education, especially among younger students, influenced the acquisition of new knowledge, the formation of personality, especially stronger religious and ethnic self-identification; that there are positive changes in students in the expression of their personality; that the value of Religious Education lies in the goals related to the development of a comprehensive view of the world and the creation of a basis for a responsible and engaged life in modern society. Then, that secondary school students, regardless of whether they chose to attend Religious Education or Civic Education, clearly recognize the right to profess their religion; family is the most important value for them, followed by justice and personal freedom, friends, free time and home privacy. Significant differences appear in connection with other value orientations, which indicate to some extent the distinctive value profile of both groups of students. Although all values are relatively highly valued, students who attend Religious Education value religion and tradition to a slightly greater extent, and students who attend Civic Education value belonging to European culture, protection of minorities, freedom of the media, equality of people and social justice more. Regarding the attitude towards other

social groups, the smallest social distance is present towards people of other religions.

What both groups of students know equally well can be attributed, apart from Religious Education and Civic Education, to the influence of other complementary teaching subjects, which together influence the effects of general education and the value system. Also, the influence of the media and the social environment should be taken into account. Thus, in the process of primary and secondary education, a religious and political culture is created among young people, which contributes to a more tolerant and humane relationship between people, as well as to a better understanding of various social phenomena and relationships. It is a well-founded assumption that young people studying in Serbia have the educational potential for religious dialogue and tolerance.

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