

Uma reflexão acerca do ensino religioso nos anos iniciais do ensino fundamental

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Resumo

Esse artigo faz uma reflexão acerca do papel do Ensino Religioso nos anos iniciais do Ensino Fundamental. A partir da Base Nacional Comum Curricular, traçamos exemplos de atividades que podem ser desenvolvidas com os estudantes dentro da sala de aula, considerando a imaginação, a ludicidade e o diálogo como componentes favoráveis ao trabalho do professor. Fazemos também uma reflexão acerca da importância de um trabalho interdisciplinar que valorize o Ensino Religioso como componente curricular e não como tema transversal a ser trabalhado em sala de aula. Para tal, essa disciplina, deve valorizar os estudos do fenômeno religioso e suas diversas manifestações, a religiosidade e a construção de sentidos da vida como conteúdo a ser refletido, discutido e analisado.

Palavras-chave: Componente curricular. Democracia. Educação. Religião. Tolerância.

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A reflection on religious education in the early years of fundamental education

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Abstract

This article reflects on the role of Religious Education in the early years of Elementary Education. From the National Common Curricular Base, we draw examples of activities that can be developed with students within the classroom, considering an imagination, playfulness, and dialogue as components favorable to the teacher's work. We have also reflected on the importance of interdisciplinary work that values Religious Education as a curricular component, and not as a transversal theme to be worked in the classroom. To this end, this discipline must value the studies of the religious phenomenon and its various manifestations, religiosity, and the construction of meanings of life as content to be reflected, discussed, and analyzed

Keywords: State of Knowledge; New High School; Educational politics.

Reflexión sobre la educación religiosa en los primeros años de la escuela primaria

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Resumen

Este artículo reflexiona sobre el papel de la educación religiosa en los primeros años de la escuela primaria. Con base en la Base Curricular Nacional Común, delineamos ejemplos de actividades que se pueden desarrollar con los estudiantes dentro del aula, considerando la imaginación, la alegría y el diálogo como componentes favorables para el trabajo del docente. También reflexionamos sobre la importancia de un trabajo interdisciplinario que valore la Educación Religiosa como un componente curricular y no como un tema transversal para trabajar en el aula. Para ello, esta disciplina debe valorar los estudios del fenómeno religioso y sus diversas manifestaciones, la religiosidad y la construcción de significados en la vida como contenidos a reflexionar, discutir y analizar.

Palavras chave: Componente curricular. Democracia. Educación. Religión. Tolerancia.

Introduction

It is not uncommon to criticize Religious Education (RE) in public schools as a violation of the secular nature of the State. The issue tends to worsen when considering the training of teachers who will teach this subject. Equally problematic is considering the training of teachers who work in the early years of Elementary School, responsible for connecting students' experiences in early childhood education with the systematic knowledge in this new stage of their education. Among many challenges, the classroom teacher at this stage faces RE as an issue because many have not had courses on this content, which is part of the National Common Curriculum Base (BNCC) from the first to the ninth year of Basic Education, in their initial training. In schools where a specialist teacher is present, this problem is mitigated. However, in those where the classroom teachers are required to teach RE, the situation becomes more complex. To shed light on this issue, we propose a reflection on the teaching practice of this curriculum component in the early years and the role that RE should play in schools as a democratic instrument.

We base our discussion on the BNCC and some RE scholars such as Sérgio Junqueira and Gruen, as well as education thinkers like Rubem Alves. The contributions of the National Permanent Forum on Religious Education (FONAPER) are also crucial, as their research, events, and publications have provided a rich debate on this curriculum component.

THE PRACTICE OF RE IN THE EARLY YEARS OF ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

According to the BNCC (Brazil, 2017, p. 56), in the early years of Elementary School, the child begins to interact “with multiple languages,” which allows “participation in the literate world and the construction of new learning, both in school and beyond.” Furthermore, the text continues:

the affirmation of their identity in relation to the collective they are part of results in more active ways of interacting with this collective and with the norms that govern relationships between people both inside and outside the school. This is achieved through recognizing their potential, embracing, and valuing differences (BRASIL, 2017, p. 56).

In these lines, among other things, the possible contributions of Religious Education (RE) to children's development have been formulated. After all, as a practice and belief of families and consequently of students, religion shapes the identity of these individuals. More than that, it is known that among the identity aspects of a culture, religion holds an important place: it justifies certain practices, laws, ways of dressing, and even eating habits. Thus, it is an integral part of a people's

cultural identity. Indeed, as Schiavo (2004, p. 77) states, religion is not exclusively a heritage of the churches; it,

is a product of the history of peoples and belongs to them as one of the most significant and important elements of their cultures. Before it is the structuring of a particular religious experience, it is, and represents, the human longing to transcend and to connect with that Being in which humanity finds answers to its profound questions.

Religion, in its linguistic dimension, also greatly contributes to personal development. Constitutively symbolic, religion is an opening to a plurality of interpretations. Each symbol manifests as an infinite concept, impossible to exhaust. In *What is Religion?* Rubem Alves (1984) states that symbols are like horizons: the more we move towards them, the less we are able to exhaust them. Thus, through the symbolic language of religion, the teacher is able to open up infinite possibilities and horizons, giving wings to imagination. At this age and, consequently, at this stage of development, there is nothing better than imagination as a skill to be developed and brought into the school practice.

Moreover, working with symbols reaches the very everyday life of students, allowing for a dialogue between knowledge and life. Students are invited to look at the world around them and become aware of the symbolic dimension that makes up their environment. The teacher, in addition to exploring students' imagination, should also instill in them curiosity. According to Rubem Alves, in *The Desire to Teach and the Art of Learning* (2004), "the Greeks said that the head begins to think when the eyes are stupefied in the face of an object. We think to decipher the enigma of vision. We think to understand what we see." (ALVES, 2004, p. 9). Exploring the child's world is of singular importance, as at this stage of development, they are undergoing considerable changes: they start to recognize who they are, seek to understand their place in the world, look around in search of answers, and question the plurality and differences around them. This is why, according to the BNCC (BRASIL, 2017, pp. 441-445), in the First, Second, and Third grades of Elementary School, the content proposed for Religious Education includes Identities and Alterities and Religious Manifestations. Together, this content allows the teacher to engage the children with the themes that will be developed. Ultimately, this exploration of the world of religious phenomena² will make more

² According to Soares and Stigar (2016, p. 142): "The religious phenomenon is the focus of Religious Education as it allows the systematization of one of the possible relationships that human beings can establish with the Transcendental reality, with otherness, with the search for the meaning of life, and with diversity. Thus, the authors continue: 'We understand that Religious Education has as its object of study the religious phenomenon, which comprises a set of facts, events, manifestations, and expressions, both material and spiritual, that involve human beings in their quest and relationship with the Transcendent. This quest and relationship can have individual and communal aspects. The religious phenomenon occurs within the universe of a culture, is influenced by it, and, in turn, also influences the culture. Such a phenomenon is inherent to the human being and presupposes Transcendence, which is at the root of all cultural production.'" (SOARES; STIGAR, 2016, p. 142).

sense when it begins with what is most personal to the child their subjectivity and identity and then moves towards what transcends them: the other and their particularities.

In this process of differentiating and raising awareness about the self, others, and the collective, students are called to respect. Given the physical and subjective similarities and differences, teachers are able to foster an awareness and acceptance of various ways of life, beliefs, and practices. In this work of exploring differences, teachers find ways to address memories, recollections, and knowledge that manifest, including in different forms of belief (BRAZIL, 2017, p. 441). The symbolic aspects emerging in daily life and the relationships students establish become evident. From traffic signs to religious symbols, the teacher's creativity enables understanding that symbols are systems created by humans to organize and establish social well-being, affecting relationships with others and, for those who profess a faith, with God. This is a Religious Education that interacts with life and, as an educational process, contributes to the introduction of new languages in the educational process, ensuring a holistic education that involves the selection, organization, and analysis of information that frames students' historical and experiential reality, opening the school to life. This dialogue with life, which extends into the classroom, will necessarily lead not only to the recognition and understanding of the plurality of individuals but also of religious plurality. According to Luiz Alberto de Souza Alves and Sérgio Junqueira in "A elaboração das concepções do Ensino Religioso no Brasil" (The Development of Religious Education Conceptions in Brazil) (2011),

Without dialogue, the barriers of prejudice, suspicion, and misunderstanding cannot be effectively removed. Through dialogue, each party makes an honest attempt to address common life issues and gains the courage to seek truth and achieve goodness (ALVES; JUNQUEIRA, 2011, p. 58).

Students in the early years are active; they enjoy communicating, express their thoughts without fear, and provide a rich field for exploration by the teacher. The teacher, in turn, guides the classroom dialogue, pointing out errors and prejudices to make students more tolerant and capable of accepting differences. Dialogue is a good starting point for developing Religious Education (RE) content in the classroom. For instance, in the second year of Elementary School, where the BNCC proposes working with students on memories and symbols, the teacher can use dialogue as a tool to identify the records students make of their personal, family, and school memories. Narratives will emerge, stories will be told, and memories will be brought into the classroom. This way, students will see that the school is concerned with and engaged in their lives, turning everyday experiences into learning and reflection content. Taking further steps, the teacher could involve children in playful

activities, such as asking them to draw episodes from these narratives or bring photos and recount the events.

The classroom is no longer seen as a harsh, cold space where the teacher, distant from the students, is the only one who speaks and can express themselves. Transforming the classroom into a knowledge laboratory results in rich and effective work. It becomes a laboratory of the religious phenomenon, focusing on understanding and perceiving daily experiences rather than conceptual dissection, which characterizes this religiosity³, especially since students at this stage still struggle with abstraction. Another possible exercise when working with religious symbols is to bring these symbolic representations into the classroom. The teacher can create cards with religious and secular symbols—such as traffic symbols—and encourage the children to sort these cards into two groups. Given the students' age and maturity, the teacher can even involve them in creating the rules for this card game. This way, the teacher not only establishes a connection between the student and the symbol (whether printed or drawn on posters) but also prompts the student to recall from memory where they have seen these symbols, whether in places they visit, public spaces, videos, drawings, or TV programs. The teacher demonstrates that religious symbols permeate the students' lives and can be found even outside of religious temples. Consequently, students are invited to observe and understand the world around them, reaffirming that "for children, the world is a vast playground. Things are fascinating, provocations to the eye. Everything is an invitation" (ALVES, 2004, p. 10).

At this stage of development, interdisciplinarity is particularly beneficial for developing activities related to Religious Education (ER). For example, when working on Religious Spaces and Territories in the Third Year of Elementary School, the teacher can create dialogues and projects that integrate ER with geography. Interdisciplinarity, as Japiassu and Marcondes (1991, p. 136) define it, is a research and teaching method that encourages interaction between two or more disciplines. This means that no single discipline is valued over another. Even a specialist teacher should recognize that interdisciplinary relationships involve not just communication between different types of knowledge but also a "mutual integration of concepts, epistemology, terminology, methodology, procedures, data, and research organization" (JAPIASSU; MARCONDES, 1991, p. 136). Thus, characterizing and identifying different celebratory spaces and sacred territories involves developing ideas about space,

³ According to Gruen, religiosity in education is an anthropological-philosophical category. He views religiosity as a deeper dimension of religion as a phenomenon. "This dimension is, or should be, at the root of all manifestations of human life, qualifying them, in our case, both in the practice of religion and in its rejection, or in the search for the path to follow" (GRUEN, 2005, p. 17). Inspired by the philosophy of Paul Tillich, Gruen asserts that "religiosity is the most profound of all human life functions; or rather, of human life as a whole. This openness to the radical meaning of human existence is, therefore, an openness to what transcends us" (GRUEN, 2005, p. 21).

spatiality, territory, boundaries, geographical points, and local characteristics. Additionally, relating spaces to identities and cultural and social pluralities allows teachers, or the general teacher, to address the religious phenomenon as part of the identity formation of individuals and society.

In the context of interdisciplinarity, the BNCC (BRASIL, 2017, p. 446) proposes exploring Religious Representations in Art for the Fourth year of Elementary School. This allows teachers to develop connections between artistic creation and the propagation of faith. Historically, art has been used as a tool for evangelization and conversion, while admirers and artists have also used religious language to express their sensitivity towards works. According to Fritz Kaufmann in *Arte e Religião* (2013), figures like Goethe have even debated the possibility of art serving as a form of religion. In a playful lesson, teachers can use magazine clippings to illustrate how religious representations manifest in art through architecture and public spaces. For example, in large cities, the contrast between tall buildings and high towers can reflect this mix of sacred and secular. Students can be encouraged to cut out images showing this interplay of sacred and secular elements—such as religious scenes in paintings, graffiti, sculptures, and artworks from different eras, including Renaissance masterpieces.

In the Fifth grade, the proposal for interdisciplinarity can be maintained by addressing the relationship between religion and language. Working with oral traditions, religious narratives, and myths certainly involves the ER teacher in a close connection with literature and Portuguese disciplines. Besides working with myths, which is a type of narrative that engages students' interest, using Comic Books (HQs) further taps into the playful world. Titles such as *Lobo: A Guerra dos Padres / Lobo: Sem Limites* by Alan Grant; *Quarteto Fantástico: Pós-Vida* by Mark Waid; or even *Grandes Astros Superman* by Grant Morrison can support this approach. Additionally, working with Brazilian folklore, and religious narratives from indigenous, Romani, and Afro-Brazilian traditions allows the teacher to focus on religious pluralism, respecting different conceptions and narratives about creation, diverse worldviews, and human existence. In working with various religious texts, the teacher can also address issues related to ethical and moral concepts. The teacher should encourage critical reading by engaging students in interpretative activities that foster a critical perception of the world. Paulo Freire noted in *Pedagogia: diálogo e conflito* (1995) that "this cycle of reading-writing-reading critically is one of the fundamental tasks of the school" (GADOTTI; FREIRE; GUIMARÃES, 1995, p. 87). Finally, it is important to value oral narratives by showing students the tradition they carry, as well as the histories of various peoples, their sufferings, beliefs, and their ways of relating to nature and the world.

THE PLACE OF RELIGIOUS EDUCATION IN BASIC EDUCATION

In this interdisciplinary approach, the risk that the main teacher might face is transforming Religious Education (RE) into a transversal theme, thereby integrating it, so to speak, into other content and curriculum components. Why would this transversal approach be a mistake? Firstly, because it disregards the entire history of RE as a discipline, its conceptual and content richness, its provocations, and its potential for promoting citizenship, tolerance, and respect. While we do not dismiss the fact that transversal themes contribute to the holistic development of students by addressing emotional, personal, and value-based aspects, removing RE from its distinct disciplinary role denies students the opportunity for a dedicated space and time to discuss their beliefs, perceptions of unfamiliar beliefs, and the prejudices routinely repeated and propagated by those who only know their own religion and end up demonizing and undervaluing others. According to Quintino and Corrêa, "Religious education makes individuals protagonists of this learning, historical and social subjects who play an active role, with characteristics specific to their age and context" (2017, p. 2).

In the BNCC (*Base Nacional Comum Curricular*), it is stated that it is up to education systems and schools to decide and incorporate transversal⁴ themes such as children's and adolescents' rights, health, economy, and ethnic-racial relations. However, neither the BNCC (2017), the Federal Constitution (1988), nor the Law of Guidelines and Bases of National Education (1996) designate Religious Education (RE) as a transversal theme. On the contrary, they affirm that RE is an area of knowledge and a curricular component of the initial and final years of Elementary Education (BRASIL, 2017, p. 27). The Federal Constitution (Art. 210, §1) even recognizes RE as an "optional discipline in the normal school hours of public elementary education" (BRASIL, 1988, Author's emphasis). Similarly, Law No. 9.394, of December 20, 1996, which establishes the Guidelines and Bases of National Education, states: "Art. 33. Religious education, which is optional, is an integral part of basic education and constitutes a discipline within the normal hours of public elementary schools, ensuring respect for Brazil's cultural and religious diversity and prohibiting any forms of

⁴ Among these themes, the following stand out: children's and adolescents' rights (Law No. 8.069/1990), traffic education (Law No. 9.503/1997), environmental education (Law No. 9.795/1999, Opinion CNE/CP No. 14/2012, and Resolution CNE/CP No. 2/2012), food and nutritional education (Law No. 11.947/2009), aging process, respect and appreciation of the elderly (Law No. 10.741/2003), human rights education (Decree No. 7.037/2009, Opinion CNE/CP No. 8/2012, and Resolution CNE/CP No. 1/2012), education on ethnic-racial relations and teaching Afro-Brazilian, African, and Indigenous history and culture (Laws No. 10.639/2003 and 11.645/2008, Opinion CNE/CP No. 3/2004, and Resolution CNE/CP No. 1/2004), as well as health, family and social life, education for consumption, financial and fiscal education, work, science and technology, and cultural diversity (Opinion CNE/CEB No. 11/2010 and Resolution CNE/CEB No. 2/2010 CNE/CEB nº 7/2010)".

proselytism” (BRASIL, 1996 – Authors’ emphasis).

In this way, by teaching Religious Education (ER) as a disciplinary content, the teacher provides students with a new perspective to view and understand the world. ER then becomes a lens through which the world can be comprehended. For effective ER teaching with children, the regular teacher, in the absence of a specialist teacher, must be aware of the importance of ER. By overcoming the fear of addressing religious phenomena, the teacher fulfills their most important mission: to educate for citizenship. This aligns with the LDB (Art. 32, IV): "the strengthening of family bonds, human solidarity, and reciprocal tolerance on which social life is based" (BRASIL, 1996). Developing this capacity for tolerance and respect for others' family traditions and beliefs involves structuring a teaching approach that is organized weekly within the dedicated ER time slots. Therefore, the teacher must be careful not to transform ER into a transversal subject that is addressed sporadically when religious topics appear in other subjects such as history, geography, or art. The courage to innovate comes from striving for improvement. Even if the regular teacher did not have courses related to ER knowledge and practices during their training, they can seek additional training to become more familiar with religious phenomena and how to address them in the classroom. This is not the ideal solution, as ideally, a specialist teacher with appropriate training should be responsible for teaching ER in all educational systems. After all, another risk of inadequate teacher training for this subject is proselytism, which is prohibited by the constitution, the LDB, and even the BNCC.

The role of Religious Education (ER) in basic education is educational rather than confessional. To ensure this educational function, it is essential to "consider the field of knowledge of each subject and its methods of investigation and study" (LIBÂNEO, 1994, p. 96). Ensuring this educational role involves setting pedagogical and social objectives, such as guaranteeing respect for the cultural and religious diversity within the school environment. According to Eduardo Gross (2014, p. 130), "the study of religion as an object helps to promote a critical perspective on religion," indicating that the willingness to know and study this object emphasizes that knowledge is a social construction, a shared formulation arising from a more analytical view of the object, rather than merely an individual one, which could be identified with each student's belief.

The educational function endows ER with an integrative character. Until the formulation of the 1996 LDB, which ensures respect for cultural and religious diversity in ER classes, there was a segregation resulting from the assertion of Catholic Christianity as the only true religion. Being integrative, according to FONAPER (2000, p. 13), means ensuring that students, regardless of their beliefs, can sit side by side without their beliefs and religions being disregarded in this curricular

component. This leads to what is proposed in the BNCC as one of ER's objectives: "To provide knowledge about the right to freedom of conscience and belief, with a constant aim of promoting human rights" (BRASIL, 2017, p. 434). For this, the teacher should "develop competencies and skills that contribute to dialogue between religious and secular perspectives on life, practicing respect for freedom of conceptions and the pluralism of ideas, in accordance with the Federal Constitution." (BRASIL, 2017, p. 434).

For this, the Religious Education (ER) teacher must view students as active participants, valuing their contributions through the problematization and narration of their surrounding context. Regarding the religious phenomenon, the teacher will have plenty of elements to create a dialogue with reality and help students understand the cultural environment in which they are embedded. Establishing a dialogue with life, its facts, and events mobilizes the group in constructing a pluralism of ideas and knowledge of various religious and secular perspectives. The space for children's questions is essential in developing a reflective and plural ER perspective. Rubem Alves (2004) emphasizes that questions are fundamental in developing students' interest in school and class. Many questions arise, and can arise, in ER class. The problem occurs when an unprepared teacher dismisses the students' questions as irrelevant, thus diminishing their interest and curiosity. An ER that is inquisitive is more valuable than an ER that is doctrinaire. In relation to the topics proposed for ER in the early years of elementary education, there is room for establishing this inquisitive ER, which is open to students' questions and curiosities. After all, "it is in questions that intelligence is revealed" (ALVES, 2004, p. 15). However, achieving this requires appropriate training in a degree program in Religious Studies, which provides a rich and respectful approach capable of addressing students' demands regarding questions about the religious phenomenon and religiosity.

THE IMPORTANCE OF RE AS A CURRICULAR COMPONENT FOR TOLERANCE

What is the importance of RE as a school subject? This question is relevant, as no other curricular component is as debated in Basic Education as RE. Some argue that RE is not important since religious knowledge, the subject of this area of study, can be and often is addressed by other subjects within the school. Additionally, there are those who continue to claim that RE violates the secular nature of the State by introducing a theme that should be confined to the private sphere. It is important to emphasize once again that RE is not intended as a means of catechization within schools but rather as a discipline that encompasses the construction of knowledge about the religious phenomenon. Its goal is to democratize access to information that students would otherwise not be

able to engage with in a serious, reflective, and critical manner.

It is important to highlight the democratic and civic formation intended and achieved through the contents and proposals of this area of knowledge. In Brazilian culture and religious context, Christianity, as shown by the 2010 IBGE census, is predominant⁵. Often, its symbols and devotional objects are found in public spaces like schools in a transparent manner, meaning they are not even noticed by those who regularly occupy these spaces⁶. This indicates that Christian education dominates the religious formation of students, who are little, if at all, bothered by the presence of religious symbols in public spaces. Our interest is not to discuss the appropriateness or legality of these religious objects and symbols in public spaces. Rather, we aim to illustrate, using this example, the broader scenario that results from it: most students receive religious education and knowledge, particularly through Christianity, at home. This hegemonic and narrow perspective on Brazilian society leads to disrespect for minority religions, especially African, Afro-Brazilian, and Indigenous religions, as well as for those who identify as atheists, agnostics, or non-religious⁷.

The catechization that occurs in churches and the education in faith provided by families ensure a formation confined to their own beliefs. This results in the understanding and affirmation of “my faith” against “theirs”; me against the other; us against them. Faced with this reality of segregation, exclusion, and prejudice stemming from the assertion of the supremacy of my belief over others, Religious Education (RE) presents itself as a democratic space because it aims to overcome this religious reductionism, offering students new perspectives and knowledge of other religious traditions that they might never learn from their families and churches. The trend we observe is the demonization and marginalization of what is different from one’s own faith. A democratic RE is one that takes on the task of overcoming this marginalization of certain beliefs. Applying to RE the concept of marginality that Saviani formulates in reference to school and selective education, which discriminates against and diminishes the education of the poorer classes, we understand that “marginality is, therefore, an accidental phenomenon that individually affects a larger or smaller number of its members, which, however, constitutes a deviation, a distortion that not only can but

⁵ See the 2010 IBGE Census. Available at: <https://cidades.ibge.gov.br/brasil/pesquisa/23/22107>. Accessed on: September 20, 2020.

⁶ To explore this further, read the article: CAMURÇA, Marcelo Ayres; MARTINS, Sueli. "Secularism and the 'Brazilian way': diversified and improvised forms of religious regulation in secular and public environments: the case of municipal schools in Juiz de Fora/MG." In: Numem: Journal of Religion Studies and Research, Juiz de Fora, v. 17, n. 1, 2014, pp. 141-171. Available at: <http://numem.ufjf.emnuvens.com.br/numem/article/view/2859/216>.

⁷ For the term "without religion," I suggest reading the following article: VIEIRA, J. ÁLVARO C. "The 'without religion': some data to stimulate reflection on the phenomenon." HORIZONTE - Journal of Theology and Religion Studies, v. 13, n. 37, pp. 605-612, April 4, 2015.

must be corrected (SAVIANI, 1999, p. 16).

To overcome the marginalization of certain beliefs, it is essential to have Religious Education (RE) as a subject taught by specialized teachers, licensed in Religious Studies⁸. An RE with such configurations further highlights the school as a space and context for the intersection and interaction of different life perspectives, cultures, colors, sexual orientations, and more. Democratizing knowledge about religion necessarily involves developing an RE that shapes citizens, not believers, through more critical perspectives. The formalization of RE in schools is a way to put an end to a catechetical model of RE that was practiced in Brazil for many years. In this way, the very process of formalizing RE in schools results in the democratization of this knowledge.

The democratization of knowledge results in the formation and awareness of tolerance. According to the Declaration of Principles on Tolerance, approved by UNESCO's General Conference at its 28th session in Paris on November 16, 1995, tolerance means that all people have the freedom to choose their beliefs and guarantees the same freedom to those who think differently. Article 4 states that education is the most effective way to prevent intolerance. This is achieved when "education policies and programs contribute to the development of understanding, solidarity, and tolerance among individuals, ethnic, social, cultural, religious, and linguistic groups, and nations" (UNESCO, 1995). In this sense, developing the ability to live with "the diversity of beliefs, thoughts, convictions, ways of being and living" (BRASIL, 2017, p. 435) becomes a specific competence of Religious Education (RE). As a place of knowledge of the other, RE also becomes a space for listening. The role of the teacher, therefore, is not to convert students to Spiritism, Candomblé, Umbanda, Hinduism, Buddhism, etc., causing them to abandon their own beliefs in favor of what is taught. Instead, the goal is to encourage students to think critically about religion, to perceive themselves as beings of belief, and to be able to respect the faith of others. In this context, it becomes possible to "debate, problematize, and take a stand against discourses and practices of intolerance, discrimination, and violence of a religious nature in order to ensure human rights through the constant exercise of citizenship and a culture of peace" (BRASIL, 2017, p. 435). By developing such competencies, RE becomes an important ally and space for understanding the social and cultural reality in which these students are embedded, acknowledging their contexts and ways of believing.

⁸ In the BNCC, we observe a modest concern with the training of specialized Religious Education (RE) teachers. We can infer the need for this training from the BNCC (2017, p. 434), which recognizes that religious knowledge is notably addressed by the Science(s) of Religion(s). Therefore, for a teacher to construct appropriate and coherent knowledge with students, they must have training in this specific field of Science.

RELIGIOUS EDUCATION AS A DISCIPLINE THAT ADDRESSES THE MEANING OF LIFE

Finally, it's worth reflecting: isn't Religious Education (RE) also a space for contemplating the meanings of life? A space for reflecting on the role we play in existence, and therefore, a place for supporting and building life and future perspectives?

These reflections should be grounded in religious knowledge and life philosophies. As students in the early years of Elementary Education become capable of reflecting on the role and influence of religion in their family and social lives, it becomes possible to initiate a reflection on the significance of life through this religiosity. The BNCC's (2017) proposal to address the topic of Identities and Otherness from the first to third years of Elementary Education is also a plausible moment to discuss existence. It is clear that such a discussion about the meaning of life and death, the world, nature, and the role that each human being assumes in this space and time they inhabit, will not be conducted with deep philosophical-existential depth. The teacher must be clear about the playful yet not superficial manner in which these reflection activities will be carried out. Addressing the meaning of life involves allowing the most noble and spontaneous curiosities of students to emerge. Rubem Alves (2004), speaking about the importance of children's questions those spontaneous questions born from their natural curiosity argues that school should not be a place that dulls thought. As we have seen, beyond intelligence manifesting in questions, they also demonstrate how much students want to give meaning to and understand things.

Emerging from the discomforts and misunderstandings of daily life, the questions posed by children point to this need for meaning. "Identifying and welcoming feelings, memories, and knowledge of each individual" (BRASIL, 2017, p. 441) is a skill to be developed, which directly reflects this search for meaning. Recognizing personal differences and the beliefs of each classmate also allows students to perceive themselves as different from others. The genius of this perception can be enriched by the teacher's activity, who, by giving space for questions and facilitating students' responses, ensures the dynamism of a lesson where self-knowledge is achieved through listening to the narratives and stories told by others. The meaning of life will emerge or be constructed as the teacher encourages students to notice the differences and similarities with their peers. Allowing RE to become a space where it is possible to formulate and debate questions such as: Who created all things? Where do people go after they die? How can someone not like animals or plants? Why is there wind? Where does rain come from? Why do good people die? Why is this wrong in my religion? This is a way of helping students to formulate meanings.

As Gruen states, this dimension of meaning, or the search for the meaning of life, points to an RE that values the dimension of religiosity. According to him, "throughout all times, at the root of human life viewed with maturity, lie the great existential questions about the meaning of this life: 'where did I come from and where am I going? What do I do, and what should I do, in the brief time between birth and death?'" (GRUEN, 2005, p. 21). These questions will be formulated by children in a less elaborated, but at the same time, profound manner. By working with students on their identities, teachers show them that every human being is born to be someone. And being someone requires being able to differentiate oneself, including from others who are not oneself. This issue can be well developed through the plurality of religious perspectives on the world, life, and humanity.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

When analyzing the role and importance of Religious Education (RE) as a school subject in the early years of Elementary Education, we emphasize the urgency of thinking about education from the perspective of the students. It is through dialogue with their lives and realities that education can become meaningful, or in other words, attractive. To achieve this, the teacher must establish a connection between knowledge and life. This approach results in the appreciation of the student, recognizing that they "are flesh-and-blood children who suffer, laugh, enjoy playing, and have the right to experience joy in the present; they do not go to school to be transformed into productive units in the future" (ALVES, 2004, p. 27). For students to show interest in RE, as well as in other curricular subjects, they need to be stimulated and provoked by a teacher who can establish a link between religious knowledge and the world in which they live.

As the one responsible for motivating the students, the teacher must be able to instill in children a desire for the content of RE. Many teachers complain that RE is a subject neither desired nor respected as knowledge, that it neither attracts nor captures the students' attention because it deals with a thorny and private topic. On this matter, Rubem Alves has much to teach us. According to him, "one learns something they do not like because they like the person who teaches it" (ALVES, 2004, p. 34). That is, "when one admires a teacher, the heart commands the intelligence to learn the things the teacher knows. Knowing what they know becomes a way of being with them. I learn because I love, I learn because I admire" (ALVES, 2004, p. 35). Thus, motivation must begin with the teachers, who, enchanted by what they teach, draw the interest and attention of the students. We have seen that the subject matter of RE is captivating; it opens up infinite possibilities for work, for dialogue with life and other disciplines, for artistic endeavors, and for narratives that give wings to

the imagination a capacity particularly prominent in students in the early years of Elementary Education.

Given this enchantment with the subject and the potential lack of motivation among students in RE classes, a reflection is warranted: To what extent am I an educator capable of being admired by my students? Is the magic, imagination, creativity, and beauty of religious knowledge an attraction in my professional performance? Do I enjoy what I do? Am I prepared to teach this subject? I believe this reflection is necessary. As Rubem Alves points out, students may come to like RE because they like their teachers, but are the teachers enjoying the work they are doing?

All of this helps us reflect on the motivation of both teachers and students regarding the subject of RE in the early years of Elementary Education. Understanding the role that RE should play in basic education and how to effectively implement it in the classroom is the first step toward carrying out work that is engaging, critical, reflective, and appealing to both students and teachers. Once this is achieved, it is important, especially for teachers, to remain vigilant about the risks of misinterpreting this subject. After all, as we have seen, when the role of RE in schools is not well understood, it is impossible to develop, with the contribution of this field of knowledge, a form of education that not only democratizes knowledge but also promotes tolerance and serves as a foundation for constructing the meaning of life a reflective and existential dimension that RE fosters and contributes to.

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