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Learning by Heart or by Experience?**

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Teaching about the Virgin Mary and the Orthodox Christian Religion in Kindergarten

The instruction in religious education in kindergarten is among the most interesting aspects of teaching social studies. Therefore, the preparation of future kindergarten teachers to teach religion must be an important part of their university studies. During the teaching practice of the student kindergarten teachers in the University of Crete (Greece) in November 2013, we designed and implemented instructions in Rethymnon kindergartens, about the Virgin Mary and the basic elements of the Orthodox religion. In a week's teaching time, kindergarten children are taught about the life of the Virgin Mary (the Theotokos); the Christian Church; and some of the holy sacraments in the Christian religion, such as marriage, baptism, and Holy Communion.

Children became involved with the art of Christian icon painting (hagiography); created their own icons; and discussed how they feel about God and their prayers, and what they seek in their prayers not only for themselves but also for other people. They composed their own prayers and discussed the meaning of love in Christianity. They also referred to other religions (Islam, Judaism, Buddhism) in order to understand that many people believe in different gods. In this paper, using the method of content analysis, we study the student kindergarten teachers' teaching plans and we focus on the contents of their instructions, the teaching methods used, and the reactions of the children. The purpose of this paper is to propose new paradigms for religious instruction in kindergarten.

The Teaching of Religion in Kindergarten

Teaching about religion in kindergarten is one of the most interesting aspects of teaching social studies. Basic areas of the curricula of the Greek kindergarten were references to religious themes, learning prayers, and the teaching of religious festivals together with the folklore and devotional customs. The moral and religious development of children was one of the main objectives of curricula until the 1990s, because the curriculum of 1989 placed less emphasis on children's religious development, emphasizing mainly the contact with the Orthodox faith and worship and customary elements of Orthodox Christian tradition (Vairinou and Kamaroudis 2003). In the current Cross-Thematic Integrated Curriculum (CTIC) for kindergarten teaching, religious subjects fall under the theme "Child and Manmade Environment" and aim at knowledge of religious traditions and the development of emotions "brotherhood and love for all creatures of the earth" (MERA—PI 2002).

The CTIC (MERA—PI 2002) for Greek kindergarten applies a cross-thematic curricular approach (Chrysafidis 2009) and consists of five wider teaching subjects: (1) “Child and Language” (oral communication, reading, writing, and written communication); (2) “Child and Mathematics”; (3) “Child and Environment” (manmade environment, natural environment); (4) “Child, Creation, and Expression” (arts, dramatic art, physical education, music); and (5) “Child and Information Technology.” The CTIC proposes that kindergarten teachers use themes from the experiences and interests of children, and that they rely on constructivist experiential and group-centered teaching and learning. Its main objective is the overall development of children. It is recommended that all activities, both group and individual ones, should begin from children’s previous knowledge and needs in order “to trigger creativity [and] exchange of ideas and to lead to new knowledge” (MERA—PI 2002). The CTIC adopts the formative assessment of children based on observation, writing diaries, and creating portfolios for every student (MERA—PI 2002).

The themes must be interesting to the children, which choose the ways, materials, and aids to look into each topic on their own. Thus, facts, phenomena, concepts, and processes reviewed in the framework of teaching religion follow a cross-thematic approach, that is, they approach various teaching subjects. Each issue primarily connected with teaching religion may also be approached through processes and knowledge integrated in other CTIC science fields—such as language, mathematics, knowledge of the natural environment, information technology, and applications of arts education—to achieve the respective objectives of each (Seefeldt 2005; Doliopoulou and Sousloglou 2007). That is, the concepts of teaching religion are approached through appropriately selected (cross-thematic) issues, and each issue may be approached with activities from various subjects of studies (cross-disciplinary), thereby “shedding light” on several of its aspects (Chrysafidis 2009; Sfyroera 2002; Seefeldt 2005; Walmsley and Wing 2004; AAR 2010).

The knowledge of religious traditions referred to in the Christian faith, worship, and the corresponding customs are closely interwoven with nourishing feelings of love and brotherhood among all people and “for all creatures on earth” (MERA—PI 2002), highlighting the foremost message of Christianity, love for every human being and the environment. In this context Christian feasts and the relevant customs constitute the first step for the development of the feeling of love for all human beings.

Therefore, the preparation of future kindergarten teachers to teach religion should be an important part of their studies (AAR 2010; Moore 2006; OSCE-ODIHR 2007). In the context of student teachers’ teaching practice, we designed and developed teachings on the Theotokos and the basic elements of Orthodox Christian religion in kindergartens, in Rethymno (Greece) in November 2012 and November 2013. The occasion was the feast of the Presentation of the Theotokos (Nov. 21). The name “Mary” is a very common female name in Greece, so many children have in their family persons (e.g., mother, sister, etc.) who celebrate this day, and some girls from the kindergarten classes celebrate the same name day. Over one week’s time the student teachers taught about the life of the Theotokos; the Christian Church; and some of the Christian sacraments, such as marriage, baptism, and Holy Communion. Children became involved with the art of icon painting; created their own icons; discussed how they feel about God and their prayers, and what they seek in their prayers for themselves and for other people; and then they composed their own prayers and discussed the meaning of love in Christianity.

Also, they considered other religions (Islam, Judaism, Buddhism) in order to understand that many people believe in different gods. Student teachers planned their teachings with the help of their supervisor and with the help of the kindergarten teacher of the class in which they taught. Key elements of the teaching plan were the use and extension of the knowledge and experiences of the children about the Christian religion through a multidisciplinary/interdisciplinary approach, focusing on the message of Christian love and referring to other religions. Each teaching project followed a different pattern, tailored to the needs and interests of children of the kindergarten class where the project was applied. The teaching hours ranged from 9:00 a.m. to 10:15 a.m. and from 11:00 a.m. to 12:15 p.m. and involved four preplanned teaching activities every day, often redesigned to meet children's needs.

The Aim and the Methodology of Our Research

The purpose of this paper is to propose new ways of teaching religion in kindergarten. The assessment of each class instruction is a key element for the revision and improvement for the teaching as a whole. For this reason, in this paper we attempt an evaluation of teaching about the Holy Virgin and the Orthodox religion, undertaken by student teachers.

More specifically, in our paper we present the results obtained from the processing of student teachers' teaching plans, which were developed before their instruction, were redrawn (if necessary) in their implementation, and were supplemented with the achievement of learning objectives after the completion of the instruction. In other words, student teachers were planning, implementing, and evaluating their instruction based on their teaching plans. We did our research on these teaching plans using the method of content analysis (Neuendorf 2002). Specifically, we conducted our research on twenty teaching plans (document study) from student teachers who taught this subject in November 2012 and November 2013 (Mertens 1998).

Our research is focused on three major sections: (1) types and content of teaching activities in accordance with the kindergarten curriculum; (2) curriculum teaching objectives approached; and (3) evaluation of teaching regarding: achievement of teaching objectives, appropriateness of content and educational aids/materials, pupils' participation, classroom control, and the self-assessment of the student teacher. For each section we created separate thematic categories and subcategories, in which we included the corresponding references of the teaching plans, using a point total as an analysis unit. The results are presented both through the statistics for the relevant categories and through a selection of extracts from teaching plans.

Results

The following are the results of our research by research section. In each section there is a quantitative and qualitative presentation of references identified, which are distributed in thematic subcategories and subcategories that emerged from the study of teaching plans. Thus, after each table, we explain the thematic categories presented in this and we enrich them with relevant extracts of teaching plans.

Teaching Activities

The following are the results concerning the type of activities that taught student teachers in accordance with CTIC curriculum. Table 1 lists the subcategories which include teaching activities that were developed and qualitative presentation below listed titles indicative activities of the teaching plans (TPs) of student teachers.

Table 1. *Frequencies of references on activities taught by student teachers, overall and per teaching subject of the CTIC curriculum.*

<i>Teaching Activities</i>		Number of References per Category	Percent of Total Number of References per Category
Categories and Subcategories	Number of References per Subcategory		
Child and Manmade Environment			
Teaching about the Theotokos	20	92	38.6
Teaching about Jesus Christ and the saints	16		
Teaching about the sacraments of the Church	23		
Teaching about other religions	25		
Story of the life of the Theotokos	5		
Visiting a church	3		
Child and Natural Environment			
Sacred animals in religions	1	1	0.4
Child, Creation, and Expression (Arts, Dramatic Art, Physical Education, Music)			
Construction of icons of the Theotokos	16		
Discussion about icons of the Theotokos	5		
Construction of Holy Cross, churches	9		
Drawing about Christianity and other religions	24		
Handmade gifts for children who celebrate their name day	2		
Kinetic game with a message of friendship and love	5		

Games with candles	2	85	35,7
Hidden treasure play with items about religions	2		
Role-play about scenes from the life of the Theotokos and the Christian sacraments	15		
Learning songs for the Theotokos	3		
Hearing hymns from different religions	2		
Child and Language		45	19.0
Learning a prayer	19		
Creating a prayer	5		
Talking about the aliases of the Theotokos	3		
Creating a book about the life of the Theotokos	3		
Writing a letter to God/the Theotokos	3		
Learning letters (e.g., “h,” “m,” “c”)	6		
Reading parables and literary texts with a Christian message	4		
Cooking a Lenten meal by recipe	2		
Child and Mathematics		14	5.9
Matching symbols and elements of different religions	12		
Create church feast calendar	2		
Child and Information Technology		1	0.4
Using e-book about the Theotokos	1		
Total number of references		238	100

As part of their teaching, female students designed and implemented a large number of teaching activities (about three to four activities per day of instruction). This is a wide variety of teaching activities, extending to all teaching subjects of the kindergarten curriculum.

It is obvious that most teaching activities belong to the category “Manmade Environment,” to which the teaching of religious subjects belongs. Major activities are related to teaching about: the person of the Theotokos, which is the central element of the teaching plan; about Jesus; the saints of the Church (“The Saints of Our Church,” TP 11); and the holy sacraments. The connection of the saints with children’s names (“How Do We Get Our Names,” TP 13) and the

connection of the sacraments with the students' personal experiences of attending baptisms and marriages and of participation in Holy Communion ("What We Do in the Church," TP 6; "Put Gold Tooth" [a Greek folk expression for Holy Communion], TP 19) provide an intense experiential dimension to the processing and learning of the subject matter. On the occasion of the introduction to basic elements of Orthodox faith, there are references to other religions, such as their deities, symbols, temples, and priests ("What Other People Believe to Be God," TP 15; "Other Gods," TP 2; "The Gods of the Ancient Greeks," TP 7), so that children are able to understand the universality of the religious phenomenon and to respect other people and other religious faiths (AAR, 2010).

A large number of teaching activities concern the construction of artwork using various techniques ("Draw What You Like from the Faiths We Learned About," TP 3; "Creating, with the Art of Mosaic and Using Very Small Pieces of Paper, the Icon of Our Lady," TP 9; "Construction of a Cardboard Christian Church," TP 8), or they approach Christian artwork by identifying its main characteristics and techniques ("How the Painters Painted the Theotokos," TP 4). Quite often there are role-play scenes from the life of the Theotokos ("We Represent the Annunciation," TP 7) or sacraments of the Church for which children have experiences from their narrow social environment ("Marriage in Our Kindergarten," TP 16; "The Baptism of Manolis," TP 18) that they have discussed earlier. Children also learn songs on the subject ("Song for the Theotokos," TP 11) and compared different religious hymns ("Hymns from Christians and Muslims," TP 4). The activities related to physical education and physical motion, because of the issue, were limited to games that promoted the message of love ("I Love the Other Kids," TP 17) or to games that used the provided knowledge for movement activities ("Play the Hidden Treasure Game about Religions," TP 20).

Reading texts with religious messages or texts of the Gospels, especially the parables ("Christ Speaks to the People," TP 16), as well as learning prayers ("Prayer to the Virgin Mary," TP 5) with panhuman messages, are very common activities in teaching religious subjects (AAR 2010). In the instruction by the student teachers, however, the children participated in more active forms of learning and composed their own prayers to the Virgin Mary ("I Pray to the Virgin Mary," TP 7) or prayers that referred generally to God ("Prayer to God," TP 14); wrote letters to God or to the Virgin Mary concerning what they wanted them to offer to all people ("What I Want the Lady to Send Me," TP 11; "I Am Sending a Letter to God," TP 2); and created "The Book of the Virgin Mary" (TP 10), displaying her life with their own words and drawings. Children discussed the epithets of Our Lady ("How to all Mary," TP 13) in order to develop their vocabulary and to understand the production of words, and they learned to pronounce and write the first letter of Mary's name ("Learning the Letter 'M,'" TP 18).

In mathematics there were particularly interesting activities that matched and sorted correspondence between the elements of each religion by using tabulation (e.g., temples and priesthood in Christianity, Islam, and Judaism, etc.). This activity is very good at allowing the children to participate and act out roles, and it functioned to repeat and recapitulate what they had learned about religions ("I Find What Suits Each Religion," TP 9; "I Divide the Religions," TP 8).

In contrast, activities regarding the natural environment and information technology are not joined to a satisfactory degree in teaching plans due to the type of the theme.

Teaching Objectives

In Table 2 we present the objectives of the student teachers' instruction, in accordance with CTIC curriculum. Furthermore, below Table 2 there is a qualitative presentation for the main teaching objectives.

Table 2. Frequencies of references to teaching objectives taught by student teachers, overall and per teaching subject of the CTIC curriculum.

Teaching Objectives		Number of References per Category	Percent of Total Number of References per Category
Categories and Subcategories	Number of References per Subcategory		
Child and Manmade Environment		172	42.3
Knowledge of the Christian religion	57		
Knowledge of other religions	27		
Love for all people	46		
Acceptance of other people	23		
Development of cooperation among the children	19		
Child and Natural Environment		1	0.2
Knowledge of living organisms	1		
Child, Creation and Expression (Arts, Dramatic Art, Physical Education, Music)		99	24,3
Artwork creations by various techniques and materials	58		
Encountering artwork mainly from Christianity, and from other religions	6		
Development of body movement	10		
Participation in games with rules	5		
Development of theatrical expression	15		
Learning songs	3		

Listening to different genres of hymns and songs	2		
Child and Language			
Development of descriptive ability	30	120	29.5
Development of narrative ability	48		
Learning small texts (e.g., prayers)	19		
Create texts (e.g., prayer book)	13		
Development of phonological awareness	6		
Listening and reading comprehension	4		
Child and Mathematics			
Sorting, grouping, matching	14	14	3.5
Child and Information Technology			
The computer as a teaching aid	1	1	0.2
Total number of references		407	100

During their instruction periods student teachers chose a wide variety of teaching objectives extending to all teaching subjects of the kindergarten curriculum (CTIC), but which were also related to the topic of their instruction.

Of course, most of the targets deal with: (1) teaching about the Virgin Mary, Jesus, the saints, the sacraments of the Church, and the Orthodox Christian religion (“Learning about the Life of the Theotokos,” TP 3; “Learning about Christ,” TP 14; “Learning about Baptism,” TP 7; “Learning about Christian Traditions” TP 12); (2) teaching about other religions (“Learning about Other Religions,” TP 19; “Learning about the Religion of the Ancient Greeks,” TP 8; “Talking about the Religions of our Schoolmates,” TP 10); and (3) teaching about Christianity’s message of universal love (“Learning about Christian Love,” TP 2; “Understanding Christ’s Message of Love,” TP 15). The development of acceptance and cooperation between children was implemented during teaching in small groups (“Be Able to Work Together,” TP 11; “We Are Members of One Group,” TP 18).

There are many different objectives relating to the teaching subject of the Child, Creation and Expression, due to the many and varied activities of painting and constructing (“We Draw with Different Materials and Techniques,” TP 9; “Collage Creations,” TP 17). The presentation and discussion about various works of religious art has as its teaching objective “Meeting the Works of Great Painters” (TP 13). Also, the role-play of scenes from the life of the Theotokos or from the church sacraments, such as baptism and marriage, mainly led to the selection of objectives from the dramatic arts (“Children Express Themselves with Dramatic Play,” TP 11; “Children Express Themselves with Improvisation and Imitation,” TP 15). The games about body movement have as objectives to help children with “Developing Movement Ability” (TP

9) and “Participating in Games with rules” (TP 17). Through listening to hymns from different religions, children tried “Expressing [Their] Opinion on Different Sounds” (TP 19) and through learning songs children attempted “Singing” (TP 17).

The use of language as the main medium of communication and instruction leads children to make descriptions (“Describe the Church of Your Neighborhood,” T.P.4) and narratives (“Tell us about a Wedding You Attended,” TP 12, “Tell us about the Baptism of their Younger Brother” TP 11). Speech development is attempted through the development of phonological awareness (“Identify and Distinguish the Little Voice ‘M,’” TP 10), through learning new words (“Learn the Epithets of the Virgin Mary,” TP 1), and through memorizing short prayers (“Memorize Short Texts,” TP 16). Children created their own prayers by dictating text to the teacher, or they “wrote” in the same way their letter to Virgin Mary (“Children Learn to Shape Texts That Have Different Messages and Recipients,” TP 7).

Finally, “The Children Learn To Make Comparisons, Groupings Assignments” (TP 17) using elements from different religions.

Evaluation of Teaching

In Table 3 we present quantitative references for the evaluation of the instructions of student teachers per category of evaluation, and after that we present their main qualitative aspects.

Table 3. Frequencies of references on evaluation of teaching per category of evaluation.

<i>Categories of Evaluation</i>	Evaluation Rank						Total Number of References	
	Maximum		Partial		Minimum		Number	Percent
	#	%	#	%	#	%		
Evaluation of Activities								
Appropriateness of content	197	82.8	37	15.5	4	1.7	238	100
Achievement of teaching objectives	153	64.3	72	30.2	13	5.5	238	100
Appropriateness of teaching styles and methods	203	85.3	23	9.7	12	5.0	238	100
Appropriateness of teaching resources and materials	221	92.9	17	7.1	0	0.0	238	100
Evaluation of the Children								
Children’s participation	135	56.7	84	35.3	19	8.0	238	100

Classroom control	133	55.9	57	24.0	48	20.1	238	100
Student Teacher's Self-Evaluation								
Pedagogical and teaching proficiency	13	65.0	6	30.0	1	5.0	20	100
Student teacher's self-fulfillment	15	75.0	5	25.0	0	0.0	20	100
Need for improvements	17	85.0	3	15.0	0	0.0	20	100

The evaluation of teaching, as shown in Table 3, regards the evaluation of each activity separately, the evaluation of the school team (children), and the overall self-evaluation of the student teacher for his or her entire teaching. For this reason the numbers listed in the rating scale and reported in the first two categories (evaluation of activities and school team) differ widely from the numbers given in the self-evaluation category.

We found that the vast majority of student teachers consider the content of their teaching activities as appropriate for the children because they were based on the needs, prior knowledge, and interests of children ("Children were very interested in what we were discussing," TP 1; "Kids already knew much of what we taught," TP 13; "Children asked many questions, particularly on items of other religions," TP 20). In several cases the relevance of new knowledge was far beyond the capacities of children ("This issue was quite difficult for children," TP 6; "Many children were not interested in what we talked about," TP 17). The appropriateness of content assessed by the lower rank mainly affects activities that provide knowledge to the children. On the other hand, the activities of language, artwork creation, and theatrical role-play gained positive evaluations ("Children loved the composition of their own prayer," TP 18; "Children loved role-play," TP 14; "The creation of the icons of Our Lady was one of the best activities of my instruction," TP 17).

The achievement of teaching objectives for each activity was evaluated very positively for the majority of activities ("Reviewing the questions indicated that children had understood the issue," TP 15; "Artwork construction and role-play achieved their objectives," TP 7); was evaluated as moderate for some activities ("There was not an absolute success the children's attainment of new knowledge," TP 17); and for a small number of activities was reviewed as negative ("Many children do not understand the issue," TP 12). Again, the language activities, visual arts, and theatrical arts were those that better achieved their teaching objectives ("Children understood the meaning of prayer by creating their own prayer," TP 18; "Playing the characters of the story, the children understood it better," TP 3).

Student teachers used mainly didactic methods such as dialogue ("We talked a lot with children about the baptisms that they had attended and, in the end, about what is a baptism," TP 4), exploratory method ("The next day the children undertook to bring to school photos and information about the marriage of their parents or other relatives, and based on these we discussed the sacrament of marriage," TP 13), and group-centered teaching ("The children were divided into groups, and each of them made a mosaic of the Virgin Mary," TP 11) (OSCE-ODIHR, 2007). These methods belong to indirect methods of teaching, and their main feature is the active role of the student in the discovery of new knowledge. In cases in which a method

of instruction did not have a positive result, many student teachers changed to another method ("I started telling the story of the Virgin Mary, but once I saw that the kids were not paying attention, I distributed to them the pictures I had as visual aid material and I asked them to imagine and narrate the life of the Virgin Mary," TP 16).

Regarding teaching materials used (either from teaching suppliers or that were made by student teachers themselves), it seems that there were enough, that they were varied, and that they concentrated the attention and interest of children ("Children were interested in the different icons of the Theotokos and began to ask about various details," TP 5; "Children drew much attention to the presentation of other religions on the computer," TP 14; "Children loved the tabulation and behaved with great enthusiasm" TP 12).

Children's participation varied by activity, but generally the rates were quite satisfactory ("Most children participated in discussions," TP 9; "The children participated in what they knew, but were unresponsive in the other [what they didn't know]," TP 10; "There was a lot of discussion about the issue, and this tired kids," TP 17; "The children participated more actively in constructing artwork," TP 14). Children with incomplete knowledge of the Greek language showed reduced participation in these activities, especially in activities that required more linguistic communication ("Two little kids who do not speak Greek did not participate in the discussion. However, they participated in the artwork construction activities," TP 8).

In the activities that were the most interesting and understandable by children, the student teachers had greater control of the class ("The children participated, and we had no problem with lack of discipline," TP 6; "In the artwork construction activity, all the children were attentive and silent as they created their artwork," TP 8). It is expected that in which the activities did not attract the attention of children and did not achieve children's active participation in the instruction, there was a lot of disturbance and lack of classroom control ("Those who did not participate in the discussion teased others," TP 12; "The two kids who did not speak Greek did not care and made a fuss," TP 7).

Through the instruction of the theme about Virgin Mary and religions, the student teachers had the opportunity to evaluate their teaching skills. Student teachers who positively evaluated their achievement of teaching objectives, the appropriateness of teaching content, and the participation of children also evaluated their pedagogical and didactic competence positively ("I think I can effectively teach difficult topics like this," TP 14; "I feel comfortable with controlling the classroom and making children active participants," TP 9). Student teachers who encountered more difficulties in teaching the issue and with control classroom evaluated their pedagogical and didactic competence less positively ("I believe that such a topic is very difficult not only for me, but for experienced kindergarten teachers too," TP 17). In the same way, student teachers talked about their personal self-fulfillment as a teacher through this instruction ("Overall I am very satisfied with the total result," TP 14; "I felt very good because the children's interest in the issue had greatly increased," TP 5; "I had better moments in teaching practice," TP 16). Finally, all student teachers recognized and highlighted their need for improvement in several different fields ("We need better preparation for such difficult issues," TP 1; "The teacher must have a lot of knowledge to succeed," TP 13; "I need to improve my control over the classroom," TP 11).

Discussion

The results of our research lead to interesting reflections on teaching religious subjects in kindergarten.

Teaching a religious issue (e.g., the Virgin Mary, or about Christianity and other religions) through a variety of disciplines from the CTIC (2002) shows that the teaching of religious subjects in kindergarten is interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary (Chrysafidis 2009; Sfyroera 2002; Seefeldt 2005; Walmsley and Wing 2004) and is not limited to merely providing religious knowledge, as most people usually believe about the religious course in school. Approaching religious issues through literature (e.g., prayers, poems, short stories), visual arts (icons, mosaics, statues), architecture (temples), music (religious hymns and songs), and folklore (customs) helps children to approach religion as a mean of understanding the human experience (Nord 1995; AAR 2010).

The high number of teaching activities about other religions shows that teaching on matters of Christian religion does not restrict children's knowledge to the prevailing religion, but the knowledge of the Christian religion can be the first step in children's awareness about the existence of other religions, so that they might understand the different religious experiences of other faithful people (Jackson 2004; OSCE-ODIHR 2007) and might respect these people's right to worship (Dever, Whitaker, and Byrnes 2001). The main message from the instructions we studied was the concept of love for every person, regardless of his or her religion (MERA—PI 2002).

Achieving objectives from various parts of the CTIC shows that through teaching religious subjects the teacher and the pupils can achieve many objectives of the curriculum, not only those connected with the religious lesson (Seefeldt 2005; Doliopoulou and Sousloglou 2007), and they can approach religion as a social and cultural phenomenon (AAR 2010; Moore 2006).

The evaluation of the instructions shows that when religious issues are connected with child's experiences and basic knowledge (e.g., the child's first name and baptism, or an important Christian feast), they are appropriate for teaching in kindergarten. Issues concerning children's names and the saints, the great Christian feasts that are important social milestones (e.g., Christmas, with its gifts and school holidays) (AAR 2010), and the sacraments of the Church that are associated with the children's knowledge and experiences may be the first steps for relevant teachings that can be extended not only to other Christian themes but also to other religions (Moore 2006).

The appropriateness of the content of religious subjects and the selection of appropriate teaching methods are those that lead toward achieving the teaching objectives of each instruction (Moore 2006). These objectives must always take into account children's abilities, needs, and interests (AAR 2010; Sakellariou and Arvaniti 2008). Because many of the religious goals are abstract and difficult to understand for children who have not yet reached the stage of abstract thought, it is important to select objectives relevant to the easiest knowledge about religious issues (e.g., what we celebrate: cognitive approach; what happened in those years: historical approach; how we worship and celebrate: folkloric approach [AAR 2010]) rather than objectives relevant to the particular symbolism of each element (e.g., it is better for kindergarten children to discuss how Jesus was baptized in the Jordan River and how we are baptized today, but there is no need to analyze the symbolism of each element of baptism, such as the symbolism of the water, oil, shearing, etc.).

The teaching methods more suited to the teaching of religious subjects appear to be the student-centered methods (OSCE-ODIHR 2007; Sakellariou and Arvaniti 2008). Student teachers used interactive, group, and research teaching methods, which are more effective in teaching social studies. This result shows that beyond the monologue of the teacher, there are other suitable methods of teaching about religion (OSCE-ODIHR 2007).

The wide variety of educational materials available for teaching religious issues (icons, videos, images from the Internet, photos, illustrations of religious symbols, etc.) and the variety of materials used in artwork construction and role-play (clay, paper and colors of all kinds, fabrics, etc.) show that the teaching of religious issues can utilize a variety of available, cheap, and multipurpose aids and materials (AAR 2010).

Concerning the participation of children, it seems that this is not always achieved. Many factors affect this result. The children's interest in the subject of the teaching, their experiences, their knowledge and personal experiences within the family and immediate social environment (AAR 2010), the type of teaching activities, the method of instruction, and the selection and use of teaching aids and materials by the teachers are some of these factors. Therefore, it is not clear the extent to which the religious issue of the instruction is responsible for children's participation during the instruction. Unfortunately, we do not have the data to compare children's participation during instruction on other issues (e.g., physical environment, language, mathematics, etc.) and their participation during the instruction on religious issues. There was no such possibility in this research. From the evaluation of the instruction, we found that the more initial knowledge the children had on the religious topic and the more student-centered the teaching method used was, the more children were involved in the instruction. The existence of foreign-language students in the classroom must be taken into account when planning teaching activities and selecting teaching methods, in order to assist the active participation of these children. The reference to other religions beyond Christianity can concentrate non-Christian children's interest and involvement in the instruction (Sakellariou and Arvaniti 2008).

The nonparticipation of children during the instruction makes other children not pay attention to teaching and show evidence of lack of discipline in the classroom. The only way to ensure the best possible control over the class is the active involvement of children in instruction. The development of an educational climate of love, security, and acceptance in which each student outlines his or her views on religious matters is a necessary condition for teaching about religion (AAR 2010; Haynes 2010; Sakellariou and Arvaniti 2008).

Through their instructions on the Theotokos and religions, student teachers perceive themselves as teachers and identify their abilities, deficiencies, and need for improvement. These data, although positive, are not attributable to the issue of teaching (the Virgin Mary), because we do not know how student teachers are assisted in their awareness as teachers from teaching other subjects (e.g., from the natural environment, language, mathematics, etc.). However, student teachers consider teaching religious issue as difficult, in that they demand a lot of knowledge and preparation (AAR 2010; OSCE-ODIHR 2007), and they note that they have no help in this from the state (Diamanti 2013).

Research Limitations and Proposals

The generalization of the results of our research is limited by the issue of the instruction (the Theotokos), the small number of classes of instruction, and their application in a single small geographical area, the city of Rethymno. Also, in preparing their teachings the student teachers were advised and helped by their supervisor and a kindergarten teacher. Still, the method followed in our research (content analysis of teaching plans) may not always yield the most certain way to evaluate a teaching project.

Therefore, for a more complete research on teaching religious issues in kindergarten, we should gather data from a larger sample of instruction courses from kindergartens that are more geographically dispersed, which will address various issues of religious teaching (e.g., Christmas, Easter, weddings, etc.). In this way we will have reliable results for the teaching of religion in kindergarten. On the other hand, it is very important to observe the instruction of in-service kindergarten teachers and not just the instruction of student teachers, in order to have a clearer picture of which religious topics and how religion is taught in Greek kindergartens. The enrichment of research methods by observing instruction in religious issues; by interviewing teachers, children, and parents of kindergarten children about instruction on these issues; by keeping a diary about instruction on religious issues; and by evaluating the portfolio of children on this instruction will give us more data to adequately evaluate the teaching of religious issues in kindergarten and to formulate recommendations for its improvement.

We believe that it is necessary for the state to support kindergarten teachers in the teaching of religion by organizing in-service training, and by adding a special chapter in the *Kindergarten Teacher's Guide* (Dafermou et al. 2006) about instruction and examples for teaching religious issues. It is necessary to enrich the *Guide* so that kindergarten teachers will have “some lines” along which to plan their teaching about school religious feasts (e.g., Christmas, Easter, etc.) in a multicultural and multireligious society (Diamanti 2013).

Our research shows that for religious issues, beginning from the prior knowledge and experiences of children can be the starting point for a better knowledge and understanding of these issues and the first step for teaching about other (unknown to the children) religions (Moore 2006). Therefore, teaching religious issues must be treated not as a catechism that “closes” the minds of children but as the “opening” of their thinking about how people approach religious faith (Perselis 2008). Moreover, religious faith is an important cultural feature of most societies (AAR 2010). This view helps the teacher to understand that by teaching religious issues he or she does not proselytizes to students but—always respecting their religious choices (Moore 2006; OSCE-ODIHR 2007)—he or she helps them to develop their thinking and social feelings (AAR 2010).

It is important for kindergarten teachers to not be afraid of teaching religious issues but rather to be well informed about the issues they are going to teach (AAR 2010), to connect the issues with the experiences and interests of children, and to design and redesign teaching activities from various teaching subjects of the curriculum. Basic issues of the Christian religion (e.g., the Virgin Mary) can be taught in kindergarten, offering to children both knowledge about main elements of the Christian religion and opportunities for understanding the religious phenomenon. Also, visits to Christian churches help children to better understand these issues, and visits to places of worship of other religions (if feasible) offer a broader view of the religious phenomenon.

Our research shows that key issues of the Christian religion (e.g., the Theotokos) can be taught to kindergarten children, thus offering them insights on various aspects of the Christian religion (the holy sacraments, the saints, etc.) and on aspects of religious customs and worship, and can be a first step for children to understand the universality of the religious phenomenon through the existence of different religions, and—most important—a first step toward children's understanding of the main message of Christianity, the feeling of love for all people.

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