

# Autonomous Learning in Religious Education in Slovakia<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

The article deals with the issue of autonomous learning in the context of religious education. It offers a definition of autonomous learning and its characteristics. Autonomous learning is subsequently included in the context of religious education. The implementation of autonomous learning in the teaching of religious education is carried out based on the competency model of religious education, which is part of the prepared curriculum for this subject in Slovakia. The paper justifies using autonomous learning in religious education regarding this teaching model and presents autonomous learning as one of the possible forms of acquiring religious knowledge and developing religious competences and connecting them with other subjects and with everyday life.

## Key words

autonomous learning; competency model; religious education; teacher; pupil

## Introduction

Autonomous learning is already a relatively established concept in didactics. It is related to the right of an individual or group to manage and organize their own learning process independently. Autonomy does not mean independence in the sense that the pupil learns on his own. Even this form of learning requires support, but not dominance by the teacher. The priority task of the teacher is to accompany his pupils in acquiring knowledge and developing competence. An autonomous pupil means an active pupil. Its activity can be manifested in various areas, for example, in social processes, organization of one's learning activities, taking responsibility for one's educational process, or in the learning atmosphere in class.

## Definition of autonomous learning

Autonomous learning can be understood as a process in which individuals initiate action with or without the help of someone else, usually a teacher, to diagnose their own learning needs, set goals, identify appropriate sources of information, work with them, choose their learning strategies, apply them and then evaluate their achieved results (Knowles 1975, 5). We can talk

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about autonomous learning when pupils make central decisions about their learning. Pupils themselves decide, for example, that they want to learn, how they will proceed while learning, what materials and aids they will use when learning, what learning strategies they will use, whether they will learn individually or in a group, how they will divide their time for learning, how they check if their learning process has been successful. Thus, the initiators of learning are the pupils themselves, who manage, organize, and evaluate their learning (Bimmel and Rampillon 2000, 33–34). Koksál (2018, 794) introduces autonomous learning into a wider context, emphasizing that the learning process must be considered part of lifelong learning.

In all three of the above-mentioned points of view of autonomous learning, the pupil is the centre of attention, not as an object of the educational process, but as its subject, as the initiator of his own learning process and the one who manages his own learning process. As part of autonomous learning, pupils should gradually take over not only the initiative, but also the co-responsibility associated with it for the course of the teaching process. They can select, make correct decisions, and also evaluate their learning activities, which take place at any time, in any place and through any means and at any age. In this context, Straková (2003) formulates five principles of autonomous learning:

1. goal setting,
2. definition of content and sequence in learning,
3. determining of the methods and techniques used in learning,
4. monitoring of the acquisition process,
5. evaluation of the achieved results.

Such a method of the teaching process is also called self-regulating. In this context, Tatarko (2011, 86) draws attention to the definition of Mareš (1998), according to which self-regulated learning is a level of learning where a person becomes an active actor in his own learning process, in terms of activity, motivation and metacognition. In doing so, he tries to achieve a certain goal, for example, in the form of knowledge, skills, social recognition, or professional application. Such a person can manage his own efforts and knows how to use appropriate strategies that will enable him to achieve his set goals.

The development of autonomous, also called self-regulated, self-directed learning becomes an important part of modern teaching. According to Tatarka (2011), pupils' ability to make informed decisions regarding the time, place, method, and content of learning requires knowledge, experience, and disposition. The easiest way to acquire such an ability is through direct instruction and training. In this context, we note that autonomous learning cannot in any case be considered the only correct learning strategy, that is, its inclusion in teaching should not be forced, but gradual, considering the pupils (specific target group), their age, abilities, but also on the nature of the curriculum, etc. As part of the gradual training of autonomous activities as part of teaching, pupils will reach the ability to work autonomously more and more, from a pedagogical and psychological point of view. These two aspects of self-regulation of learning are described by Průcha, Walterová and Mareš (2003, 22), who speak of self-regulation of learning as managing oneself while learning. They state that in the context of self-regulation of learning, two perspectives are usually distinguished – pedagogical and

psychological. The pedagogical view – which refers to self-regulation of learning as *self-direction* – can be explained by the concept of internal control and management, which is the opposite of external control and external management. This view can be characterized based on two dimensions – sociological and pedagogical. The sociological dimension means that the pupil works on tasks independently of the teacher and classmates, manages himself: it is about the *self-management* of the pupil. The pedagogical dimension means that the pupil teaches himself, which in this case is *self-teaching*. From a psychological point of view, self-regulation of learning is referred to as *self-regulation*. This is a way of learning where the pupil becomes an active actor in his own learning process in terms of activity, motivation, and metacognition. Čapek (2015, 395) talks about the independent work of pupils as their activity depending on the goals and nature of educational work. In such an activity, pupils acquire knowledge through their own efforts, relatively independently of external help and external guidance, by solving problems, self-study or completing a variety of tasks. According to Čapek, this form of learning is closely related to independent and critical thinking. The pupil takes responsibility for the results of the learning process, relies on his own strength, will and pace of his work, implements his ideas, and respects his specific assumptions and the specific assumptions of his classmates in the class or learning group. The author also notes that the negative of this form of work is the zero cooperation of learners in the classroom or in the learning group, the consequence of which is that social relations are not supported, and forms of social learning are not developed. However, this negative can be eliminated by the teacher by changing the methods, so that the students can work in all ways and adapt to both individual and teamwork. Čapek's opinion confirms what we have already stated above that autonomous learning must be gradually integrated into the teaching process and cannot be absolutized and considered the only correct way to achieve the set learning goals. Undoubtedly, social learning also has its place in teaching, because a person (and therefore every student) is by nature a social, sociable creature and requires work in a larger or smaller group. However, autonomous learning, in our opinion, can also be beneficial for social learning, because autonomy leads the student to self-regulation, and thus also to self-control and evaluation of his own actions, which can certainly contribute to his more effective cooperation in the group.

### **Autonomous learning and religious education in Slovakia**

In the prepared new curriculum of religious education in Slovakia, the basic characteristic of this subject is the competency model of religious education. Among other things, the curriculum says that learning

is understood as an individual process of construction, where pupils themselves actively develop and expand their own abilities and acquire religious competences through basic knowledge. At the same time, religious knowledge is integrated into the context of everyday life and affects several dimensions of the pupils at the same time. Therefore, knowledge requires not only understanding and deepening, but also application in personal

life (Kurikulum rímskokatolíckeho náboženstva/náboženskej výchovy pre primárne, nižšie stredné, stredné a úplné stredné vzdelávanie, 2020, 6).

The individual process just mentioned, in which the pupils themselves develop and expand their own abilities, includes elements of autonomy. We therefore hold the opinion that autonomous learning can be one of the means of helping to apply the competency model of religious education in educational praxis.

However, it requires, as Reimer (2020, 131–132) also states, a change in the role of the teacher. The competency model is by no means a simple emphasis on the autonomous learning of pupils, in the sense that the teacher would become useless. On the contrary, it should be about creative, engaged learning based on teacher-pupil interaction. The teacher is an expert in the content of the teaching and the person who is responsible for stimulating and supporting the pupils' learning processes. The goal of the school is to provide contents that are important and significant for life in society, while the teacher represents the basic agent of society. The way of working is new – pupils have the opportunity to work independently and creatively, based on pre-structured stimuli and situations. As stated by Fulková and Reimer (2016, 35), in current didactic theories, the pupil is an active subject of the education and training process, he is the centre of attention and teaching is focused on him. He ceases to be a passive recipient of the teacher's knowledge, but becomes an active creator of it, influencing the teacher's activities and everything that happens in the classroom. For all of this to be realized, it is necessary to give the pupil enough space so that he can actively implement the activities that will enable him to learn and achieve goals, i.e., to achieve a certain form of autonomy. Teaching and learning in this way are not only a prerequisite for the pupils' activity, but also their independence and creativity, which contribute to the development of the pupil's cognitive processes. It can therefore be concluded that, from this point of view, the teaching of religious education acquires a new dimension and becomes beneficial for the development of the pupil's personality as such. The way of learning, the strategies and methods used in class are a potential for building and developing interdisciplinary relationships, for example, also within the framework of various projects, in which religious education can (and must) also become a part. Reimer (2020, 135–137) lists several attributes of good religious education, oriented towards religious competences:

1. Individual learning support: When acquiring and building competences, pupils are at qualitatively different levels. The teacher must recognize these competence levels of the pupils to subsequently be able to identify targeted learning offers that correspond to the acquisition of the next level of competence.
2. Metacognition: Competence-oriented teaching focuses on the individual acquisition of competencies by pupils. It requires that the teaching process, in addition to the phases of direct teaching, also contains phases of individual processing of specially selected educational offers. It means that pupils need to work independently in individualized learning phases.

3. Connection of knowledge and skills: Sustainable development of competences requires vertical and horizontal connection of knowledge and skills. Pupils must understand the connecting connections and main ideas of the subject. Vertical networking means clarifying the systematic connection of individual areas of knowledge and skills in teaching. Horizontal networking requires the ability to apply acquired knowledge and skills to other areas.
4. Practice and training: We can talk about competences only when pupils know how to use their skills and abilities, as well as their cognitive knowledge in unfamiliar situations. Competences are not developed theoretically, but only when they “get under the skin”. This can be seen especially in sports, music, or computer games, where the most important prerequisite for acquiring competences is practice and training.
5. Cognitive activation: An important factor for successful learning is to encourage pupils to use their existing knowledge and acquired skills and abilities to cope with new challenges actively and creatively. This is especially true for competency-based teaching since competencies are explicitly related to solving unfamiliar challenges and situations. If we want to support the acquisition of competences, we will not be successful if we confront pupils with routine or standard tasks. Rather, it is necessary to always create new situations in the classroom in which personal discoveries can be purposefully made. The challenge in competency-based teaching is to find tasks that challenge pupils to combine existing knowledge and acquired skills in a new way.
6. Application in everyday life: Didactic stimuli are important to the extent that they support the acquisition and development of pupils’ competencies. Therefore, teaching must focus on the creation of situations that are also application situations in which students must demonstrate their competences. Competence here is shown as performance (in the sense of the ability to transfer and practically perform), which activates knowledge, abilities and will with the aim of solving situations independently and creatively. At the same time, we can find high-quality application situations in the immediate environment and surroundings of the students themselves. When assigning appropriate tasks, we can therefore be inspired by religious phenomena from the immediate environment in which pupils live.

An element of autonomy can be discovered in each of these attributes. The first aspect emphasizes the individuality of the pupils’ competence level. If pupils learn autonomously, their learning process takes place on an individual basis – they learn independently, manage their learning process, develop their own competences, work at their own pace, etc. Even within the framework of metacognition, phases of individual pupil work are required. Autonomous elements can also be part of linking knowledge and skills and their application to other areas of life. If the pupil understands the given topic, he can independently connect it to, for example, everyday situations that he experiences in everyday life. Autonomy can also be used in the training of competences because pupils are often very creative and can simulate various new situations by themselves, within which the acquired competences can be trained. Undoubtedly, autonomous education encourages pupils to be active and creative because the very tasks that

pupils receive in this type of teaching are prepared with this goal in mind – they are supposed to support the pupil’s activity and creativity so that he can make full use of his strengths when solving problems. As we have already mentioned when linking knowledge and skills, we consider the application of acquired knowledge, skills, and competence to be a very valuable part of education, including religious education. Pupils must fully realize that religious education is not only a subject taught at school but is a part of our lives. That is why we consider it very important to guide pupils to find connections between what they learn in religious education and what they live.

We conclude the topic of autonomous learning in the context of religious education with a summary of what the teaching of religious education should provide to pupils and today’s young people. Reimer (2017, 251–252) very succinctly formulates the goals of religious education in schools when he states that it is important to:

- provide young people with identity and orientation;
- support the self-formation and autonomy of young people’s religiosity;
- create space for mutual relations and meeting;
- support the everyday experiences of young people, because they can be a space for the free development of their religious spirituality;
- enable young people to participate in common experiences, because they support identification and help to be part of a whole;
- work in small groups, because identity development requires small groups in which relationships and trust can develop and where dialogue and testimony can find their place.

## **Conclusion**

Autonomous learning means that the learning process of pupils takes place on an individual basis – pupils learn independently, manage their learning process, develop competencies, work at their own pace, etc. Autonomous elements also belong to metacognition and are also part of connecting knowledge and skills and their application to other areas of life. Autonomy can also be used in the training of competences because it encourages pupils to be active and creative. Pupils’ individual work with the contents can also be very stimulating for the application of acquired religious contents in everyday life. In this sense, it can be said that this phenomenon can also contribute to the formation of the religious personality of pupils. All these connections of autonomy and religious education confirm our belief that autonomous learning can also be used in religious education classes. Due to the scope of the paper, it is not possible to analyse specific examples of the use of autonomous learning in religious education classes in pedagogical practice or its justification from a philosophical or theological point of view. The topics just mentioned open up possibilities for a more detailed research of the issue of autonomous learning in religious education in Slovakia, but also in other countries.

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