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PERSPECTIVES OF COMPETENCE-ORIENTED RELIGIOUS EDUCATION IN SCHOOL. DEVELOPING RELIGIOUS COMPETENCE OF PUPILS (THE EXAMPLE OF SLOVAKIA)

Abstract

Contemporary Catholic religious education in schools is increasingly influenced by competency-based educational reforms that emphasize learning outcomes and pupils' holistic development. This article analyses the concept of religious competence as the central objective of school-based religious education, with reference to the educational reform introduced in Slovakia in 2023. Drawing on ecclesial documents and didactic theory, the study clarifies the distinction and complementarity between catechesis and religious education in school. Furthermore, it presents a structured model for the development of religious competence and outlines practical didactic steps for implementing a competence-oriented approach in religious education. The article argues that competence-oriented religious education strengthens the educational and ecclesial identity of the subject while enabling pupils to engage responsibly with faith, religion, and life in a pluralistic society.

Keywords: religious education, religious competence, catechesis, competency-based education, Catholic school teaching, Slovakia

Streszczenie

PERSPEKTYWY KOMPETENCYJNEJ EDUKACJI RELIGIJNEJ W SZKOLE. ROZWIJANIE KOMPETENCJI RELIGIJNYCH UCZNIÓW (PRZYKŁAD SŁOWACJI)

Współczesna katolicka edukacja religijna w szkołach jest w coraz większym stopniu pod wpływem reform edukacyjnych opartych na podejściu kompetencyjnym, które kładą nacisk na efekty uczenia się i holistyczny rozwój uczniów. W niniejszym artykule przeanalizowano pojęcie kompetencji religijnych jako głównego celu szkolnej edukacji religijnej w odniesieniu do reformy edukacyjnej wprowadzonej na Słowacji w 2023 r. Opierając się na dokumentach kościelnych i teorii dydaktycznej, w badaniu wyjaśniono różnice oraz komplementarność między katechezą a edukacją religijną w szkole. Ponadto przedstawiono ustrukturyzowany model rozwoju kompetencji religijnych i nakreślono praktyczne kroki dydaktyczne służące wdrożeniu podejścia zorientowanego na kompetencje w edukacji religijnej. Autor artykułu dowodzi, że edukacja religijna zorientowana na kompetencje wzmacnia tożsamość edukacyjną i kościelną przedmiotu, umożliwiając jednocześnie uczniom odpowiedzialne zaangażowanie się w wiarę, religię i życie w pluralistycznym społeczeństwie.

Słowa kluczowe: edukacja religijna, kompetencje religijne, katecheza, edukacja oparta na kompetencjach, nauczanie w szkołach katolickich, Słowacja

Introduction

Religious education in schools is currently facing profound challenges arising from societal pluralization, secularization, and educational reforms focused on competencies rather than isolated content knowledge. In many European countries, including Slovakia, new national curricula emphasize the development of transferable and functional competencies that enable pupils to respond to real-life situations in a reflective and responsible manner.

Within this context, Catholic religious education must redefine its pedagogical self-understanding. It is no longer sufficient to transmit doctrinal knowledge or isolated religious facts. Instead, religious education must aim at fostering pupils' religious competence – that is, their ability to perceive, interpret, communicate, evaluate, and live religious meanings in their personal and social lives. This article explores the theoretical foundations and practical implications of competency-based religious education, with a particular focus on the Slovak educational reform.

1. School-Based Religious Education Is Not Catechesis

The identification of religious education in schools with catechesis was particularly evident in Slovakia in the 1990s – although it persists in the minds of many responsible for Catholic education even today – when religious education in schools was understood

as school catechesis. This was also reflected in various church documents, such as the *Pastoral and Evangelization Plan of the Catholic Church in Slovakia (2001–2006)*. It states that since 1991, catechetical activity has focused primarily on school catechesis, for which a curriculum and, gradually, textbooks and methodological guides for religious education have been developed for all grades of elementary school and the first two grades of secondary school¹. In this sense, school teaching is confused with catechesis, and at the same time, school teaching is intended to replace catechesis in the parish. This mistaken view was also reflected in the fact that preparation for the sacraments of initiation for children and young people (the sacraments of the Eucharist and Confirmation) was carried out in many parishes – and continues to be carried out today – exclusively through school religious education and not through targeted parish catechesis. That is why even today, religion teachers are still referred to as catechists in many official church documents in Slovakia. The reason for this mistaken view of religious education is not only the absence of a systematic concept of parish catechesis for children, young people, and especially adults, but also the historical background of the development of the relationship between catechesis and religious education in schools in our country.

It is important to note that in the actual Slovak context, we have begun to make a clear distinction between religious education in schools and catechesis in parish settings. While both are interconnected and complementary, they pursue different aims and employ distinct pedagogical approaches. Catechesis focuses on nurturing a personal relationship with Christ and fostering the maturation of Christian faith and life within the ecclesial community. In contrast, school-based religious education aims to provide systematic knowledge about Christianity and to support pupils in understanding religious traditions, symbols, and practices within a broader educational framework².

According to the *Directory for Catechesis*, failure to clearly distinguish between catechesis and religious education risks compromising the identity of both. As a school subject, Catholic religious education must adhere to the same academic rigor, structure, and methodological discipline as other subjects. Improvisation is particularly harmful in this field, and instructional goals must align with the educational mission of the school³.

2. The Context of Educational Reform in Slovakia

The Slovak national curriculum reform introduced in 2023 represents a paradigmatic shift from content-oriented teaching to competency-based education. Rather than prescribing detailed subject matter, the curriculum defines expected competencies that pupils should

1 Konferencia biskupov Slovenska, *Pastoračný a evanjelizačný plán katolíckej Cirkvi na Slovensku (2001–2006)*, access 16.01.2026, <http://www.kbs.sk/obsah/sekcia/h/dokumenty-a-vyhlasenia/p/dokumenty-konferencie-biskupov-slovenska/c/pastoracny-a-evanjelizacny-plan-katolickej-cirkvi-na-slovensku-2001-2006>.

2 Tibor Reimer, *Katechéza v súčasnej dobe. Podnety a výzvy nového Direktória pre katechézu* (Bratislava: Don Bosco, 2021), 43–55.

3 Pontifical Council for the Promotion of the New Evangelization, *Directory for Catechesis* (Vatican: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2020), n. 313.

acquire by the end of each educational stage. These competencies form the conceptual backbone of the curriculum and provide continuity across educational cycles.

This reform moves away from rote memorization of isolated facts toward the systematic development of functional competencies, often described as *literacy*, which are essential for participation in contemporary society. For religious education, this shift implies that teaching is no longer organized around isolated themes but around the progressive and interconnected development of religious competencies. Content selection and instructional design must therefore consistently reflect their contribution to competency development⁴.

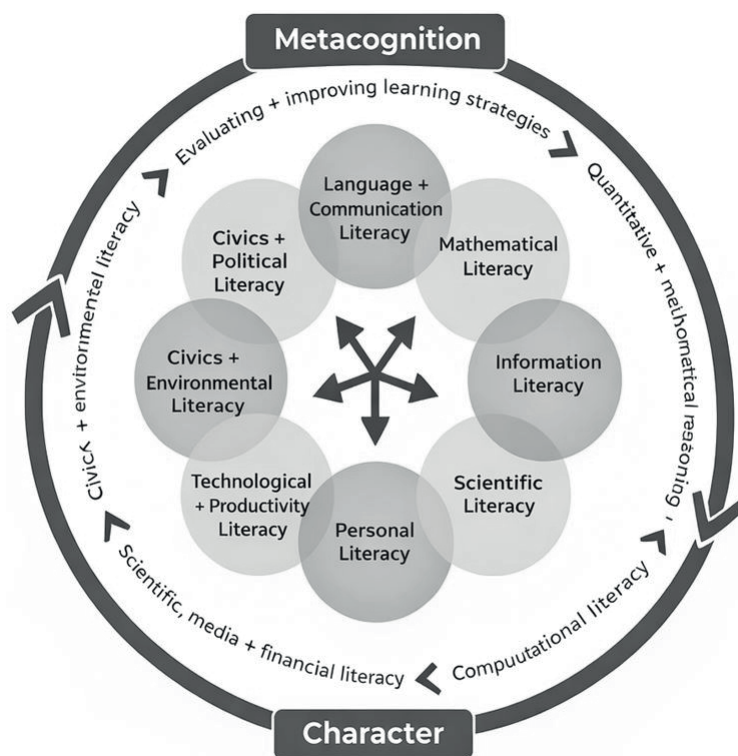


Diagram 1. Functional and cross-curricular literacies in the Slovak national curriculum. Source: Ministerstvo školstva, výskumu, vývoja a mládeže Slovenskej republiky, “Obrázok 3 Mapa doménových a priezgových gramotností v základnom vzdelávaní”, 5, in: *Štátny vzdelávací program pre základné vzdelávanie*, access 22.01.2026, https://www.minedu.sk/data/files/11808_statny-vzdelavaci-program-pre-zakladne-vzdelavanie-cely.pdf.

⁴ Branislav Pupala et al., *Vzdelávanie pre 21. storočie. Východiská zmien v kurikule základného vzdelávania* (Bratislava: ŠPÚ, 2022), 14–15.

The new Slovak national curriculum (2023) focuses on a shift towards functional literacy – the ability to understand, interpret, and apply knowledge in specific situations. A key element is the interconnection of teaching content and the development of cross-curricular literacies (reading, communication, social and emotional, digital, and others), which should be organically present in all subjects across the curriculum. The reform thus promotes the principle of cross-curricularity – the integration of knowledge, skills, and attitudes across educational areas, which should lead to the holistic development of pupils and connect school with life⁵.

The reform documents and guidelines point out that this is a paradigm shift in education: instead of “covering” topics, there will be a didactic selection of representative problems and tasks that support knowledge transfer, in-depth understanding, metacognitive processes, and pupil’s autonomy. Metacognition – the ability to be aware of, regulate, and reflect on one’s own learning – is becoming one of the main pillars of the new didactics, as it enables pupils to take responsibility for their learning, choose strategies, and evaluate their effectiveness⁶.

Part of this philosophy is an emphasis on school culture and ethos – mission, vision, relationships, rituals, rules, and ways of communicating that shape learning as much as the content of the curriculum. The guideline “School Culture and Ethos” emphasizes that reform is not just about plans and curricula, but about a shared sense of purpose and organizing the daily work of the school to support the learning community⁷.

3. Religious Competence as the Goal of Religious Education

Currently, religious education in schools is an integral part of school education. Confessional religious education allows pupils the freedom to know and profess their faith. According to the Education Act (No. 245/2008, §15), religious education is provided by registered churches and religious societies. Religious education is taught as one of the obligatory elective subjects, alternating with ethics education. The framework educational program for the subject of Catholic religious education is approved by the Conference of Bishops of Slovakia after consultation with the Ministry of Education. The law therefore guarantees denominational religious education. Catholic religion is understood as an educational subject that enables pupils to think and act responsibly in relation to religion and faith and contributes to the development of religious identity.

5 Ministerstvo školstva, výskumu, vývoja a mládeže Slovenskej republiky, “Obrázok 3 Mapa doménových a prierezových gramotností v základnom vzdelávaní”, 5, in: *Štátny vzdelávací program pre základné vzdelávanie*, access 22.01.2026, https://www.minedu.sk/data/files/11808_statny-vzdelavaci-program-pre-zakladne-vzdelavanie-cely.pdf.

6 Štefan Porubský, “Sprievodca koncepčnými zmenami v ŠVP”, access 16.01.2026, https://vzdelavanie21.sk/wp-content/uploads/2024/09/Sprievodca_koncepcnymi_zmenami_v_SVP.pdf.

7 Marián Valent et al., “Kultúra a étos školy”, access 16.01.2026, https://vzdelavanie21.sk/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/NIVAM_Kultura_etos_skoly.pdf.

Unlike previous educational programs, the new Slovak national curriculum for Roman Catholic Religious Education focuses not only on the content to be taught, but also on the expected religious competencies that pupils should acquire at the end of each cycle of elementary school. These competencies are the “heart” of the curriculum and the “common thread” that guides pupils’ learning through the individual cycles of primary school in the long term. For the planning of religious education, this means that topics are no longer taught and “ticked off” one by one. Rather, content and competencies are interconnected so that the religious competencies expected of pupils at the end are built up gradually and systematically. When selecting topics and content for lessons, consideration should therefore always be given to how the content and individual topics relate to individual religious competencies and how these competencies are developed⁸.

The key didactic question is therefore: how does religious education focused on the development of religious competencies “work”? How does this teaching differ from traditional religious education, which is focused on the content of learning? How can lessons be designed in which pupils acquire and develop religious competences? How does the “lesson plan” for religious education change? Does this changed view of teaching and learning have consequences for the roles of pupils and teachers and for their mutual interactions?

The central didactic question of competency-based religious education concerns the nature of learning itself: How do pupils acquire religious competence? How does competency-based instruction differ from traditional objective-driven teaching? What implications does this approach have for lesson planning, classroom interaction, and the roles of teachers and pupils?

Competency-based religious education does not fundamentally reinvent good teaching. Effective instruction has always been concerned with what pupils know and are able to do at the end of a learning process. However, this approach systematically shifts attention toward pupils’ learning processes and outcomes. It is learner-centered in the best sense, focusing not primarily on content delivery but on pupils’ ability to engage religiously with existential questions and everyday life situations⁹.

Competence-oriented religious education avoids the accumulation of “superficial” knowledge. It is always about the connection between knowledge, skills, and will. Pupils build their religious knowledge through specific learning situations and learn how to apply their knowledge in these situations. In religious education classes, they are given space to develop and apply religious competencies in relevant life situations.

Religious competence is understood as a comprehensive ability that integrates cognitive, motivational, volitional, and social dimensions. Pupils develop religious competence by acquiring religious knowledge, reflecting on it, applying it to concrete situations, and expressing their beliefs responsibly. Thus, religious education seeks to avoid the accumulation

8 Tibor Reimer, *Náboženská výchova ako rozvoj náboženských kompetencií* (Bratislava: Don Bosco, 2020), 137.

9 Tibor Reimer, *Spríevodca zmenami vo vzdelávacích oblastiach. Človek a spoločnosť. Rímskokatolícka náboženská výchova/náboženstvo* (Bratislava: NIVaM, 2025), 3–11.

of “inert knowledge” and instead emphasizes the dynamic interplay between knowing, being able, and being willing¹⁰.

Religious education can be understood as a complex, dynamic, and process-oriented form of education. It begins with religious perception – the ability to recognize and interpret religious phenomena in the world. This perception forms the basis for religious knowledge, which includes familiarity with core Christian beliefs, biblical texts, traditions, and the historical life of the Church.

Subsequently, pupils develop competencies in religious communication, learning to articulate religious questions, understand religious language, and express their own beliefs. Critical judgment and decision-making competencies enable pupils to evaluate religious and ethical issues responsibly. Finally, religious competence culminates in application and practice, encouraging pupils to act responsibly and to engage actively in social, communal, and religious life.

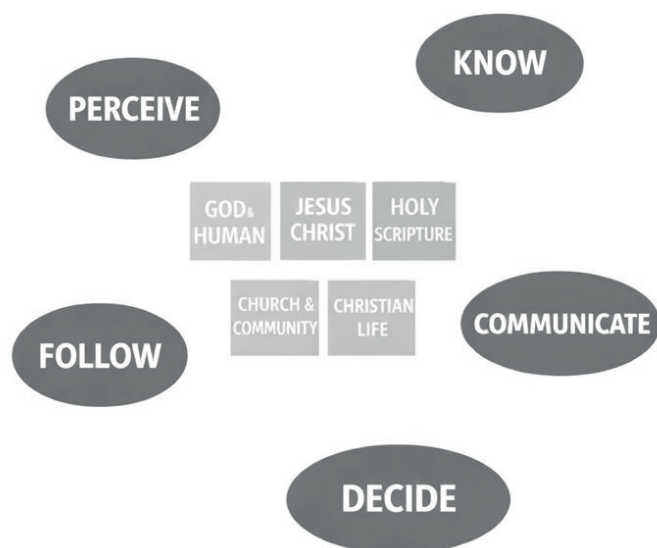


Diagram 2. The competency model of catholic religious education (Source: “Catholic Pedagogical and Catechetical Center, Kurikulum rímskokatolíckeho náboženstva/náboženskej výchovy (pre primárne, nižšie stredné, stredné a úplné stredné vzdelávanie) [Curriculum of Roman Catholic Religion/Religious Education (for primary, lower secondary, secondary and complete secondary education)], 10. marca 2020”, 4, dostęp 16.01.2026, <https://kpkc.sk/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/KURIKULUM-KATOLICKEHO-NAB-ZS-A-SS%CC%8C-def-verzia-ju%CC%81n-2020.pdf>).

Catholic religious education based on the competency model focuses on knowledge, skills, and attitudes. We distinguish between content areas and competencies. Knowledge is specified in content areas. These concretize the overall content of the Catholic faith.

¹⁰ Reimer, *Náboženská výchova ako rozvoj náboženských kompetencií*, 139–145.

The fundamental criterion here is not to cover the entire wealth of the faith, but to concentrate on the essential and central content of the faith. The competency model therefore has five content areas that represent the central content of the Christian faith: God and man – Jesus Christ – Holy Scripture – Church and sacraments – Christian life¹¹.

Five religious competencies in religious education develop the overall personality of the pupil: their ability to perceive reality in a religious way, to know religious knowledge, to understand and communicate religious language and language, to act according to their own religious convictions, and to express their faith in a religiously motivated life.

The aim of religious education is to develop religious competencies. Teachers of religious education use specific thematic units to deepen and develop individual content areas. This content helps pupils to acquire and develop specific religious competences through religious knowledge of individual thematic units. In this way, for example, pupils can perceive human desires for happiness and meaning in life. At the same time, they develop their knowledge of religion: they understand liturgy and the liturgical year, distinguish between sacraments and sacramentals, and assign the material and formal aspects to each sacrament. In religion classes, pupils also acquire the ability to communicate religiously: for example, they can describe the three-dimensionality of man or interpret and discuss biblical texts. At the same time, religious education develops the religious beliefs and decision-making of pupils. For example, they can distinguish between different ways of ethical decision-making and understand the Ten Commandments as the basic norm of human behavior. The final dimension of religious education is the religious competence of following. For example, pupils not only discuss with other pupils the importance of examining their conscience as part of the sacrament of reconciliation, but they can also apply it to their lives as a way of personal responsibility¹².

We understand learning as an individual process of construction, where the pupils themselves actively develop and expand their own abilities and acquire religious competence through basic knowledge. Religious knowledge is integrated into the context of everyday life and affects several dimensions of the pupils' lives. Knowledge therefore requires not only understanding and deepening, but also application in personal life¹³.

4. Implementing Competency-Based Religious Education in Educational Practice

Competency-based religious education requires systematic implementation in educational practice, along with continuous development, testing, reflection, optimization, and repeated application in teaching. This approach to instruction goes beyond the mere transmission

11 Reimer, *Sprievodca zmenami vo vzdelávacích oblastiach. Človek a spoločnosť. Rímskokatolícka náboženská výchova/náboženstvo*, 6.

12 Reimer, *Náboženská výchova ako rozvoj náboženských kompetencií*, 146.

13 Matthias Hahn, Andrea Schulte, „Kompetenzorientiert Religionsunterricht planen – aber wie?“, *Theo-Web. Zeitschrift für Religionspädagogik* 13, 1 (2014): 125–139.

of information and emphasizes the development of pupils' skills, attitudes, and abilities that can be applied in real-life situations. The focus of the educational process shifts from the teacher as the bearer of knowledge to the pupil as an active subject of learning. Thus, the emphasis is not primarily on content itself, but on what the pupil should know, understand, be able to do, judge, or express at the end of the learning process¹⁴.

The following five steps constitute according to R. Möller a methodological framework for planning and implementing competency-based religious education. Each step reflects the competencies to be developed, based on which appropriate content is selected and didactically well-considered teaching and learning situations are designed. These situations enable pupils to meaningfully acquire, apply, and transfer the knowledge they have gained¹⁵.

4.1. Preparation and Initiation of the Learning Process

At the beginning of each teaching unit, it is essential to consciously and systematically prepare the learning process with a focus on supporting the development of pupils' religious competencies. This step includes linking competencies with content, identifying suitable teaching and learning situations, analyzing pupils' prior knowledge, and formulating clear instructional objectives.

Competency-based teaching presupposes a well-considered connection between specific religious competencies and the content or topics of instruction. Although the national curriculum defines performance and content standards, the task of linking them remains the responsibility of the teacher. Teachers should therefore begin by asking themselves: *Which of the five competencies do I intend to develop?* and *Which content or topic best supports the development of this competency?* Religious competencies are developed progressively throughout the entire period of primary education, and the content of religious education serves as a means for acquiring these competencies¹⁶.

Didactic practice shows that determining an appropriate approach to a topic in terms of developing a particular competency is not always straightforward. A single topic may be interpreted from different perspectives and pursued with different instructional goals. The content of religious education rarely serves the development of only one isolated competency; rather, it allows for the simultaneous development of several competencies. From a didactic perspective, their integrated development is therefore desirable, as together they constitute the overall aim of religious education – the development of religious literacy.

The competency-based focus seeks to integrate pupils' knowledge, skills, and attitudinal dispositions. The goal is not to impart superficial knowledge that is irrelevant to pupils' lives, but to guide them toward applying their learning when faced with real-life challenges.

14 Hilbert Meyer, *Was ist guter Unterricht?* (Berlin: Cornelsen, 2014), 23–24.

15 Rainer Möller, "Kompetenzorientierter Religionsunterricht in der Grundschule. Ein Planungsmodell", in: Rainer Möller et al. *Kompetenzorientierter Religionsunterricht in der Grundschule. Exemplarische Unterrichtseinheiten* (Münster: Comenius-Institut, 2013), 3–11.

16 Hahn, Schulte, "Kompetenzorientiert Religionsunterricht planen – aber wie?", 130.

For this reason, authentic learning situations that enable pupils to actively connect new knowledge with their own experiences should be identified already at this stage. Lesson preparation also includes an analysis of pupils' existing knowledge, experiences, ideas, and value orientations – especially in relation to religious concepts, images of God, and existential questions¹⁷.

4.2. Designing and Accompanying Learning Pathways That Develop Religious Competencies

In accordance with educational standards, the thematic content of the teaching unit is then progressively addressed and developed. Competency-based teaching emphasizes the individuality of learners, their learning abilities, needs, and pace. A necessary condition is the provision of differentiated learning opportunities that allow pupils to follow their own learning pathways according to their developmental stage and current level of competence¹⁸.

The teacher creates a stimulating learning environment in which pupils engage actively, independently, and in a self-regulated manner. Through cognitively activating tasks, pupils constructively acquire knowledge and skills, while the teacher acts as a facilitator of learning and pupils cooperate with one another through social interaction.

However, an emphasis on individualized learning does not imply exclusive reliance on open forms of instruction. Research in pedagogy demonstrates that open, pupil-centered, and constructivist learning formats are not inherently more effective than teacher-led instructional approaches. Effective teaching requires a balanced combination of different methods. Consequently, competency-based instruction is characterized by the alternation of instructive and constructive phases of learning and teaching, employing a diverse range of instructional strategies, including individualized learning, whole-class instruction, and cooperative learning formats¹⁹.

4.3. Reflection on Learning and the Provision of Guidance

Reflection on learning should not be understood as a separate phase at the end of instruction, but as a continuous component of the entire learning process. Regular pauses for reflection may initially seem unfamiliar to both pupils and teachers; however, questions such as *What have I learned? How did I learn? What still needs further development?* foster deeper understanding of one's own learning²⁰.

17 Möller, "Kompetenzorientierter Religionsunterricht in der Grundschule. Ein Planungsmodell", 5–6.

18 Porubský, "Sprivodca koncepčnými zmenami v ŠVP".

19 Möller, "Kompetenzorientierter Religionsunterricht in der Grundschule. Ein Planungsmodell", 6–7.

20 "Metakognícia", 1–4, in: *Štátny vzdelávací program pre základné školstvo*, 715–719, access 16.01.2026, https://www.minedu.sk/data/files/11808_statny-vzdelavaci-program-pre-zakladne-vzdelavanie-cely.pdf.

Joint reflection serves several purposes. For teachers, it provides valuable insights into pupils' learning progress, motivation, and potential barriers to learning. For pupils, it supports the development of metacognitive abilities, helping them to become aware of their learning strategies and to set realistic learning goals. An integral element of this process is the individualized feedback provided by the teacher, which guides further learning development²¹.

4.4. Consolidation and Further Development of Religious Competencies

Competency-based religious education necessarily includes phases of repetition and consolidation. Only through regular practice, application, and transfer can knowledge and skills be sustainably acquired. The lack of systematic reinforcement in the past has often resulted in pupils retaining very little after many years of religious education²².

Religious education should therefore offer diverse forms of consolidation that encourage pupils to apply what they have learned in varying contexts, through different activities and from multiple perspectives. Religious competencies are developed gradually, with topics recurring throughout the different cycles of primary education, where they are expanded and deepened. This spiral approach enables teachers to build on existing competencies, reinforce them, and systematically advance pupils' religious literacy.

4.5. Evaluation of Learning

One of the key advantages of the competency-based approach in religious education is that it demonstrates the learnability of religious education. Clearly defined competencies describe what pupils should know and be able to do by the end of primary school. Assessment is an integral part of the learning process and should have a supportive rather than punitive character. The focus shifts from the question *What grade will I receive?* to *What have I learned?*

Formative assessment is emphasized, as it helps pupils understand their learning progress, learning strategies, and areas for further improvement. Assessment addresses not only the cognitive dimension of learning but also pupils' ability to think critically, apply knowledge, and connect learning with personal experience.

At the conclusion of a teaching sequence, it is appropriate to engage in open reflection on the learning process between teachers and schoolchildren. Feedback enhances the willingness of both parties to take responsibility for learning, reveals weaknesses in instructional planning, clarifies interactional problems and misunderstandings, and provides impulses for further collaborative work as well as for addressing individual pupils' learning needs and support options²³.

21 Möller, "Kompetenzorientierter Religionsunterricht in der Grundschule. Ein Planungsmodell", 8.

22 Porubský, "Sprievodca koncepčnými zmenami v ŠVP".

23 Möller, "Kompetenzorientierter Religionsunterricht in der Grundschule. Ein Planungsmodell", 11.

Summary – conclusion

Competency-based religious education represents a fundamental didactic shift that places pupils' learning processes at the center of instructional practice. It is not merely a methodological adjustment but primarily a matter of pedagogical attitude. When teachers trust pupils' capacities and recognize them as active participants in learning, they create opportunities for meaningful and individualized learning pathways.

By focusing on the development of religious competence, school-based religious education can contribute significantly to pupils' personal, moral, and spiritual growth. It enables them to engage responsibly with religious traditions, articulate their own beliefs, and orient their lives in a pluralistic society. In this way, competency-based religious education fulfills its educational mission within the framework of contemporary schooling.

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