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THE CONSTRUCTIVIST APPROACH IN RELIGIOUS EDUCATION IN THE CZECH REPUBLIC

Abstract

The article presents the basic concepts of constructivism in pedagogy and its dominant application in contemporary schools in the Czech Republic. The key points are applied and discussed from the perspective of religious education and the process of guiding children in the faith. It reflects on the didactic possibilities of this approach, especially with regard to the development of critical thinking, the connection of concepts and lived experience of a person and a different approach to understanding theological truths. It also critically deals with possible risks for religious pedagogues and catechists.

Keywords: constructivism, religious education, preschool, primary education, didactics

Streszczenie

KONSTRUKTYWISTYCZNE PODEJŚCIE W NAUCZANIU RELIGII W CZECHACH

W artykule przedstawiono podstawowe pojęcia konstruktywizmu w pedagogice oraz jego dominujące zastosowanie we współczesnej szkole w Czechach. Główne tezy są analizowane i rozważane z perspektywy pedagogiki religijnej oraz procesu wprowadzania dzieci w wiarę. Omawiane są możliwe zastosowania dydaktyczne tego podejścia, zwłaszcza w odniesieniu do rozwoju myślenia krytycznego, łączenia pojęć z doświadczeniem człowieka oraz alternatywnego sposobu rozumienia prawd teologicznych. Odniesiono się również krytycznie do potencjalnych

zagrożeń, jakie podejście konstruktywistyczne może stanowić dla pedagogiki religijnej i pracy katechetów.

Słowa kluczowe: konstruktywizm, nauczanie religii, edukacja przedszkolna, edukacja wczesnoszkolna, dydaktyka

Introduction

Contemporary preschool and primary education in the Czech Republic is influenced by the pedagogical constructivist approach. Its elements have become an integral part of curricular documents such as the Strategy for Education Policy of the Czech Republic until 2030+ and framework educational programs.

Given that religion teachers are in contact with pedagogy, whether during their theology studies or in church education courses, certain elements are already being incorporated into religious education and catechesis. These are more the activities of the teachers themselves than targeted teaching strategies supported by the churches. For this reason, this article will first focus on constructivism in a general sense, although many of these aspects appear in religious education as both a challenge and a risk, whether teachers are aware of this or not¹.

1. Constructivism

Constructivism is not a unified theory, but rather a discourse that brings new ideas from theories of knowledge. Some authors use the term constructivism, others use the phrase constructivist thinking. This is not a modern discourse, as elements of this type of thinking can already be found in ancient philosophers². Socrates, for example, is considered to be the first to introduce critical, that is, constructivist thinking.

The basis of constructivism is the idea that human perception is neither predetermined nor identical, because it is always shaped by a specific person within the context of their life. Each individual “constructs their entire experience on the basis of internal criteria”, which also determine the structure of their thoughts. The fundamental goal of constructivism is therefore to clarify **how people shape their knowledge**³.

American philosopher and psychologist Ernst von Glaserfeld advocated “radical constructivism”. According to him, reality cannot be objective, ontological, or self-evident.

1 This article originated as part of the COOPERATION project: *Theology and Religious Studies* (Charles University in Prague).

2 Holger Lindemann, „Eine Einführung in den Konstruktivismus”, in: Holger Lindemann, *Konstruktivismus, Systemtheorie und Praktisches Handeln* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2019), 18.

3 “Das einzelne Subjektsein gesamtes Erlebenaufgrund internen Kriterien konstruiert”. Lindemann, „Eine Einführung in den Konstruktivismus”, 17.

All knowledge exists only “in the minds” of people, which means that the subject can construct their knowledge only on the basis of their own experience⁴. Glaserfeld draws on the work of French psychologist Jean Piaget, noting his insight that “knowledge arises from the active activity of the subject”⁵. This activity then plays an important role in pedagogical teaching approaches and methods.

Glaserfeld also reflects on the fact that “thinking and reasoning” can never be fully explored in an individual, and therefore our knowledge is limited. According to Glaserfeld, because people use language to communicate, all concepts in human thinking must be connected to words. This is related to the fact that people examine phenomena and assign concepts to them. Glaserfeld states that individuals ask themselves the question: “What word would be appropriate if I wanted to describe this particular part or aspect of my experience?”⁶. Let us give a concrete example from religious pedagogy. In one study on Christmas characters, a child drew a small hedgehog instead of Baby Jesus, who brings gifts after Christmas dinner. In the Czech Republic, gifts are brought by an invisible figure called Ježíšek, whom many children currently identify with Santa Claus, while Christian children often identify him with the baby Jesus in the manger, and some children do not draw him at all (because he is invisible). The child in our example must have asked himself the same question that Glaserfeld writes about – what picture would suit him? And because the child knows the Czech word *ježek* (hedgehog), and in accordance with Piaget’s assimilation process, classifies Jesus in the same category as this animal – not on the basis of external appearance (he lacks the knowledge to do so), but on the basis of a similar-sounding word in the Czech language⁷.

In line with Piaget’s thinking, Glaserfeld also believes that we form concepts of our understanding of the world in accordance with our development. People do not acquire knowledge passively through their senses, but actively construct it in their minds. An important role is played by how this knowledge is linked to previous experience and systematized in thinking. It is therefore not primarily a matter of discovering an independent reality, but of systematizing the knowledge of a particular individual.

In the Czech pedagogical dictionary, constructivism is identified with “a pedagogical trend that emphasizes the processes of discovery, expansion, and gradual transformation of the cognitive structures” of the individual.

4 Jürgen Raithel, Bernd Dollinger, Georg Hörmann, *Einführung Pädagogik: Begriffe – Strömungen – Klassiker – Fachrichtungen* (Wiesbaden: VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften, 2009), 72.

5 Piaget explains that in his view knowledge arises from the active subject’s activity: Ernst von Glaserfeld, *Radical Constructivism: A Way of Knowing and Learning*, Studies in Mathematics Education Series 6 (USA: The Falmer Press, 1995), 56.

6 “Speakers of a language can examine concepts they habitually employ in thinking. Not by direct introspection, but by imagining a variety of related situations and asking themselves: «what word would fit, if I wanted to describe this particular part or aspect of my experience»”; von Glaserfeld, *Radical Constructivism*, 77.

7 Noemi Bravená, “Philosophizing with Children on National Tradition Related to Christmas”, in: *Symmetrical Communication? Philosophy and Theology in Classrooms across Europe*, eds. Friedhelm Kraft, Hanna Roose, Gerhard Büttner (Loccum: RPI, 2011), 61–74.

Cognition is:

- changeable: it changes over time and is transformed by the subject;
- based on different types of experience: general and partial, personal and mediated;
- associated with varying degrees of truth: truths (preconceptions), falsehoods (misconceptions);
- linked to self-evaluation: it is bound to one's own interpretations and attitudes⁸.

The two most important aspects are “the active role of the subject and the significance of their internal assumptions in pedagogical and psychological processes” and “their interaction with the environment and society”⁹.

Cognition is constructed (created by the child as part of the learning process). It can also be reconstructed, especially when it comes to certain partial corrections/modifications of knowledge. Knowledge is also completely restructured, and this process is preceded by so-called deconstruction, when the child's existing idea of a certain phenomenon, concept, activity, etc. is demolished¹⁰. Only then does the child build a completely new structure of the phenomenon being learned in their mind.

2. Key aspects of constructivism in the teaching process

Constructivist thinking offered pedagogy new possibilities for managing teaching processes with greater efficiency. Furthermore, there was a challenge to make positive use of one's own subjective experiential structure of knowledge and to work with it individually.¹¹ Constructivism is also presented as a different theory of teaching and is thus deliberately contrasted with so-called transmissive teaching, which focuses on knowledge and memorization and does not value the student as an active subject.

2.1. Constructivism in didactics

In didactics, constructivism represents a paradigm that is divided into three schools of thought according to its underlying theories:

A. Cognitive constructivism – This school of constructivism is based on the theory of Jean Piaget and American cognitive psychology (J.S. Brunner). It emphasizes that knowledge is acquired through “construction”, which is typically characterized by the child connecting pieces of information from the teacher into a meaningful thought structure using mental operations typical for a given age. In didactics, it is mainly implemented in the so-called three-stage model of learning.

⁸ Zdeněk Kolář, *Výkladový slovník z pedagogiky: 583 vybraných hesel* (Praha: Grada, 2012), 37.

⁹ Jiří Mareš, Eliška Walterová, Jan Průcha, *Pedagogický slovník* (Praha: Portál, 2008), 105–106.

¹⁰ About the terms: construction, reconstruction and deconstruction – see more in: Kersten Reich, *Konstruktivistische Didaktik. Das Lehr- und Studienbuch mit Online-Methoden Pool* (Weinheim: Beltz, 2012), 137–141.

¹¹ Raithel, Dollinger, Hörmann, *Einführung Pädagogik: Begriffe – Strömungen – Klassiker – Fachrichtungen*, 72.

- B. Social constructivism** – This strand of constructivism was inspired by the social dimension of learning and is based on the theories of A. Bandura and Lev Vygotsky. It emphasizes that children construct knowledge, but always within the context of social interactions and a specific culture. In teaching, it is mainly implemented through cooperative learning.
- C. Synthesis of both concepts in practice** – Teachers use elements of both approaches in practice, and their goal is to replace learning theories and rote learning with very specific skills: solving real-life problems, creative thinking, group teaching, emphasis on manipulating objects, etc.¹²

2.2. Constructivism in teacher education

In practice, constructivism has become most established in Czech preschool and school education thanks to the Reading and Writing for Critical Thinking (RWCT) program¹³, at several levels:

- **The teacher sympathizes with the concept of critical thinking development but has not completed the RWCT course.** This category includes a relatively high proportion of catechists, religious educators, and church workers in the Czech Republic. They have read about the development of critical thinking or experienced it somewhere, but have not completed the basic RWCT course. They are partial users of the methods. We could also include teachers with a non-religious specialization here, as the teaching of constructivism is already a standard part of the curriculum at teacher training colleges in the Czech Republic.
- **The teacher has completed the basic RWCT course.** Many beginning teachers who use the RWCT program in the classroom initially focus on the methods, only later realizing the complexity of the change in thinking, which is reflected not only in their relationship with the student and the subject matter, but also in their teaching style. Some catechists or religious teachers have taken the course on their own initiative and mostly use the methods and quick applications to Bible stories or other theological topics.
- **The teacher has completed the basic RWCT course and other courses and has been working on the topic for a long time.** These are teachers who apply the three-phase learning model – evocation, awareness of meaning, reflection. In each of these phases, they are able to appropriately combine various RWCT methods, taking into account their teaching qualifications and the specific topic being taught. We know from experience that such religious educators exist, but church statistics are lacking.
- **RWCT lecturer course.** These are teachers who have been involved in the RWCT program for a long time and are also aware of other ways of developing critical thinking. They are able to apply RWCT methods, use the three-phase learning model and analyze

¹² Mareš, Walterová, Průcha, *Pedagogický slovník*, 105–106.

¹³ Reading & Writing for Critical Thinking, „O programu. Program Čtením a psaním ke kritickému myšlení (Reading and Writing for Critical Thinking)”, access 1.06.2025, <https://kritickemysleni.cz/o-programu>.

it, prepare model lessons, and train other teachers. They also understand the broader meaning of constructivism in education. Due to the non-public statistics of www.kritickemyšlení.com, which organizes the courses, it is not possible to determine how many catechists and religious educators have completed the lecturer course¹⁴.

- **Other forms of constructivist thinking and education of religious educators.** These are mostly teachers who are also Christians and catechists. They focus, for example, on developing critical thinking through philosophy for children and developing child-oriented methods – for example, many Christians with an ecological mindset use inquiry-based teaching. Overall, however, we can say that this is a personal initiative of individuals.

2.3. Constructivism in teaching

Didactics is a comprehensive pedagogical discipline that can be defined as “the theory of education and teaching”¹⁵. In short, it deals with who and what we teach, where and how we teach individuals, with what goal and why we educate, and how effectively.

Educators most often use RWCT methods. In addition, we find elements of constructivism in the active approach to children, in the use of formative assessment, in the activation approach, etc. However, in practice, constructivism is most often identified (probably thanks to the RWCT program) with the development of critical thinking. Educators often identify individual elements of an active approach to children with innovation rather than with constructivism as such (e.g., in the methodology of philosophy for children, philosophical conversations with children, and theologizing with children)¹⁶.

This is the application of constructivism in encouraging children to ask questions and seek answers to philosophical or theological questions:

Philosophy for children – this is a school of thought initiated by Matthew Lipman and based on the idea that children ask questions about life and seek answers to them.

Philosophizing with children – these are philosophical conversations that use a different methodology from Philosophy for Children, but whose essence is conversation with children about various questions related to teaching and of a philosophical nature.

Theologizing with children – this is a method of conducting conversations with children that was developed within religious pedagogy and relates to Christian topics. This method is used by those who are familiar with children’s theology; other catechists and religious educators tend to use **theological conversations about God** and biblical characters with children.

14 The author of the text completed a lecture course with European certification in 2020 after completing several courses and teaching model lessons. She is currently applying the three-phase learning model in catechesis for children in grades 1–4 of elementary schools in the Brethren Church.

15 Jarmila Skalková, *Obecná didaktika* (Praha: ISV nakladatelství, 1999), 14.

16 Noemi Bravená, *Teologie dětí – vznik, definice, základy metodologie a oborové didaktiky* (Praha: HTF UK, 2021): habilitation work.

Various **activation techniques** are also used, the aim of which is to involve all children in the lesson and make them as active as possible, namely so that children are not just passive recipients of information. Discussion pairs, smaller groups, other organizational forms of education, movement in space, etc. are often used for this purpose. Other techniques include working with keywords, “key images”, brainstorming, “rotating flipchart papers” and the “statement and discussion” technique (the teacher presents a list of true and false statements – the students themselves rephrase the false statements) etc.¹⁷ As part of an active approach, pupils learn throughout the entire lesson, so it is desirable that they do not remain passive.

3. Religious education and the objectives of religious education

The Czech Republic has a so-called two-tier curriculum. This means that the curriculum is defined at the state level and certain optional content is defined by the school itself in a binding document called the School Education Program. Religious education in the Czech Republic is an optional subject in state schools and is not part of the state curriculum. Church schools may include religious education in their school education program as a compulsory or compulsory-elective subject, with pupils choosing between religion and ethics. The term “religious education” still refers to the teaching of the Christian religion.

If we ask teachers what they teach and what teaching materials they use, the situation is very diverse. The Czech Republic does not have the same textbook base as other countries where Christianity is still more prevalent in the population. There are teachers who prepare their lessons based on what interests the children and deviate from the church curriculum¹⁸.

The objectives of religious education are defined in professional literature, which religious teachers generally understand in a more general sense and include teaching from the Bible, church history and ecclesiology, and the fundamental theology of specific churches¹⁹. Nevertheless, the terms “key theological competence” and “spiritual competence” appear in current literature, which aim to show the connection with pedagogical thinking and terminology. These are general educational goals and provide sufficient space for definitions from the perspective of different churches.

The primary purpose of religious education in all churches in the Czech Republic is to guide children in their faith in God or towards God²⁰. However, since the 1990s, we have seen a certain shift, particularly in the methods of religious education, which is

17 See more in: Učitelnice, „Aktivizační metody na začátek hodiny”, access 1.06.2025, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2GHyErMZadg>.

18 See: Františka Klásková, *Katechetická práce s dětmi v Královéhradecké diecézi ČČSH*, master theses (Praha: HTF UK, 2012).

19 Ludmila Muchová, *Úvod do náboženské pedagogiky* (Olomouc: Matice cyrilometodějská, 1994).

20 Ján Liguš et al., *Náboženská výchova a výuka* (Brno: L. Marek, 2005), 172.

now more closely associated with schools, while catechesis is associated with church pastoral care and teaching. This is probably influenced by German theology, with which Czech theology is in very close contact, where religious education is part of the state curriculum. With the development of religious education in the Czech Republic, which was initiated by the Catholic educator Ludmila Muchová, there is more discussion in all churches about the appropriateness of content and methods for working with children in specific contexts – in the church, at school, and in extracurricular activities. Overall, there is a growing awareness of the need for pedagogy, but also of age-appropriate theological content. Catechists and religious education teachers say in interviews and seminars that they want to improve their education because the way religion was taught in the past is no longer entirely sustainable – that is, children are bored, they prefer other forms of motivation, and there are more and more children who do not like drawing or creative activities. Many teachers struggle with keeping the children's attention, motivation, and trying to improve their levels of interest in anything other than their mobile phones.

Religious education is not perceived as part of the curriculum by educational experts or the lay general public. There is a greater tendency to impart general religious competence rather than to anchor children in a particular religion, which many parents and secular teachers consider to be coercive.

4. Elements of constructivism in religious education

The methods used in Catechetics and religious education have undergone and are still undergoing change in all churches in the Czech Republic. While in the 1990s, after the Velvet Revolution, methods from church work were commonly applied in schools, they are now being replaced by more child-oriented methods. However, there are still teachers who adhere to the practices of the 1990s and, although professional, often lead children in an outdated manner, resulting in religion being described by children as “boring”, “unnecessary” and “outdated”. This is not just a matter of methods, but of the churches’ overall lack of a unified vision of what religious education in schools should aim to achieve – I am not talking here about goals (these are set by the churches), but about what we as theologians want to be the added value of such teaching in a changing Europe.

Didactics can be found in the basic division of Catechetics into two areas: **material Catechetics** – this concerns the content that is communicated to children (Scripture, tradition, other topics – this part corresponds most closely to the subject didactics (curriculum) and **formal Catechetics** – the ways in which we communicate content (didactic means, planning, catechetical design (lesson plans) – this corresponds best to parts of subject didactics and parts of general didactics)²¹.

21 Emilio Alberich Sotomayor, Ludvík Dřimal, *Katechetika* (Praha: Portál, 2008), 8–9.

There are religious educators who **adhere to proven catechetical methods**. Storytelling and dramatization techniques traditionally dominate with younger children, while educators increasingly use dialogical methods, develop creativity, etc. We observe the following practical applications among religious educators:

1. Child-oriented teaching methods – teachers deliberately shift certain topics into comprehensible applications – they make greater use of dialogical methods and active learning (e.g. discussion pairs or small groups).
2. Development of philosophizing with children, philosophy for children (Muchová, Bauer, Bravená), theologizing or theological conversations with children (Bravená, Muchová).
3. Teachers make greater use of IT technologies – tablets, apps, short YouTube videos, etc.
4. Application of specific RWCT methods and development of creativity, experiential learning (Pedagogical Center of the Archdiocese of Prague – e.g. the usage of Venn diagrams, brainstorming, etc.).
5. Use of a three-phase learning model, including RWCT methodologies in religious education (Lazárek²², Bravená, et al.)²³.

However, Christians also work as teachers of other subjects where they present Christianity – teachers of history, Czech language and literature, ethics, and multicultural education. We find the use of presentations of historical figures, the inclusion of ethical dilemmas, methods of philosophizing, etc., which aim to place the child at the centre of attention, that is, to arouse their primary interest in Christian topics. Christian content is thus presented with regard to the literary, historical, ethical, or multicultural context. Here we most often encounter other goals and content deviations. However, there are also religion teachers who accept these inspirations and apply them in religion classes in order to break a certain stereotype.

Overall, we can say that teachers choose specific methods for their teaching and use them in a very practical way. They also discover constructivism mostly through the methods of the RWCT program, the development of critical and creative thinking, activation techniques, and elements of formative assessment. However, very few understand constructivism as such. Some do not even know that it is constructivism. When asked directly, they respond, for example, “I do not like to teach transmissively”, “I do not want to just talk, I want to help children become more involved in the lesson”. More and more teachers prefer to move away from memorization and just telling Bible stories, especially with children over the age of 9. Catechisms are beginning to be used more to make lessons more interesting or as part of specific doctrinal education. Children’s questions continue to pose new challenges, and older children are seeking knowledge of fundamental and systematic theology – in this sense, there is a general lack of training for teachers in the Czech Republic.

22 Pavel Lazárek, “Metody vedoucí k rozvoji kritického myšlení”, *Cesty katecheze* 4, 2 (2012): 22–26, access 1.06.2025, <http://www.cestykatecheze.cz/casopis/2012-2/Metody-vedouci-k-rozvoji-kritickeho-mysleni.html>.

23 Noemi Bravená, “Die Bibel als literarisches Schriftendenkmal. Anregung zur integrativen Erziehung an der Grundschule”, in: *Heterogenität im Klassenzimmer. Jahrbuch für konstruktivistische Religionsdidaktik, Religion lernen*, eds. Gerhard Büttner, Heinz Mendel, Oliver Reis, Hanna Roose (Babenhäusen: Verlag Ludwig Sauter, 2018), 133–148.

5. Is constructivism an advantage or a challenge?

Like any system of thought, constructivist pedagogy brings a number of positives and a number of critical points to the field of religious education and catechesis. The problem is that not all risks can be assessed before application and without theological review, which many educators forget – they are sometimes guided by the motto: “Let us use everything, as long as the children believe in God”.

5.1. Constructivism requires a change in thinking

I consider this to be the biggest problem in the pedagogy of educators, especially religious educators, because thinking critically about oneself, one’s own faith, and one’s students is a cognitively demanding process. Educators must ask questions and seek answers, but they must also accept that often even they do not know the specific answers.

Risk: In practice, we often see a reluctance among teachers to continue their education and to subject even what I am “enthusiastic” about to criticism. This applies to teachers of all subjects. For religious teachers, there is another major risk that has not yet been addressed in the literature. This is a change in thinking about theology. By this I mean that teachers must view theology as a logical and coherent system that cannot be interpreted by everyone, but to which everyone has access. Religious education is always linked to the ecclesiology of the church in question (although it may have ecumenical elements). It is therefore necessary to appeal for a change in thinking about theology when changing thinking about children and teaching methods – not in the sense of reinterpreting truths, but in the sense of seeking reasons why the church teaches a certain doctrine, what its intention is, and how a given topic relates to the overall concept of the church. With a deeper knowledge of the theology of their own church, teachers can better grasp the application of biblical passages or doctrinal truths. There is often a misunderstanding here on the part of both theologians and teachers, because theology is the dominant discipline, not pedagogy, but without pedagogy it is often not motivating or effective. Pedagogy should not reshape theology, but should help theology lead to faith and in faith.

5.2. Constructivism has shown the connection between concepts and lived experience in the human mind

Constructivist teaching has shown that children’s preconceptions play a very important role in learning. They help students to mentally connect familiar phenomena with new knowledge, while maintaining their motivation to learn. In elementary school, preconceptions such as water, fruit, and seasons, with which children have experience, are used. However, religious education has a problem with evoking preconceptions – a child who has not been socialized in a religious environment may not have any preconceptions about certain topics because they lack experience and terminology from a church environment (e.g. questions such as:

Who is Jesus of Nazareth? What are the characteristics of God?)²⁴. Children of religious parents do have specific preconceptions thanks to their religious upbringing, but they often adopt words into their speech that they only have a vague idea about, and sometimes they understand certain concepts differently – based on their previous experience – for example, Czech children in the story of the *Káně galilejská* (Galilean Cana) do not see the place where the story took place, but a bird of prey called a *Káně lesní* (forest buzzard).

Risk: The risk is not pedagogical, but theological. In his text on radical constructivism, Glaserfeld focuses on quotations from church history that speak of the impossibility of describing God in words and thoughts. Even though God is knowable in revelation, he adds that this is not the same as “rational knowledge”. In essence, he tries to prove that without empirical experience, it is impossible to have an idea of what transcends man.²⁵ Radical constructivism is based on subjective experiences and dilutes the concept of revelation, which forms the essence of theology and the foundation of every Christian’s faith. Religious education cannot be based solely on sensory experiences and needs to have room for transcendence and higher reflection on what is not scientifically provable in facts but is, for example, found in the experiences of people across different churches. Radical constructivism rejects metaphysics and forms one of the models of understanding the world. According to Glaserfeld, “it would be misguided to ask whether radical constructivism is true or false... because it is a conceptual tool”²⁶. In this sense, I don’t think it’s compatible with religious education, because the goal of theology is to define an objective truth that is binding for Christians. I can subjectively view the various shapes of the crosses on which Jesus was crucified, but I cannot agree with the statement that in Christianity there is a possibility that Jesus of Nazareth was not crucified.

Significance: Radical constructivism, however, has pointed out that any empirical experience helps to build a child’s thought structures – in this sense, personal experience with Christianity and practicing faith is therefore irreplaceable. The question for Glaserfeld would be why a child is aware of and actually experiences the concept of salvation when they have not yet experienced it empirically.

Social constructivism is particularly inspiring for religious education in that theological knowledge, theological thinking, and the spiritual experience of children arise in community and in interaction with other children and adults (where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them). Furthermore, Lev Semyonovich Vygotsky’s theory

24 Bravená, “Die Bibel als literarisches Schriftdenkmal. Anregung zur integrativen Erziehung an der Grundschule”, 4–8.

25 von Glaserfeld, *Radical Constructivism: A Way of Knowing and Learning*, 27–28.

26 “That is the difference. Radical constructivism is uninhibitedly instrumentalist. It replaces the notion of «truth» (as true representation of an independent reality) with the notion of «viability» within the subjects’ experiential world. Consequently it refuses all metaphysical commitments and claims to be no more than one possible model of thinking about the only world we can come to know, the world we construct as living subjects. Because this is a difficult and shocking change of attitude when one first comes to it, I want to reiterate once more that it would be misguided to ask whether radical constructivism is true or false, for it is intended, not as a metaphysical conjecture, but as a conceptual tool whose value can be gauged only by using it”. von Glaserfeld, *Radical Constructivism: A Way of Knowing and Learning*, 22.

of thinking is very inspiring, because even in children's theology it is evident that children have their own "zone of actual development" – namely a certain standard of understanding theological truths²⁷. Every religiously socialized child, in accordance with their spiritual development and maturation, understands certain connections, but with appropriate encouragement from the teacher, they can also anticipate their theological thinking²⁸, that is, achieve what Vygotsky calls the zone of proximal development. This is where it becomes apparent that religious education often remains at a basic level in children's theology and does not offer them "solid food".

5.3. Constructivism is not about questioning truths, but about finding a different path to understanding them

A biblical character in a book or a sermon or catechesis about a biblical character is not the same as the real Moses, Jesus, or the Apostle Paul. The world of real biblical stories and how we know and tell them is different – constructivism has pointed this out very well. In order for children to understand why Christianity is timeless, they first need to know what Christianity is, what the individual concepts mean, how faith is practiced, and what rights and obligations are associated with it. Knowledge and clear definitions are indispensable, but constructivism has shown that there are different paths to them. A certain degree of subjectivity is also possible in religious education (who among us has seen heaven? And yet as children we all imagined it somehow). It is precisely these subjective ideas and experiences that should be combined with dialogical methods and mutual sharing within the group. Not in order to contradict the child's world of faith, but to make it more understandable to them. The conclusion of a constructivist lesson is linked to reflection, where the child chooses certain phenomena from what they have learned – depending, of course, on the method used. In practice, however, this is not entirely possible in complex areas of thought, which include theology²⁹.

5.4. Constructivism is above all pedagogical "hard work"

Religious education cannot do without teachers who work hard on themselves – both in terms of their teaching skills and spiritually. However, it is not just about didactics; today, there is an increasing emphasis on the connection between the teacher's diagnostic activities, that is, the ability to get to know children, define their strengths and weaknesses, their learning potential, their ability to understand abstract concepts etc. Therefore, along with constructivism, there is a growing emphasis on individualized teaching,

27 Lev Semjonovič Vygotskij, *Psychologie myšlení a řeči* (Praha: Portál, 2004), 136.

28 Noemi Bravená, "Do Not Be Concerned Only About Yourself..." *Transcendence and Its Importance for the Socialization and Formation of a Child's Personality*, trans. Angelo Shaun Franklin (Kassel: Kassel University Press, 2019).

29 Noemi Bravená, "Die Bibel als literarisches Schriftdenkmal. Anregung zur integrativen Erziehung an der Grundschule", 145–146.

namely teaching that satisfies the needs of different children, including their ability to understand Christianity. This is not something that teachers learn during their studies, but rather through contact with children and through diligence and reflection.

5.5. Constructivist religious education is associated with new methods

Constructivism has pointed to other possible methods that teach children to sort information, view phenomena from multiple perspectives, and analyze and synthesize information. These methods are known among educators as methods that develop critical thinking. There is a wide variety of them, and it is good to include them in teaching. One example is the five-leaf method, which can be used from elementary school to senior citizens³⁰.

Lazárek provides a very apt example from religious education in his text:

Eucharist	Faith
silent, strengthening	strengthening, fulfilling
forgiving, blessing, loving	saving, liberating, protecting
the living Christ among us	a rope lowered from heaven
mystery	journey

Risk: Some teachers have an inner feeling that if they only use new methods, they are guaranteed to be effective. However, this is not the case with any subject-specific teaching methodology, including religious education. This is because it is only during the teaching process that the didactic transformation of the subject matter into the actual curriculum (the subject matter experienced by the child) takes place. Teachers always use methods with specific children, under specific conditions, and for a specific theological topic. Another risk is that many teachers underestimate the partial nature of a method's application – for example, RWCT methods usually work differently than we are used to (they do not convey all information about a topic, but only some of it). The problem is that it is never a separate method, but a different way of learning, that is, it is necessary to assess the entire teaching unit.

In addition to the commonly used methods, catechetical methodology also included the dogmatic method. This involves the transmission of “ready-made facts” without any activity on the part of the pupils, but at the same time it is a matter of “presenting (...) unquestionable articles of faith”³¹. Many primary school teachers, based on constructivist approaches, reject everything dogmatic, and many teachers condemn the concept of “memorization”. It is true that the dogmatic method lacks motivation for pupils to learn, but it definitely belongs in catechetical education in the Church – learning Bible quotations,

30 The method consists of five lines: 1. topic (usually a noun); 2. two adjectives describing the characteristics of the topic; 3. three verbs – what the topic “does”; 4. a sentence summarizing the topic; 5. a synonym for the topic. For more details, see: Jeannie L. Steelová, Kurtis S. Meredith, Charles Temple, Scott Walter, *Příručka II. Rozvíjíme kritické myšlení. Čtením a psaním ke kritickému myšlení* (Praha: Kritické myšlení, 1997), 31–32; Lazárek, *Metody vedoucí k rozvoji kritického myšlení*, 25.

31 Liguš et al., *Náboženská výchova a výuka*, 172.

the Lord's Prayer (Hail Mary), the creed, etc. Children associate these with worship, and therefore this subject matter has a value for them that goes beyond mere memorization; it has experiential and liturgical value.

Conclusion

Pedagogical constructivism is only just being discovered by religious educators and catechists in the Czech Republic, based on established methods from the critical thinking development program (RWCT). However, it should become a mandatory part of the education of religious educators, not only in view of the opportunities and challenges it offers, but also the limitations it poses for religious topics and the development of theological competence. There should also be more research into its application to religious topics. The main risk is overestimating the equivalence of subjective constructs over objective truth and knowledge, as well as diluting the theology of revelation. The main benefit is the development of critical, creative thinking, cooperative learning, and a deeper understanding of concepts and a more meaningful (logical) structure of theological concepts in a child's thinking.

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