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Certificate of participation

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University of Macedonia, Greece

participated in the

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“Changing RE Teachers’ Views through Training Programs: Implications for Educational Practice”
prepared in cooperation with Ass. Prof. Dr. Nikolaos Koutsoupas

signed electronically Prof. Dr. Friedrich Schweitzer

Changing RE Teachers' Views through Training Programs: Implications for Educational Practice

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Dear colleagues

I'm very grateful to the instigators of this international meeting, Friedrich Schweitzer, Rob Freathy, Stephen Parker and Henrik Simojoki, who gave me the opportunity to join this group of experts focusing on an undoubtedly significant topic these days. Investigating the teaching quality in School Religious Education and possible perspectives of its improvement through teacher training programs shapes an issue of the highest importance. As Friedrich Schweitzer pointed out in a related paper, published a few years ago, the current discourse about School Religious Education focuses on a variety of contents and models, whilst at the same time, no commensurate interest has been raised within the school classroom context. We could approach this position from a pragmatic philosophical point of view, highlighting that the place of Religious Education for public schools is not something we can research only theoretically. It is an issue that must be analyzed on a practical level as well. We must investigate how this course operates within the classroom reality.

In order to come across the question very much raised in this scientific meeting today (How to improve educational practice through teacher training), we should first of all begin to attempt a diagnosis concerning the current status of educational practice formed within the school context. For the Greek educational landscape this topic is of great interest, as the educational practice seems not to be characterized by homogeneity. This is because Religious Education teachers perceive their role differently. This variety in teacher mission understanding depends on how they comprehend the basic aim of Religion as a school subject.

This course is being designed and taught under the supervision and responsibility of the state. Accordingly, the state establishes Committees, which undertake the preparation of the Curricula and School Textbooks of the Religious Course. The pedagogical orientation and learning contents of the Religious Course are directly linked to the theology and life of the Orthodox Church, but without the absence of a dialogue with other religions. This direction is provided under the consideration that Orthodox Christians in Greece constitute the majority of the population (about 95%). The course is neither catechetical nor confessional. It is a subject that addresses all students, and it is linked to the theology of the Orthodox Church.

The teachers of Religious Education who can teach this school subject are those who have received a degree in Theology after having attended one of the four Theology university departments in Greece. Theological Departments Curriculums include optionally an RE-teacher proficiency program. These programs enable Students to be appointed in the future as RE-Teachers in Greek Public Schools. They are appointed as teachers only of the secondary state education after having been examined and successfully passed national examinations for teachers, but without the approval of the Church for their appointment. As such, educational theologians are employees of the State and are not accountable to the Church for their religious beliefs. Further, it worth mentioning, that Theology University Departments do not fall under the jurisdiction of the Church, but operate and are evaluated under the responsibility of the Ministry of Education. This implies that professors of the

university department of Theology are appointed to these positions following evaluation procedures conducted only by the State. The Church is not involved in these processes.

In Greece we perceive Religious Education Discipline as a matter of Practical Theology, as a transition discipline and a transitory epistemological framework as well between theology and society.

It should also be remembered that there is only one permanent framework for further education graduated teacher training in Greece that takes place in the so-called Regional Training Centres (PEK). Newly appointed teachers, graduated from Theological University Departments, attend a 100-hour curriculum in these teacher education institutions, which consists of three phases (a. lectures/seminars, b. classroom visits / exemplary instruction, c. focus on theoretical and practical issues). In addition to this post-graduated teacher preparation system, educational sessions are conducted either at the local level, conducted under the responsibility of school counselors, or the responsibility of the State at the national level. In any case, they do not form part of a permanent and consistently routine graduated and appointed teacher preparation system in Greece. Such an authority does not exist in Greece.

In Greece, we have been experiencing a very intense debate over the content and basic aims of Religious Education in public schools over the last decade. The bone of contention lies in the following question: Should the subject be focused on Orthodox Church theology and tradition by contributing to the cultivation of Orthodox religious consciousness? Or should it follow the educational standards of religious literacy, contributing to a deeper insight into the religious phenomenon as a source of cultural creativity? The controversy ended in 2019 when Hellenic Council of State (Symvoulío tis Epikrateias) i.e. (id est) the Supreme Administrative Court of Greece determined that religious education in public schools should lead to the cultivation of Orthodox religious consciousness and not be associated with the ecclesiastical and mystagogical mission of the Catechesis. This decision was based on Article 16 of the Greek Constitution. Non-Orthodox pupils keep the right of exemption.

The disagreement over religious education in Greece was prompted by the fact that many educators, theologians, and scholarly academics do not hold a shared view on the subject's educational practice. Some claim that the issue should be discussed as part of the socialization of the church community, while others suggest that the course should obey the guidelines common to all high school courses. While the Greek Supreme Administrative Court has legally resolved the whole matter, the uncertainty surrounding the teacher's position remains a living fact.

Considering all the above aspects, we expect to undertake an analytical empirical study. The survey tests two fundamental hypotheses: a. Teacher perspectives on School Religious Education basic educational aims may change after participating teacher training programs. b. Changing teacher's views on School Religious Education improves practices of School Religious Education.

The study is coauthored by Nikos Koutsoupas Professor for Applied Informatics and Data Analysis at the University of Macedonia, Thessaloniki – Greece.

Perceptions of high school RE teachers who enrolled in training programs during the last five years (2016-2020) will be discussed.

We Attempt to examine if the preparation they have undergone, according to their viewpoint, may be seen as a step to improving their sentiment on the basic goals of the RE school.

We will thus investigate whether teacher training enhanced the quality of instruction. Our research would more specifically analyze whether there is a correlation between three factors:

Firstly, teacher training quality.

Secondly, shifting perceptions of RE fundamental aims.

Third, productivity in teaching RE.

Teachers will be encouraged to share their personal perspectives on the following five issues in the survey:

1. As teachers of religious education, how do they understand their position and their educational role?
2. To what point has the educational theoretical difference between catechism and School Religious Education been evident and plausible?
3. How do they test the expertise and skills that they have acquired in the past by completing teacher preparation programs for Religious Education?
4. Participation in training sessions has caused them to change their view of their teaching position and, if so, to what extent? Are they moving toward a more secular or catechetical view of the subject?
5. Have training seminars culminated in teaching becoming more successful or not?
6. May different aspects of training seminars be classified according to their effectiveness in teaching?

Two distinct perspectives have dominated the theoretical context of our study; Education Philosophy on the one hand, and Theology of Education on the other. We primarily focus on the educational theory of Dietrich Benner and his positions on the role of the school as a transitory educational institution between family and society linked . Secondly, we rely on the theological view of congregational education reflected by St. Cyril's of Jerusalem Catechetical Lectures from which the church's character on catechetical ministry mystagogy emerges.

Reflections resulting from the study's evidence are supposed to shed light on whether and how teacher training programs have an impact on School Religious Education's teaching practice. This would be an important factor, adding both to teacher training standards and the effectiveness of religious education practice in Greek public schools.

Thank you very much for your attention!