Article

Religious Education as a Platform for Pupils' Social Development and Prevention of Internet Addiction: The Case of Slovakia

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Abstract: The authors present changes in the content and teaching methods of religious education (RE) in the third decade of the 21st century, as proposed by the current curricular reform of compulsory education in Slovakia. First, they analyse the reform documents in terms of social competence development as one of the RE content requirements. Second, they seek a teaching methodology that applies a balanced approach to the use of information and communication technologies (ICT) while protecting RE pupils and their building of healthy human relationships from the potential threat of digital addiction. The authors based their teaching ideas on the findings from their research. To explore the relationship between addictive Internet behaviour and social intelligence, they used a questionnaire including the Internet Addiction Test and the TSIS Scale. The Mann–Whitney U test was used for statistical analysis. Data on 386 adolescent respondents revealed a statistically significant difference between males and females in social awareness, with males performing significantly better. A weak positive relationship ($\rho = 0.240$) was identified between social awareness and addictive Internet behaviour. In the discussion, the authors suggest teaching methods for developing social competence via RE without resisting the opportunities provided by ICT, while also avoiding an increase in the risk of online social media addiction. They suggest that even denominational RE should prioritize cultivating healthy relationships not only with God but also relationships with other people, the outside world, and oneself.

Keywords: religious education; social intelligence; internet; addiction; prevention; social media

1. Introduction

So far, one of the predominant characteristics of the 21st century has been the unprecedented development of information and communication technologies and artificial intelligence (AI), which, on the one hand, increase the quality of life of society in many ways, but, on the other hand, might reduce social, moral and spiritual awareness of humanity. The ability of human beings to communicate naturally with other people, as well as the ability to distinguish between virtual reality and real life have decreased (Dulovics et al. 2021). The activities made possible by modern technology crowd out the time needed for daily reflection and meditation on the meaning of life and ultimate issues. The moral, ethical, and value orientation of society is subservient to the material–economic orientation, and values and ethical norms have lost their primary importance. Due to digitisation, a significant increase in so-called 'screen time' among children and young people has occurred in the last two decades. Young people undoubtedly spend a significant part of their free time in cyberspace, where a large part of their social life occurs (Niklová 2022). This situation has been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic that hit Europe and the rest of the world in 2020. As a result, various processes related to the lives of the younger generation have become even more intensively digitised. This has had an even more pronounced impact on the increasing amount of time spent online by several population groups. It is now a well-known fact that excessive Internet use, in the presence of other risk

factors, is associated with specific adverse consequences for an individual's life. In some cases, this can even lead to Internet addiction (Young 2004; Nábělek 2007; Pontes et al. 2015; Ambrožová 2020), also referred to as excessive Internet use (EIU) or pathological use of the Internet (Niemz et al. 2005); pathological use of technology (Sim et al. 2012); problematic Internet use (Davis et al. 2002); excessive Internet use (Hupková 2018; Izrael et al. 2020); or nehtomania (Bělík and Kraus 2018).

Daily use of Internet, in many cases with features of addictive behaviour, makes adolescents more vulnerable to various risks that threaten the healthy social development of adolescents. Social media dependency moderately impairs communication abilities (Polat 2023). Excessive use of social networking sites can be a predictor of a whole range of problems arising from it, such as cyberbullying, harassment or sexual threats, and their impact on young people's mental health should also be considered. Excessive Internet use can result from repeated rewards in the online environment. The individual develops a 'conditioned reflex' and a natural behavioural expression and may even take on the attributes of an online social media addiction. In an individual at risk of Internet addiction, the following symptoms can be observed: loss of control over time, lying about daily activities and time of Internet access, restlessness, lack of focus, nervousness, irritability, personality changes—"virtual" identity—experiencing bipolar emotions (both happiness and guilt), despair, and fixation and obsession with Internet use (Lichner and Šlosár 2017). Manifestations of Internet addiction are dishonesty, defensive behaviour, agitation, ignoring responsibilities, inability to prioritise, isolation, moodiness, depression, guilt, and anxiety (Murphy and Lindeman 2023).

The lives of the world's contemporary population have undergone significant transformations driven by the aforementioned rapid technological advancements, but also by globalization, socio-economic shifts, and environmental challenges such as climate change. In this context, it is possible to characterize the past two decades as a period of profound paradigm shifts in society (Kosová et al. 2019), which are likely to result in both positive and negative outcomes for the quality of young people's lives, their education and their careers. One of the most essential solutions that could help mitigate the negative impacts of these phenomena on the youngest generation is for education of children and youth to flexibly respond to the emerging situation. Given children's developmental cognitive and moral immaturity, decisions on the intensity of ICT use should be influenced by their family members and teachers, including religious education (RE) teachers.

There are plenty of challenges that RE teachers are facing now, in the third decade of the 21st century, for example: How should RE, as a subject in primary schools or secondary schools, effectively fulfil its role in promoting the development of profound humaneness—specifically of social skills—within the contemporary milieu dominated by pervasive technological advancements and the omnipresence of social media? What social information, social skills and social competences within RE are appropriate to convey and train in this context? In what way can these be communicated to the present young generation so that they not only develop their relationship to religion, to God and to themselves, and therefore their spirituality, but also that their empathetic, assertive and cooperative relationships to their fellow humans and the world around them are developed at the same time? How can RE also fulfil the preventative role of school education against the risk of online addictive behaviour that young people face from ubiquitous media?

While there are many perspectives to consider in addressing these questions, one possible approach is to observe a particular transformation process in education, for example, within a single country, where efforts to answer these questions are underway. The aim of this study is to present a case study of the Slovak Republic and its current education reform processes, which necessitate significant changes for RE to remain an integral part of the Slovak education system. The first part will provide a brief overview of the reform changes related to the development of pupils' social (and emotional) competences and social skills being (a) one of the nine cross-cutting, cross-curricular literacies across the school system as well as (b) one of the main aims of RE and EE (ethics education), the only two, mutually

alternative formative subjects. This will enable further consideration of procedural changes and adjustments in teaching approaches, particularly having doubts about a unilaterally positive influence of online technologies on building healthy relationships, which will be explored in the subsequent section of the study.

Therefore, in the second section, we will focus on searching for ways to teach RE in this age of ICT and AI, even in RE. It draws on the authors' partial research into the correlation between social intelligence and Internet addiction. Although the research was limited by sample selection, it revealed a statistically significant relationship between social awareness and the increased risk of Internet addiction. This finding prompts reflection on various teaching approaches in RE to establish a reasonable balance between ICT use and prevention against its overuse.

2. Emphasis on Social Development within the Curricular Reform

In the Slovak Republic, as one of the post-communist countries, an experimental phase is currently underway to validate the first truly radical educational reform since the Slovak Republic's inception in 1993. It is a curriculum reform of the content and objectives of education, called 'Education for the 21st Century'. This reform addresses the challenges of the contemporary globalized and digitized world described above. The aim of primary and lower secondary education is for pupils aged 5–15 to acquire comprehensive and functional literacy in line with the demands of society, and to be able to apply it in everyday personal and social life, and in fulfilling their personal, educational, cultural, and social needs. They should build a foundational cultural framework for their personality that will guide and accompany them in planning and achieving individual life goals, as well as participating in broader societal, cultural, and global activities. They should gain a real awareness of their own personal potential for further educational growth and holistic development (MŠVVŠ).

Current education reform in Slovakia can be described as a shift from the traditional education model of memorizing facts to learning to think and acquiring social competence and essential (predominantly social) life skills. It aims to prepare young people for future scenarios that can only be predicted now, and enabling the prevention of psychopathological phenomena that are already manifesting in the deterioration of mental health and well-being among young people. 'Education for the 21st century' intends to widen opportunities for learning, to embrace every individual (inclusive education), to take responsibility for the sustainability of life on Earth (green school), and to promote the effective and safe use of digital technologies in upbringing and education (digital school). The main challenge of this reform is to teach children to think independently, and act responsibly based on values, knowledge, and data (MŠVVŠ 2023). Social and emotional competence has become one from the set of nine cross-cutting literacies/competences of the newly reformed State Educational Programme (MŠVVŠ 2023). Their set further includes metacognition, character, reading and visual literacy, as well as civic, digital, financial and environmental literacies or competences.

Already since the 1990s, Kosová, a Slovak expert in the philosophy of education, has emphasized the significant role of a personality-oriented educational science that accentuates the individual's personal and social development—the development of personal and social competences (2005). Its focus is on the process of personalization and the process of socialization of a child. The goal of these processes is to nurture development of a unique, fully developed, self-realizing personality and, at the same time, of a competent member of society. In current education, it is important to adapt the educational goals to this overall educational paradigma leading to the social development of each child and young person. Personal and social competence is among the eight key competences relevant to life, as outlined in the European Union document 'Key Competences for Lifelong Learning' (EC 2019). The reason is that the European Commission considers it essential to empower all individuals to thrive and contribute to diverse societies, as well as to address any potential conflicts.

By social development, we mean the development of social competence, individual social skills and social intelligence of an individual. So, what exactly is social competence? The concept of social competence in its original understanding placed emphasis primarily on a person's ability to effectively cope with the demands and rules of the social environment. Currently, the concept of social competence has exceeded its original framework and acquires a transdisciplinary character, stemming from the system of sciences (Janoušková and Vaňová 2012).

In order to measure the level of social competence and social skill development, it is important to introduce one more term: social intelligence. Social intelligence can be understood as foundational in relation to social competence in a more general sense. For example, Albrecht (2009) defines it as as the ability to get along well with others while winning their cooperation—the capacity to foster positive relationships while also securing collaboration from others. Social intelligence encompasses an amalgamation of sensitivity towards the needs and interests of others, often likened to a 'social radar,' a disposition of generosity and thoughtfulness, and a repertoire of practical skills essential for effective engagement with individuals across diverse environments.

Social intelligence was first defined by Thorndike as the ability to understand and manage men and women, boys and girls—to act reasonably in human relationships (Thorndike 1920). Social intelligence is now characterized as a person's ability to understand the feelings, thoughts and behaviour of other people and oneself and to behave appropriately based on this understanding (Orosová et al. 2004). This definition includes two aspects: cognitive (the ability to understand others) and behavioural (the ability to interact effectively with others). According to Guilford, behavioural content is the awareness of what another person feels or thinks and what they intend to do through clues we obtain from their behaviour; it is, therefore the understanding of non-verbal information (Jurčová 2000). If a person's level of these abilities is low, it can cause problems in social relationships and can be a predictor of the development of risky online behaviour.

Unlike social intelligence, social competence inherently carries a positive connotation. Social competence is multidimensional, composed of various pieces of social information, knowledge, skills, beliefs, attitudes, other partial competencies, etc. It is assumed that there is an ability to effectively manage these resources, which are linked to dimensions of human behaviour. Social competence can be acquired by developing its partial components, such as social characteristics, social motivation, social skills, knowledge, and interpersonal experience. Social competence encompasses behaviour and is also manifested in behaviour (Veteška and Tureckiová 2008). Socially competent behaviour is perceived as socially desirable and positive, oriented towards assertive, prosocial, and cooperative behaviour. It can be developed via training and intervention programs (Výrost and Baumgartner 2006). Developing socially competent behaviour in an individual requires improvement in self-reflection, reflection on social processes, reflection on subjective meaning, interpretations of behaviour and training in social skills. This sets social competence and socially competent behaviour apart from social intelligence and socially intelligent behaviour, which may also exhibit manipulative and antisocial characteristics. This delineation respects the psychometric and personality approach to studying and training social intelligence (Orosová et al. 2004).

Social skills are part of social competence; they represent more specific prerequisites. Generally, skill is the ability to perform processes and utilize existing knowledge to achieve results. Social skills can be defined as the abilities of adaptive, learned and socially acceptable behaviour, which enable one to cope effectively with the demands and challenges of everyday life (Gresham et al. 2011; Miovský et al. 2012). Social skills include, in particular, the ability to cope with social pressure, healthy self-assertive skills, empathy skills, communication skills, constructive conflict resolution skills, the ability to build healthy social relationships, media literacy, the ability to self-reflect and to know others (social perception), and coping with stressful and conflict situations (coping strategies). Social skills are essential for developing positive relationships, participation with peers, acceptance of

social norms and moral rules, and the responsibility to help others (Nešpor 2003). Social skills are rooted in relationships and are developed through interpersonal interactions (DiTommaso et al. 2003). Those who struggle with social skills offline bring difficulties to the online sphere (Weidman and Levinson 2015).

The basic types of social skills are skills that facilitate communication. They are related to the ability to effectively identify and manage feelings, as well as to negotiate. Developed social skills provide strategies for solving social problems. These represent the so-called alternatives to aggression as they enable proper conflict management and avoidance, and the ability to solve problems in interpersonal relationships without the use of aggression or violence. Stress management skills are also essential for successful conflict resolution in the context of stress and tension.

Social competence and social skills are considered to be one of the most critical aspects of the school environment (Lörinczová and Tomšik 2016). Let us give several examples of social skills that need to be developed in school, such as collaboration, empathy or assertiveness. In schools, students acquire the foundations for effective cooperation and communication in a group and acquire social and personal competences as part of their personal and social development. The ability to cooperate represents a general goal of education. In a school setting, cooperation can be seen at various levels—from routine student involvement in an activity to purposeful cooperative learning with a cooperative structure. Evidence of the fulfilment of such a structure is when students can achieve their goal and the other students with whom they are connected in the task situation can also achieve their goal (Kasíková 1997). Collaboration is when a student contributes ideas, opinions, and knowledge actively or on request; expresses constructively and politely when expressing disagreement; listens to other members, does not interrupt them; allows others to express their opinions; helps others in forming an idea; participates in the accomplishment of the group's subtask; takes a leadership role based on one's abilities; takes responsibility for their own learning and reflection; evaluates their own contribution to the group; and can evaluate the process of the activity. It is also when groups evaluate whole-group activity and group members evaluate each other.

Of all the social skills developed in the school environment, it is essential to emphasize the development of empathy. Empathy is an effective response transmitted after a conscious understanding of the experience of a situation and the feelings or perceptions that the other receives (Decety et al. 2016). Empathy can be defined as understanding the other person (Hetemi et al. 2023, p. 2). It is the ability to "listen to others without judging, understand them, and accept them. The extra-verbal component includes facial expressions, attitude, body posture, and gestures. The verbal component is in the content of what is said, in the colour and volume of speech, in the silence gaps." (Izrael et al. 2020, p. 12). Contact in the physical environment is crucial for developing empathy (Winczewski et al. 2016). Empathy allows people to form and maintain close relationships with people to perceive and interpret themselves externally. It significantly influences emotion regulation and attention and is a factor of resilience. Empathy is part of active listening, a set of skills that enable us to communicate so that what is heard is understood. It eliminates misunderstanding, confusion and conflict (Švehláková 2020). The development of empathy needs to be addressed in the younger school years; as Eisenberg and Mussen (1989) state, childhood and adolescence can be critical times for cultivating mindfulness, empathy, and kindness. Empathy demonstrated among peers (Jolliffe and Farrington 2006) is considered one of the main areas of intervention programmes to prevent bullying.

A socially competent person is not only empathetic, but also assertive. Assertiveness is emotional freedom: the ability to get along well with people, to feel a sense of inner well-being and confidence, while at the same time be able to make decisions for oneself and to be held accountable for decisions, to be able to express a point of view and an opinion, to assert demands, to criticise constructively, to accept criticism while not humiliating the other person, and also to be able to compromise and be able to acknowledge one's fault (Stanislav and Martinove 2020). Assertive communication has an impact on reducing the

incidence of cyberbullying, as pointed out by Kusumawaty et al. (2021). As a type of learning, it is built on the cooperative solving of more complex tasks. The cooperation mechanism is learned at every developmental stage of life through interpersonal contact and reflection (Wagner 1999). Cooperation among students is a significant preventive factor against the emergence of bullying and other forms of inappropriate behaviour by students. Also, adequate social support can reduce the incidence of problematic Internet use—a negative association between Internet addiction and social support has been found (Taş 2019; Cui and Chi 2021).

At the end of this section on social skills, it is necessary to mention another term that is increasingly appearing in school curricula—soft skills (or its synonyms: life skills, transversal skills, transferable skills, 21st century skills, etc.). Currently, there is increasing emphasis on these skills, which represent personal and social attributes or abilities that support achieving the best personal performance, and the best behaviour. They encompass a wide range of social abilities and traits related to human social intelligence (such as honesty, friendliness, perseverance, patience, etc.) (Hupková 2011). Life skills develop in three areas: (a) personality, self-knowledge and getting to know others; (b) social communication; and (c) conflict and coping skills.

Teaching and learning aimed at the social development of pupils occur through (a) domain-specific competences, developed in individual courses (such a geography, biology, arts, etc.), as well as (b) implementing cross-cutting literacies or competences in each of these courses. In the Slovak State Educational Programme, religious education (RE) as well as ethics education (EE), its alternative subject, belong to the educational domain area called 'Human and Society' (MŠVVŠ 2023).

3. Reform Requirements for Changes in the Goals and Content of RE

The current Slovak curricular reform expects changes in the content and teaching approach within RE and EE, the only two explicitly formative subjects in the State Educational Programme, shaping the moral and social dimension of a child's personality. What is the current state of fulfilling this task in RE in Slovakia? To evaluate this, several pieces of data from the recent period are to be presented.

In the Slovak Republic, as in most post-communist countries (with Estonia being an exception), there has been a longstanding tradition of confessional RE in schools, particularly prominent in the first half of the 20th century before it was taken over and significantly restricted by the communist regime. The model of mandatory selection from two alternating subjects has been in place since its inception. Parents of younger children in primary schools or students in secondary schools must choose between participating either in religious education (RE) or ethics education (EE). Religious education remained confessionally oriented even after the establishment of the democratic Slovak Republic in 1993. In 2004, all registered churches in Slovakia gained the right to teach RE if they prepared and accredited their educational RE curriculum. Currently, six Christian denominations in Slovakia have gained this accreditation: the Roman Catholic Church, the Greek Catholic Church, the Evangelical Church of the Augsburg Confession, the Reformed Christian Church, the Orthodox Church, and the Church of the Brethren in Slovakia. One strong reason for adhering to the confessional model of RE in Slovakia is the fact that the majority of the population has long identified with the Christian faith. In the 2021 population census, inhabitants of Slovakia traditionally declared affiliation with only two religions: 69.68% identified with the Christian faith, with 55.8% specifying Roman Catholicism, and 0.04% with the Jewish religion. However, these numbers are gradually declining; for example, in 2011, 62% identified with the Roman Catholic faith. The second-largest group consists of citizens with no religious affiliation (23.8%) and those unspecified (6.5%). The Evangelical Church of the Augsburg Confession in Slovakia was mentioned by 5% of citizens, and the Greek Catholic faith by 4% (Ivančíková et al. 2023).

In general, the objectives of any school education are derived from the various relationships a person realizes and experiences in his or her life—the relationship to oneself,

to other people, and to the surrounding world. As the school subject of RE focuses on cultivating a relationship with Transcendence or with God and on the spiritual sensitization of students based on this relationship, it is often referred to as a subject *sui generis.* This primary distinctive goal of RE is clearly reflected in several confessionally oriented RE curricula in Slovakia. However, it is striking when, alongside it, the second important dimension of this subject often fades away, and that is the relationship with people. After all, this is clearly emphasized in the biblical reference of Jesus' statement of the most important Christian commandments: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbour as yourself." (Gospel of Matthew 22: 37–40).

The task of RE, whether it follows a confessional or non-confessional RE model, is to develop the entire personality of the RE student, encompassing all of their relationships developed across the entire school curriculum. This means fostering the RE student's relationships with God, with themselves, with others, and with the world. Properly conceived, curricular changes in RE should reflect all these relationships and the need for their cognitive, transformative, and evaluative characteristics.

RE should develop students' identity and belonging, preparing them for adult life, careers and lifelong learning, including the role of a citizen in a pluralistic society and global community. RE has the potential to enable students to develop respect and sensitivity towards others, especially those whose beliefs are different. RE can thus actively promote not only spiritual but also moral and social values in the students' lives. It can facilitate students in reflecting on their own uniqueness as human beings, communicating their feelings to others, and appreciating the importance of forming positive relationships within the circumstances of everyday life.

While we approach the dichotomy between the confessional and non-confessional RE models critically, similarly to Hull, it is also generally the case that the non-confessional model is aimed predominantly at learning *about* religion(s) and learning *from* them (Hull 2002). As demonstrated in comparative research on the objectives of RE across all European Union countries 20 years ago (Hanesová 2006), social relationships and the social development role of RE were explicitly emphasized and receive a greater share of attention within the non-confessional RE model. As an example, the highest goals of RE in Estonia and Sweden included the achievement of students to acquire the ability to live according to the principles of humanity in their relations with other people.

Under the influence of societal tensions, national extremism, and growing religious intolerance, often fuelled by social media, there have been signs of a shift in RE emphasis in Slovakia, as well as in some other countries with a traditional 'into religion' RE model (Hull 2002). In Slovakia, the long-term dominant aim of this model used to be to introduce individuals to one of the officially registered confessions. Curricular emphasis on human relationships within RE primarily concerned relationships within the church. Thirty years ago, Muchová, a Czech religious pedagogue, expressed it concisely: "Religious education represents such education that introduces a person to a relationship with God, points out a specific meaning of life, presents the highest moral values, and creates a spiritual community with others, similarly minded people—primarily referring to the church (Muchová 1994, p. 19). In the first decade of the 21st century, more than half (17) EU countries had a confessional model of RE, with objectives understood more narrowly, primarily focusing on the relationship with God and their own church.

In his essays, Hull described in detail the risks associated with the application of confessionalism in the strict catechetical sense within RE when implemented in the environment of state schools (e.g., Hull 2002). Schreiner insisted that RE should develop general religious competence in young people, leading them towards mutual interest and understanding of differences in European pluralistic society (Schreiner 2001, p. 253). RE should develop students' sensitivity towards religion and the religious dimension in life. It should lead students towards answers to questions of meaning from the perspective of worldview and religion. Furthermore, it should lead students to clarify and justify

their own values and encourage them to explore their own decisions based on values (Schreiner 2003).

Over the past decade, there has also been a shift towards implementing a broader scope of relationships and a higher level of development in social intelligence, social competencies, and social skills. Some contemporary religious pedagogues predict that although the current spectrum of RE models, whether teaching into religion or teaching about religion(s) and learning from religions, will likely persist in society for a long time, there will be an increasing overlap of their objectives in a certain sense. According to Willaime, "a growing integration of religious education, be it confessional or not, with the overall educational goals of the school and its specific mission. In most countries, religious instruction is required to contribute to the education of students towards responsible citizenship in pluralist society" (Willaime 2013, p. 62).

Reimer, one of the active participants in the current curriculum reform in Slovakia in the field of RE, opens up the taboo topic of this shift by requiring society not to view school RE from the perspective of transmitting faith but rather from the logic of the educational process in schools (the interview with Reimer in Zlatohlávková 2022). Religion is part of our culture and has its relevance in school education. For example, understanding and deepening how it has permeated and shaped our culture requires RE. The aim of RE should therefore be to support and develop students' religiosity as one of the personality dimensions of every human being. It includes not only conveying religious knowledge to the students, but also sharing understanding of one's own religiosity and the religiosity of others in its complexity. According to Reimer, this does not mean the abolition of confessional RE, but rather creating space for moments of cooperation and mutual penetration. The future of RE lies in encouraging more mutual learning among students with different religious backgrounds and even among non-believing students during classes, because the religious dimension belongs to the holistic development of every human being.

The current curricular reform has legislatively anchored the necessity of shifting the teaching of RE towards the social development of students. All accredited versions of confessional RE in Slovakia, representing a subject within the educational area 'Human and Society', should explicitly emphasize the awareness, acceptance, and development of one's own identity in relation to other people and all living beings on our planet. An integral part of these processes is the cultivation of character, moral (ethical), and spiritual qualities of students, and their religious awareness (MŠVVŠ 2023). A 15-year-old student should be able to identify moral goodness in the actions of others and in their own actions, appreciate the good qualities and abilities of others, accept that qualities and abilities can be developed, identify the causes and consequences of human behaviour, and assess their ethical dimension. The new State Educational Program in Slovakia requires students to acquire knowledge about other religions in Slovakia within RE, with attention paid to the development of their social awareness—i.e., understanding the importance of peaceful and respectful coexistence among people with different faiths and those without belief (MŠVVŠ 2023). The RE teacher should cultivate respect for others regardless of cultural, religious affiliation, origin, worldview, age, gender, or self-perception. They should guide students to seek common ethical intersections in interreligious dialogue, understand the dangers of societal polarization, cultivate interreligious dialogue and dialogue between believers and non-believers, and develop the ability to discuss current issues (sects, cults, abuse, and religious and anti-religious intolerance).

In addition to such explicitly defined objectives in RE, and possibly also in EE, the RE teachers have the duty to implement in their RE subject also the development of cross-cutting social skills and attitudes, such as courage, resilience, and justice. Thus, a young person at the age of 15, also thanks to RE, should be able to cooperate with others, act in a charitable way, contribute to the community in a positive way, act justly, honourably, and conscientiously, respect the rules of social coexistence, justify the unethical nature of fraudulent behaviour, act according to the principles of fair play and equality, and maintain personal integrity in action even when nobody is watching (MŠVVŠ 2023).

4. Research Evidence of the Relationship between Social Intelligence, Internet Addiction and the Role of Religiosity

In the introduction of this study (Section 1), we pointed out the risks of the increasingly digitized society, which pose a huge challenge for all teachers on a global scale. Recognizing this and other global challenges of contemporary society, pressures arose within the forum of educational theorists and practitioners in Slovakia to reconsider and reform the entire system of education within compulsory school attendance (5–15-year-old children). In Sections 2 and 3, we characterized the current state and demands for the transformation of the objectives and content of RE in the context of broader curricular reform in Slovakia. So far, we pointed out *what* to teach in the current third decade of the 21st century, even in confessionally oriented RE. The response to both of these pressures should also be reflected in the teaching processes within RE. The question is *how* to do it.

As we have observed over three decades of teaching RE in Slovakia, RE is a subject sui generis not only in terms of its unique content but also in the realm of methodology. How can RE teachers convey to students an experiential learning based on principles of scientificity, illustrativeness, experientiality, and relevance in light of the latest didactic tools and available resources? How can RE teachers prevent repeated feedback from multiple RE students in Slovak schools indicating that RE is the least demanding and simultaneously the most boring subject? In our opinion, RE must also be embedded in the current context of ICT advancements. However, it is also necessary for it to be inherently unique in terms of preventing the pandemic of digital dementia, which reliance on Internet-based teaching and social networks can trigger. So how can social competences of RE students be developed in the context of risks from excessive use of ICT and especially social media? Are there any studies that would set certain reference points for the development of teaching methodology in reforming RE?

In seeking answers to these questions, we decided to incorporate the modest findings from our original questionnaire research conducted among a group of adolescents in one of the regions of Banská Bystrica, regardless of whether they had previously completed RE or EE. Although the questionnaires sent out to adolescents in the Banská Bystrica region did not include any additional personal questions to preserve anonymity, according to statistics from the Ministry of Education, two-thirds of all pupils currently enrol in RE, and one-third in ethics education (EE) (Zlatohlávková 2022), up from an even higher ratio of 3:1 in the previous decade (Fronc 2017). From this perspective, it can be assumed that at least 2/3 to maximum 3/4 of our respondents were RE graduates. As far as EE is concerned, here too we can speak of respondents who had received education in many ways overlapping and even exceeding the social dimension of RE. This follows from the nature of the original EE curriculum, created by L. Lencz for Slovak state schools as an alternative to RE in 1994, based on the concept of prosociality by the Spanish psychologist Roche Olivar—the father of the concept of ethics education in Spain after the fall of the Franco dictatorship. His concept of prosociality was inspired by the Charism of the Christian Unity of Chiara Lubich (Olivar 1992; Olivar and Gil 2019).

4.1. Research of the Relationship between Social Intelligence and Internet Addiction

In 2022, we conducted wider empirical research on university students as representatives of Generation Z. One of the goals of this research project, called 'Prevention of risky behaviour online', was to verify the existence of a relationship between addictive behaviour and the social intelligence of young adults who had just passed through adolescence—a critical period in terms of an individual's lifelong development. Adolescence plays a significant role in the formation of one's own identity, which is also accomplished through interpersonal interaction (Molčanová et al. 2007).

Two frameworks seemed to be available for measuring components of social intelligence. Kosmitzki and John (1993) isolated the following components of social intelligence: perception of other people's mental states and moods, general ability to get along with other people, knowledge of social rules, insight and sensitivity to complex social situations,

use of social techniques to manipulate others, adopting others' perspectives, and social adaptation. Silvera et al. (2001) compiled a list of relevant terms and used factor analysis to derive three components of social intelligence, namely, social information processing, social skills, and social awareness. The first two correspond to the cognitive and the third to the behavioural aspect of social intelligence. Kosmitzki & John constructed the TSIS scale to ascertain the above attributes.

We also wanted to find out whether there is a difference between men and women in the level of social intelligence as well as addictive behaviour, so we constructed the following research questions:

Question 1: Is there a correlation between addictive behaviour in terms of gender of the respondents?

Question 2: Is there a correlation between addictive behaviour and social intelligence of the respondents?

4.1.1. Research Sample

The research sample consisted of 386 adolescent students (N = 386) from Banská Bystrica, Slovakia. Among them, 264 (68%) were female, while 122 (32%) were male. The respondents' ages ranged from 18 to 22 years, with the largest representation found in the 20-year-old age group (153 respondents), followed by the 21-year-old age group (82 respondents).

4.1.2. Research Instruments

The research questionnaire was administered electronically via Google Forms. It consisted of two scales supplemented with demographic items.

The Internet Addiction Test (IAT), put forward by K. K. S. Young, measures personality characteristics and behaviour associated with compulsive Internet use, escapism and addiction through 20 statement items. Overall, it measures mild, moderate, or severe Internet addiction. The respondent answers the statements on a five-point Likert scale, with 0 = not at all and 5 = always, reflecting the extent to which the statements indicate the respondent's specific behaviour—his or her daily routine, social life, sleep patterns, or feelings experienced. The scale was developed based on the fourth edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-IV) criteria for pathological gambling and on a modification of a previous questionnaire by K. S. Young (1996).

The TSIS (The Tromsø Social Intelligence Scale developed by Silvera, Martinussen, and Dahl in 2001 contains 21 statements related to social behaviour and situations in which the subjects rate their behaviour and reactions on a 7-point Likert scale (1 describes me very poorly; 7 describes me very well). The test provides raw scores of social intelligence in three subscales: the Social Information Processing subscale SP ($\alpha = 0.79$), the Social Skills subscale SS ($\alpha = 0.85$) and the Social Awareness subscale SA ($\alpha = 0.72$). The SP and SA subscales represent the cognitive aspect of SI, and the SS subscale represents the behavioural aspect.

The reliability of the individual scales used in the research regarding their internal consistency was measured at the level of individual questionnaire items using Cronbach's alpha coefficient. The value of the quantified coefficients indicates sufficient internal consistency of all the questionnaires.

We used the Mann–Whitney U-test as a statistical test in the comparative analysis. We used Spearman's correlation coefficient as a statistical test in the correlation analysis. Before analysing the data using our chosen statistical tests, we verified that our variables met the condition of normal distribution of the data. Based on the results that verified the normal distribution of the data, we then chose parametric or non-parametric tests.

4.1.3. Research Results

In Table 1, we present the results of the Mann–Whitney U test for comparing males and females in our research group in the context of addictive behaviour.

Table 1. Difference between males and females concerning addictive behaviour (N = 386).

					Mann–Whitney U	
		n	AM	Mdn	Z	p
IAT	Male	122	38.50	39	−1.232	0.218
	Female	264	37.27	35		

Legend: n—number; AM—arithmetic mean; Mdn—median; Z-value of Mann–Whitney U-test; *p*-statistical significance.

Table 1 shows that, in our research group, there was no statistically significant difference in the prevalence of addictive behaviour between males and females. In Table 2, we compare the social intelligence of our male and female respondents.

Table 2. Difference between males and females in TSIS (N = 386).

					Mann–Whitney U	
		n	AM	Mdn	Z	p
SP	Male	122	32.30	33	−1.181	0.237
	Female	264	33.15	34		
SS	Male	122	30.10	30	−0.405	0.686
	Female	264	30.06	30		
SA	Male	122	25.45	25	−4.161	0.001
	Female	264	22.48	22		
TSIS score total	Male	122	87.66	88	−1.928	0.054
	Female	264	85.47	85		

Legend: n—number; AM—arithmetic mean; Mdn—median; Z-value of Mann–Whitney U-test; *p*-statistical significance.

Table 2 shows a statistically significant difference between males and females on the level of social intelligence by gender for the total score, with males coming out significantly better.

The following Tables 3–5 present the results of the correlations between addictive behaviour and all three subscales of social intelligence.

Table 3. Relationship between addictive behaviour and TSIS—SP (N = 386).

N = 386	TSIS—Social Information Processing		
	ρ		p
IAT score	−0.067	*	−0.067

Legend: * $p \leq 0.05$; rho–Spearman correlation coefficient; *p*-statistical significance; N-number.

Table 4. Relationship between addictive behaviour and TSIS—SS (N = 386).

N = 386	TSIS—Social Skills		
	ρ		p
IAT score	0.019	**	0.717

Legend: ** $p \leq 0.01$; rho–Spearman correlation coefficient; *p*-statistical significance; N-number.

Table 5. Relationship between addictive behaviour and TSIS—SA (N = 386).

N = 386	TSIS—Social Awareness		
	ρ		*p*
IAT score	0.240	***	0.001

Legend: *** $p \leq 0.001$; rho–Spearman correlation coefficient; p-statistical significance; N-number.

Based on the correlation measurements, we can conclude that the addictive behaviour measured by the IAT is significantly related to the SA subscale of the TSIS. A weak positive relationship (ρ = 0.240) was found between social awareness and addictive behaviour on the Internet at the $p \leq 0.001$ level of significance (*p* = 0.001). This positive correlation of the Social Awareness subscale values with the IAT scale values reflects a certain level of statistical significance of the relationship between them, indicating that the higher the respondent's social awareness score on the TSIS, the higher the score on IAT—the scale of addictive behaviour.

4.2. Interpretation of Research Results and the Role of Religiosity

In our research, we found a statistically significant difference in the level of social intelligence by gender in the subscale of social awareness, with males performing significantly better. We also found a weak statistically significant relationship (r = 0.240) between the level of addictive behaviour and the level of social awareness. In the other two subscales of social intelligence according to Silvera et al. (2001)—namely, social information processing and social competence—no statistical differences between men and women were found within our research sample. In this respect, the results of our research are consistent with other research, e.g., by Bar-On and Parker (2000). According to their research, women had higher interpersonal skills, were more empathic, and more socially responsible; men had higher intrapersonal capacity and stress management and were more flexible, adaptable and optimistic, based on which it can be assumed that the given competences are complementary and substitute each other and thus produce similar values of overall social intelligence.

To explain these results, we analysed the seven items that represent social awareness in the TSIS test (items No 2, 5, 8, 11, 13, 16, 21) (Silvera et al. 2001, p. 319):

- "I often feel that it is difficult to understand other' choices.
- People often surprise me with the things they do.
- Other people become angry with me without me being able to explain why.
- It seems as though people are often angry or irritated with me when I say what I think.
- I find people unpredictable.
- I have often hurt others without realizing it.
- I am often surprised by others' reactions to what I do."

The application of social awareness items formulated in this questionnaire, created more than 20 years ago, does not distinguish between the possibility of developing this component of social intelligence in a traditional school environment and its development in cyberspace, for example through social media interactions. Based on the society-wide increase in the excessive use of social media by adolescents in the 2nd and 3rd decades of the 21st century compared to 2001, it can be assumed that the listed items saturating social awareness are now significantly influenced by young people's interactive experiences on social media. However, proving this claim is not part of our research presented here, nor have we examined what respondents do online and what content they present about themselves on social networks. More research specifically focused on this topic would be needed. Further research is also needed to explain the statistically significant difference in social awareness between men and women. In the meantime, we can hypothetically predict that the items assessed in the TSIS test, which saturate social awareness and, as previously noted, encompass not only awareness in direct physical relationships but also in online interactions, serve as an apt representation of what men experience in their reflection

on online relationships within cyberspace. Nonetheless, this remains solely a hypothesis awaiting further investigation.

Various studies (see below) show that the virtual environment allows individuals to create a new, digital identity. It is a representational identity that can be invented, which the individual changes, thus fulfilling their ideas and desires that are absent in reality. Online behaviour has different attributes to real behaviour in the physical environment. One of the *attributes of the online space is the disinhibiting effect known as the 'digital mask' or 'digital cloak'. The online disinhibition effect explains the difference between an individual's behaviour* in the physical world and behaviour in the online environment (Shukla 2020). It works by reinforcing some attributes of behaviour acquired in the physical environment and weakening others. The positive nature of the online disinhibition effect, called benign disinhibition (Suler 2004; Lapidot-Lefler and Barak 2015; Shukla 2020), facilitates more accessible self-expression (Shukla 2020), self-disclosure and sharing. The person can share their deepest fears, show vulnerability (Suler 2004), or have greater emotional experience (Lapidot-Lefler and Barak 2015). Further, it promotes a sense of courage, eliminates fear or apprehension of being judged and perceived by others, and motivates people to take risks. People do not have to worry about their appearance or reactions; and negative perceived nonverbal expressions or signs of indifference and disappointment are absent (Suler 2004). Individuals are motivated to do things in the online environment that they would not normally do in the offline world (Suler 2004; Davis 2012). It may also promote introjection in individuals, which may determine the 'adoption' of public ideas and opinions as one's own.

Another impact of the online space is the minimisation of authority, which is formed based on online social media postings (rather than age, status or social role). The above encourages the free expression of one's thoughts. For example, it helps disadvantaged and stereotyped people to express themselves freely without worrying about the barriers felt in real life (Shukla 2020).

Existing research demonstrates that "mobile social media present a large number of experiences from a psychological perspective, each with potential that can result in problematic behavioural patterns" (Almenayes 2015, p. 45). Young's scale of Internet addiction (1996) was also used in the study by Almenayes. In his exploratory factor analysis, he arrived at three factors of social media addiction—social consequences, time displacement and compulsive feeling. Religiosity significantly negatively predicts social consequences as a factor of addiction (p. 50). In his study titled 'Empirical Analysis of Religiosity as Predictor of Social Media Addiction', Almenayes provided an example of 'socially inclined' people who may spend a significant amount of time on Facebook, frequently revisiting their profile to see how many 'likes' their most recent post has received from others (Almenayes 2015, p. 45).

Also according to a systematic review by Dossi et al. (2022), there is research support for "a possible role for religiosity as a protective factor" (p. 1); it was documented in the majority of studies the authors analysed. They also concluded that religiosity seemed "to be associated with lower internet gaming rates among adolescents" (Dossi et al. 2022, p. 1). Previous research studies have reported improvements in adolescent mental health as a result of religion and RE, such as reductions in stress, alcohol and drug use, depression, school failure, violence, gun ownership, and suicidal behaviour. RE has been shown to be instrumental in the development of adolescents' social skills, such as respect for religious diversity, ability to perceive greater social support from peers, fostering connectedness, understanding of love and brotherhood, sense of belonging, as well as coping with adversity, coping mechanisms, resilience, satisfaction with one's own life, greater meaning in life, and higher self-esteem (Joshi et al. 2008; Gonçalves et al. 2015; Isralowitz and Reznik 2015; Estrada et al. 2019). In some cases, research also reports negative effects of religion and RE on adolescent mental health: certain disorders such as obsession, anxiety and depression, radicalism and extremism, religious discrimination, microaggression, and gender discrimination (Estrada et al. 2019).

5. Teaching Suggestions for RE Teachers

In preventing risky behaviour online, across all school subjects, including RE, it is essential to focus on developing emotional and social competences concerning the development of empathy, cooperation and assertiveness. As we already mentioned, social skills are an immanent part of social intelligence and pro-social competence. In Slovakia, prevention of risky behaviour online is implemented within the framework of preventive-educational projects through two types of prevention—specific and non-specific prevention. Non-specific prevention (Tichý et al. 2023) focuses on acquiring positive social behaviour, adherence to social norms, and education to take responsibility for oneself and one's actions. Specific primary prevention programmes are programmes aimed specifically at a particular form of socio-pathological behaviour. For example, in the case of drugs, it seeks to find ways to prevent drug use. In the Slovak school system, this non-specific prevention is carried out by pedagogical staff (within all subjects, including RE and via cross-cutting themes), together with non-teaching professional school staff (especially social pedagogues) (Emmerová 2019). The role of RE contributing to development of various transversal social competences is embedded in the reformed State Educational Programme in Slovakia (MŠVVŠ 2023), similar to other countries such as NCCA in Ireland (e.g., the key skill of communicating and of working with others).

Social media, especially those accessible via mobile devices, enable socially sensitive individuals to have a much greater potential for communication with others, which can culminate in pathological addictive behaviour. An understanding of the correlation between online addictive behaviour and social awareness should lead all teachers, including RE teachers, to realize that not all types of tasks or classroom communication within the lesson clearly fulfil a preventive function with regard to the risks of addictive behaviour. If RE teachers try to adapt the types of assignments to the students' desires for more space within the subject spent using online media, it may happen that, although their social awareness will develop in the sense of the above-mentioned items, there will also be higher risk of addictive behaviour. Thus, the RE teacher needs to be aware of the pros and cons of using social media in RE classes.

As several studies have shown, RE in schools has the potential to prevent addictions through the formation of authentic personality in their students. This potential can be fully realized if they are aware of their capabilities and utilize them optimally for the benefit of themselves and society, while also being able to address the pitfalls of excessive Internet use. Charlton et al. (2012) found that the higher the level of religiosity of the female respondents, the lower the level of internet addiction. According to Almenayes (2015, p. 46), religiosity is a drug preventive factor: "This may be the result of religion's normative function... The greater their religiosity is, the less vulnerable" the young people are to various addictive types of behaviour. Almenayes (2015) concluded that "religiosity protects against social consequences of social media" (p. 44). Also according to the data from Weinandy and Grubbs' (2021) scoping review, "higher religiosity is related to more belief in the disease model of addiction in providers, negative attitudes towards addiction, and a stronger support for spiritually-based treatments" (p. 1).

Some authors emphasize the benefits of integrating social media into RE as an enhancement compared to traditional instruction, predicting potential improvements in student achievements (Minarti et al. 2023, p. 287). Åhman and Thorén (2021) wrote about the positive, functional and non-threatening effect of Facebook within religious communication in the Church of Sweden. They considered the positive outcome of using social media in the Church as "levelling hierarchies and including more people into a process through which they can voice their different opinions in a democratic manner" (p. 10). They highlighted the possibility to connect individual and collective, stable and contingent, universal and experiential values of religion through the utilization of social media in religion. Mitsi (2017) also presents a comprehensive set of ideas for developing social skills through the integration of new ICT in RE. According to Çolak (2023), social media provide "support rather than an alternative to traditional methods, provides quick feedback, contributes to

sociality while increasing interaction outside the classroom, and increases the role of the teacher while providing effective communication with students" (p. 2087). Social media may support the creation and strengthening of interpersonal relationships. Online activities related to religion and RE include, for example, sending emails on holidays, browsing web pages with religious content, listening to sermons, sharing spiritual thoughts in forums and blogs, virtual worship, and RE in a virtual environment, facilitated through platforms such as YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, Blogs, Wikis, and other specific websites.

Çolak (2023), on the other hand, can also recognize the potential adverse side of social media, namely social media addiction, which can result, for instance, in decreased interest in schooling and a lack of focus on learning. Therefore, RE teachers should be equipped to address the challenges associated with the use of social media in RE. Providing innovative pre- and in-service training to RE teachers can ensure that students do not succumb to the potential dangers of social media. RE teachers should not hesitate to embrace social media and deliver this new form of education to students in a healthy and secure manner. Çolak (2023), and also Minarti et al. (2023), are convinced that ICT can have positive applications in RE provided that a teacher's appropriate guidance and supervision are maintained. If an RE teacher employs social media sensibly and in moderation, it can help mitigate the risk of addiction within RE and enhance the overall learning experience for students. According to this group of authors, through meticulous planning of instructional activities and the application of critical thinking and content selection abilities, utilizing social media can be a valuable learning tool.

To sum up, RE has the potential to be the subject in which social awareness can be developed directly through physical participation and interaction in a group of classmates and contribute to a more balanced social development of RE students, without an increased risk of their addictive behaviour. This highlights the critical role of guidance and supervision by teachers when implementing social media in the RE classroom. We advocate that RE teachers should engage in meticulous ethical reflection prior to implementing new educational technologies in RE (Hanesová et al. 2017). Within the framework of prevention, emphasis should be placed on building healthy relationships not only with God, but also with other people, with the outside world, and with oneself. In RE, the most effective approach to fostering social skills while also preventing extensive Internet use is through activities that directly stimulate social intelligence in the classroom. Jackson (2014) suggests that from students' perspectives, schools represent one of the limited spaces where discussions on religion and encounters with religious diversity occur. His research into classroom dynamics indicated that allowing students to express their perspectives and challenge prevailing narratives can enhance their ability to relate their knowledge and comprehension of religions to their personal and social growth. "The connection of the personal and the social in classroom interactions suggests ways in which personal refection can be connected with themes of social morality and citizenship." (Jackson 2014, p. 61).

RE teachers have a wide range of teaching techniques at their disposal. For example, they can implement various problem-solving tasks, social group projects (such as service learning projects), thematically focused debates and face-to-face discussions, as well as engage in philosophizing and theologizing with students (Büttner 2007; Osewska 2018; Bravená 2019). Additionally, they can utilize methods of active, experiential, or adventure learning (Hupková 2011).

6. Conclusions

Various social networking platforms are places where young people are exposed to an extensive range of potential risks. We consider prevention through the entire educational curriculum, including RE, to be of paramount importance in the issue at hand, which, based on our findings, should focus more on the threats arising from the use of social networking sites, which can adversely affect young people's mental health. Our task should be to nurture an authentic personality who is fully aware of their potential and uses it to the best of their ability, for their own benefit and the benefit of society.

Several authors have shown that religion and RE has a positive impact on mental health and the development of social competence in young people (Bartkowski et al. 2019; Estrada et al. 2019). So, prevention activities also within RE should promote a healthy lifestyle for children in parallel with their spiritual, moral, personal and social development, including all social skills. Preventive interventions help children and young people to acquire knowledge, skills and competences that effectively reduce the risk of occurrence or development of specific forms of risk behaviour (Miovský et al. 2012).

Numerous RE educators have encountered challenges in balancing traditional academic methods with fostering online interactive activities among students. Increasingly, many of them are turning to online media during lessons as a way out of the challenges they face from students. Frequently, there is an assumption that ICT possesses the capability to effortlessly resolve obstacles in education. However, the reality underscores the necessity for community and a direct collaborative effort among individuals dedicated to student welfare, utilizing available resources effectively to promote academic and social advancement. We maintain that when utilized appropriately, ICT harbours the potential to enhance educational environments positively. Conversely, its misuse can yield detrimental effects. While some misuse these novel technologies, others leverage them for the betterment of human development.

The results obtained in our research should be seen in light of the research's limitations, which are the size of the research population and the non-random selection of respondents, as well as the limitations resulting from the older measurement instruments used and validated in the research conducted.

The authors point to the need for further research of social intelligence or social skills concerning other aspects or variables, appropriate for the current digital era of RE instruction and character formation. The need for more research into the role of RE in preventing addictive behaviour and development of social skills has been suggested by the majority of authors writing about this topic, such as Almenayes (2015), Weinandy and Grubbs (2021) and Minarti et al. (2023). These authors caution that there is a growing need for more studies evaluating the benefits of religiosity/spirituality and/or RE during adolescence. In particular, research on the correlation between the impact of technology, cyberspace, social media, and artificial intelligence, and the role of RE in young people's lives must progress (Gonçalves et al. 2015; Estrada et al. 2019). This article was also intended to contribute to the stimulation of such research.

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