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#### **THE STUDENTS' PERCEPTION REGARDING THE IMPORTANCE OF RELIGIOUS EDUCATION IN SHAPING THEIR CHARACTER**

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#### ***Abstract***

The students' religious education was and still is a controversial issue in Romania. Although our country is mainly orthodox, having powerful traditions, culture and spirituality, with an applied bi-millenary faith, there are opinions against the necessity to perform religious education in schools, opinions based on unfounded and inconsistent reasoning. Religious education is beneficial, as it helps the child become a responsible, balanced, optimistic adult, having a healthy vision of life, with multiple psychological and spiritual advantages, as well as an open, tolerant and receptive attitude towards the needs of others and willing to help. Religious education shares authentic values, such as kindness, altruism, moderation, love for our fellow human beings, faith, hope, and it takes man closer to our Creator, which, at difficult times is a real landmark, a powerful inner support. The diagnosis of our current society shows the promotion of fake heroes and values, the loss of self, the alienation and isolation of people, the adoption of a selfish and individualistic behavior, and lack of care for our fellow human beings, excessive technology, and defective communication. To help these generations of students develop, it is necessary for them to receive a healthy education, aiming both at their soul and their mind, based on acquiring knowledge, but also on shaping personalities with ethical and moral principles and a kind character. Religious education in schools helps students with parables, models of behavior, authentic axiological landmarks that are absolutely necessary during this period, when characters are shaped. The present study aims at achieving an investigating on the way students perceive religious education and its impact on shaping their character, especially at the beginning of teenage when temptations, immaturity and the changes they go through make them vulnerable and prone to wrong choices, which can sometimes have negative consequences for the rest of their lives.

**Keywords:** religious education; character; values; students;

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

Family and school are the main partners of the educational process and must contribute to forming and shaping a child's character from an early age. Family, by means of the attitudes and models promoted has the essential role to share fundamental human values with the child (love, respect, honesty, altruism, kindness, tolerance), as, before starting school the child must receive the education 'of the 7 years at home' – so much appreciated and rare nowadays. School, by means of dedicated and professional teachers, must promote and develop the child's beautiful character, to expose the child to examples of moral behavior, to authentic and immortal values.

One cannot shape characters instantly, at a certain moment, but gradually and an important part in this process belongs to the educational activities taking place in schools starting with early ages. During early childhood, the child's personality is shaped under the influence of affective and motivational coordinates of adults, by means of imitation and examples.

In forming positive character traits, one can identify several significant moments:

- adopting clear moral representations and notions;
- transforming moral notions into moral convictions, moral attitudes and feelings;
- by practice, moral feelings and attitudes are turned into moral skills and habits set into positive character traits.

Religious education accomplished through the contents of the school subject called *Religion*, aims at shaping the students' characters by valuing the positive behavioral models and by a permanent reference to the absolute human and divine values.

## **2. PROBLEM STATEMENT**

Forming characters is a complex process starting in the first years of life and taking place, especially during school time.

Character is the relational-value side of personality, the system of stable and specific individual attitudes, with a moral significance that defines a person as a member of society (Cocan, 2007, p. 151). A. Cosmovici considers character to be the structure expressing the hierarchy of a person's essential reasons, and the possibility to turn to fact the decisions taken according to these (Cosmovici, Iacob, 2008, p. 61). In ordinary language, character describes those features that are specific to our way of being, of behaving, our convictions, attitudes and a person's moral profile.

In a general sense, the term character designates a multitude of psychological relations reflected in a person's relations towards his/her fellow human beings and the values that guide a person's life. Character is mainly shaped throughout our childhood and teenage under the influence of our family, of the educational, cultural and social environment, of our group of friends, as well as of the promoted values. Character reflects a person's system of values and can be viewed as a dimension of the self, one that is responsible for the ethical behavior, reason for which it is considered to represent a person's psycho-moral profile, having a significant part in an efficient coexistence and adjustment to society. The structure of character comprises stable attitudes and those character traits that are specific to a certain person.

Character is a structure of personality determined by the interaction of three components. V. Negovan (2006) identifies:

- the cognitive component – represented by a person's basic knowledge related to right and wrong and by the rational and creative processes necessary to operate with this knowledge in taking correct moral decisions;
- the affective and volition component – represented by the value system offering criteria to make moral judgments;
- the conative or behavioral component – applying attitude in a person's behavior (for instance: the value of 'right' without its corresponding attitude, but the correct attitude, as well, without the value of 'right' is not the expression of a shaped character.

M. Golu (2009) considers that in the structure of character one can find affective elements (emotions, feelings), motivational elements (interests, needs, ideals), cognitive elements (representations,

concepts, judgments) and volition elements (features, traits), related to a person's social existence and mediating a person's relations with his/her fellow human beings and with society as a whole. The percentage of the four types of components in the character structure varies from person to person, and that can represent a criterion of typological classification – for instance: the structure of a character with prevailing personal motivation will have as character trait selfishness, and this will be more developed than altruism.

Character is reflected in a person's attitude towards the world and towards himself/herself:

1. attitude towards himself/herself (dignity, modesty, pride, feelings of culpability and superiority/inferiority);
2. attitude towards others and towards society (respect, honesty, sincerity, correctness, altruism, patriotism);
3. attitude towards activity (implication, diligence, cooperation).

Of these three categories, one can derive several attitudes, leading to defining general human values:

Attitudes	⇒	Values
Attitude towards God	⇒	religiousness
Attitude towards people	⇒	humanism (kindness, altruism, respect, tolerance)
Attitude towards society	⇒	democracy (by: implication, decision, responsibility, mutual esteem and respect)
Attitude towards country	⇒	patriotism (ethnic and/or local)
Attitude towards family	⇒	Family attachment
Attitude towards self	⇒	dignity, esteem, self respect
Attitude towards work	⇒	diligence, cooperation, mutual assistance
Attitude towards values (as working products)	⇒	Care for the national and international heritage, care for the community and the private property.

(Cocan, 2007, p. 152).

According to the positive/negative polarity, character can be dominated by certain antagonist character traits: kindness-meanness, diligence-laziness, honesty-lie, altruism-selfishness, seriousness-lack of seriousness, modesty-pride, and courage-cowardice. Values are determined when attitudes correspond to the social and ethical standards.

M. Zlate (1999), after developing Paul Popescu-Neveanu's conception, refers to the model of character balance regarding the polarization of character traits. He states that at birth character is in stage zero of its development, but that it will evolve towards one pole or the other during its evolution; all pairs of traits are present in each of us, and according to how they are shaped, the positive or the negative pole of the character trait in question will prevail.

This perspective regarding character development contributes to setting a character typology: '*a person of good character*' = a person with prevailing positive traits and '*a person of bad character*' = a person with prevailing negative traits.

### **3. RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

The present study aims at emphasizing teenage students' perception towards religious education, the way they understand and apply theoretical concepts and notions in real life contexts. The results were gathered by applying a questionnaire with several possible answers on a 5-step Likert scale (to a very large extent / to a large extent / to a moderate extent / to a small extent / not at all).

The sample was made up of 52 theoretical high school students (28 girls and 24 boys) of grades 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> attending religious education classes.

#### 4. RESULTS

Figure 1 illustrates the students' perceptions regarding the usefulness of notions and knowledge acquired during Religion classes for real life. A significant percentage of the students (53, 8%) considers that the theoretical knowledge and the skills developed during Religion classes will be very useful in real life, at certain moments of their existence, which indicated a powerful correlation between the contents of this school subject and real life issues or contexts. This is a very important fact, as these results overcome the criticism regarding several school subjects and referring to their lack of practical, applied character. The connections to real life are indispensable as students need to understand the usefulness of theoretical notions, regardless of the field.

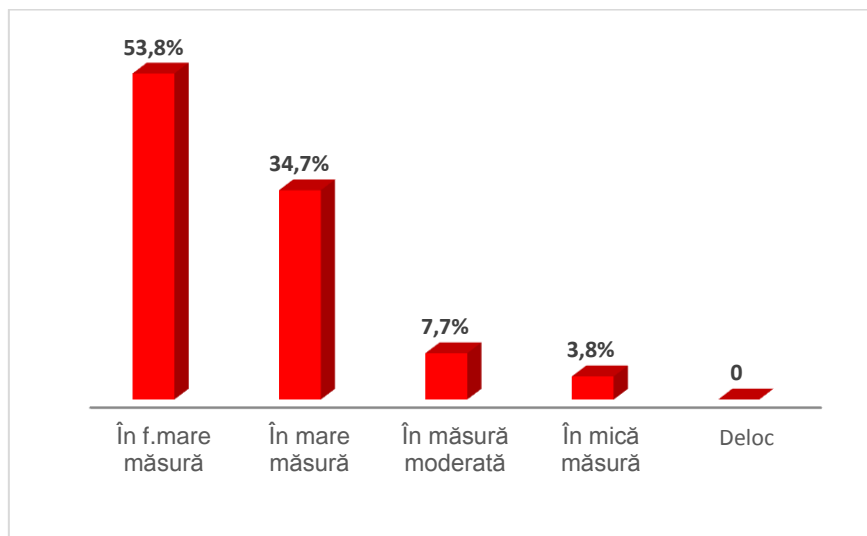


Fig. 1. The students' perceptions regarding the usefulness of notions and knowledge acquired during Religion classes for real life

Figure 2 represents the students' perceptions regarding the role of Religion classes in the process of self discovery and personal development. One can notice the fact that a percentage of 38, 4% of the students considers elements of religious education taught in school to be useful to a great extent for the process of discovering themselves, knowing their cognitive and affective abilities, their motivational resources and skills, measuring their potential, as well as during the process of developing inner, evolution resources. Self awareness and personal development are the key to a successful life. Those students who can value their skills, abilities and competences efficiently can easily overcome challenges and obstacles, rely on their own and are motivated to exceed their limits.

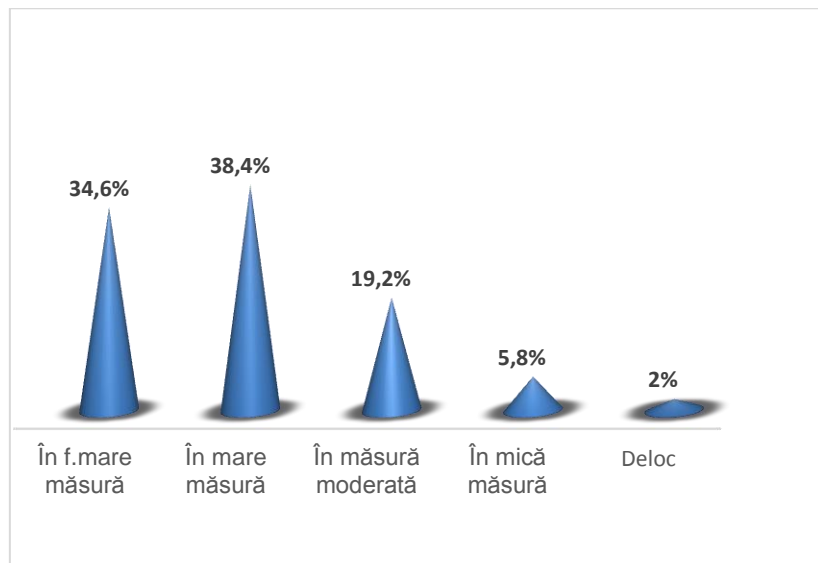


Fig. 2. The students' perception regarding the role of Religion classes in the process of self awareness and personal development

The parables and stories in the lives of saints used during Religion classes are authentic models of attitude and behavior for the students, especially during teenage, a time when a person needs authentic, healthy landmarks to refer to, different from those highly promoted in all the groups they attend. Teenagers need positive alternatives for the fake values abounding in cyberspace, media and other channels of our present society they have access to. This is the only way allowing them to choose between right and wrong, moral and immoral and to form authentic principles and value to guide their lives with. The Religion class contributes to reducing the negative effects of our contemporary identity and focus crisis, as it displays examples of kindness, holiness and human coexistence.

In figure 3 one can notice that students value, to a great extent (50%), the fact that during Religion classes they met behavioral models to apply in the current society. This is very important for their moral character that is in the process of shaping itself and for building a positive vision on life.

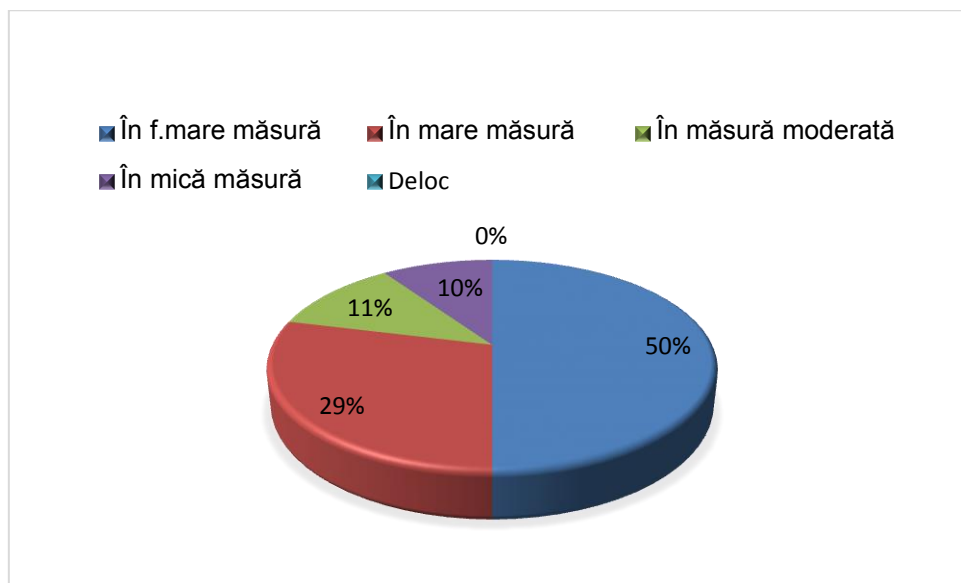


Fig. 3. The students' perception referring to the extent to which parables and stories of the lives of saints can be behavioral model to apply nowadays

## 5. CONCLUSION

Religious education is a necessary process for every society aiming at a better future for its people. Morality, principles, faith, authentic values are the pillars supporting the development of a balanced, physically, psychologically and spiritually healthy society. School has a main part in this process, especially now when family declines the responsibility of educating children. In the past the '7 years at home' meant the base of children's education, and family played its part of educational agent, acknowledging the importance of transmitting permanent principles and values. Nowadays this part is assumed by a small number of families, as they expect school to foster the entire process of shaping the children's personalities, and school cannot support this complex and difficult endeavor on its own. The advantages of performing religious education starting with early ages are multiple and undisputable.

Only by means of a real, functional partnership among school, family, Church, cultural institutions and media one can achieve a safe and positive environment to accomplish a harmonious development of the young generation. And religious education cannot and must not be left aside this context.

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