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Religious Education in the Preschool Multi-confessional Space: A Parental Perspective

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Abstract: *This study explores the perceptions of parents in Romania on the importance of religious education at pre-school level and identifies the main challenges related to its implementation in kindergartens. Theoretical foundation starts from international research supporting the onset of religious education at an early age, given the benefits on the moral, emotional and social development of children. The research was carried out during December 2024 – April 2025, through an online survey of 564 parents of preschoolers. The data were analysed according to socio-demographic and socio-cultural variables, and the results show significant support for the introduction of an optional religion in kindergarten, with statistically significant difference in favour of parents from more numerous families and from Protestant/neoprotestant confessions. Moral motivation was prioritized over other types of motivations (religious or educational-cultural). The main difficulties identified are related to religious diversity and the adaptation of religious content in multicultural contexts. The conclusions support the need for a flexible, inclusive and contextualised approach to religious education at preschool age.*

Keywords: *kindergarten; religion optional; parents; confessional approach; multicultural contexts.*

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Introduction

Recent research data from various religious and cultural spaces have shown that religious education is very important for the harmonious development of the child (Thoma, 2023; Poncini, 2023) and should be carried out in different contexts from an early age (Grimmitt, 2000). In some countries religious education is a compulsory study discipline at each level of education (Hakiman et al., 2021), in support of these educational policy decisions are proposed research data showing the role of this classical dimension of education in the development of intercultural competence of children (Jurišić & Žagmešter Kemfelja, 2025). Other research data pointed out that religious education is the one that significantly controls the behavior of children and that it should be studied since kindergarten, because at this age children show curiosity about various religious-moral themes (Rouse & Hyde, 2024; Hill & Woolley, 2022).

Preschool age is characterized by curiosity, and as curiosity stimulates learning, research data has shown that the most appropriate time for the onset of religious education is about four years old. Preschoolers after the age of 4 are thus considered to have an increased interest in religious training, which is considered „the golden age" of interest in religious knowledge (Koç, 2023). Research has also shown that early religious education supports better moral-civic training in the next stages of child personal development (Grimmitt, 2000).

An important aspect of the childhood period is the fact that at this age the basic elements of personality are formed by supporting children in shaping their lives through the cultivation of their spirituality (Cataya Rodriguez, 2025) and through religious education preschoolers can be taught character values, thus fostering the development of a desirable character. Religious values, which form the foundation of character building (Hyde, 2023), provide strong support in moral and emotional development if introduced from preschool age and their impact was observed until adolescence and even later, according to recent research data (Bustan et al., 2019).

At the same time, research in recent years that supports the need to introduce religious education since kindergarten highlights the role that kindergarten has in moral-religious training, especially on issues that the family often fails to realize or when they have difficulty highlighting the significance of religious themes or practices (Osewska, 2018).

Recent research shows that studying religious education since kindergarten contributes to the well-being of the child and provides significant support in their path of personal development (Teraoka et al.,

2025). Other research shows the potential of this dimension of education in limiting cases of behavior outside ethics, reducing self-centered manifestations, forming children's interest in culture and their own religious belief, supporting them in social integration in different groups and contributing to their overall well-being (Hyde & Rouse, 2022). Acquiring notions of religious education at the preschool level brings significant benefits in child development to the extent that its individuality is respected, the relationship between brain development and socio-emotional development in order to provide meaning and encourage active involvement in the process of self-formation (Hill & Woolley, 2022).

According to recent results, for an effective character education it is recommended to include children in groups and in educational environments that can support their development (Eaude, 2024), presentation of desirable models and reading stories containing eloquent moral-religious examples, educational activities that value certain traditions, making social visits, watching movies and intoning moral-religious songs memorizing and uttering short texts or prayers, teaching children to give thanks when they receive something or apologizing if they are wrong (Hidayatun et al., 2025). Several authors have recently investigated the impact of addressing the topic of death in preschoolers, suggesting that carefully addressed it could guide them in understanding existential problems, in providing relief to grieving children and in maintaining the general well-being (Koliouli & Kouniou, 2025) even questioning the possibility of visiting local cemeteries in order to teach children about death (Puskás et al., 2023).

An important feature of early childhood education is the playful aspect, and for this religious education has a significant potential for the educational process to be attractive (Perdana & Ngadiman, 2019), facilitating children to explore the environment and the inner being, while arousing their curiosity. Research data shows that if religious education is carried out from an early age and in the form of play, the potential for developing conscience and moral conduct in children tends to be higher (Santi & Santi, 2014; Opriş, 2014).

Even though a very important role in the achievement of religious education in preschool children is played by kindergarten, in the optimal development of the child must be involved both kindergarten and family and community (Dura, 2019; Toifur et al., 2022). Among the most important issues related to the achievement of religious education in kindergarten, recent investigations indicate the lack of sustained support from the family of children and decision-making persons, teaching methods poorly correlated with religious content, the lack of adequate teaching materials, as

well as the difficulty of pedagogically managing socio-cultural changes in contexts marked by secularization and religious pluralism (Poulter, 2025; Hovdelien & Sødal, 2022). Recent research also highlights the significant role played by the teacher's particular understanding of the child's spirituality and the ways in which a spiritual pedagogy is applied (Rouse & Hyde, 2024), which can support better management of the challenges that arise in everyday life and in relationships with others (Shields & Hattingh, 2022).

Building on the growing challenges in the education of children, research data points to a growing interest of parents in the religious training of preschoolers, particularly in the formation of their character through religious education by instilling formative and integrative moral and religious values (Eaude, 2024), by offering the values of distinction between good and evil, the values of justice, goodness, good manners, simplicity, courage, and by acquiring certain virtues, such as love, peace, piety, wisdom, patience, etc. (Miron, 2021). The data show that in many countries across Europe, Asia, and Latin America, this topic proves to be particularly current, and the discussion concerns not only the formative dimension but also the challenges of religious pluralism in the design and implementation of religious education in kindergarten.

Problem investigated

The review of the literature shows the importance given to the study of religion from the youngest ages, in different socio-cultural spaces. Numerous recent research shows the benefits of introducing religious education from an early age, with the results emphasizing its role in the moral, emotional and intercultural development of children. At the same time, a review of the literature shows that at the international level there is very little data on parents' perceptions of religious education at the preschool level. Meanwhile, in Romania, religious education is part of the official curriculum only from the primary cycle, which raises questions about the appropriateness and feasibility of its implementation in pre-primary education.

The present study aims to provide additional insights and to contribute to the development of educational policies and the curriculum by investigating the perceptions of parents in Romania regarding the importance of religious education in kindergarten within a multidenominational context, their motivations (moral, religious, educational-cultural), preferences related to the forms of implementation (optional, thematic projects, etc.) and the difficulties identified, especially in the context of confessional diversity. The analysis considers socio-demographic and socio-cultural variables, to capture any statistically significant differences.

The research design

Finality of research

The study was guided by the following research questions:

1. *Are there statistically significant differences between parents' opinions on the importance of studying religious education in kindergarten according to socio-demographic variables (gender, age, residence, level of education, family extension) and socio-cultural variables (confession)?*
2. *Are there statistically significant differences between the moral motivation of parents and the other types of motivations (religious, educational-cultural) to support the study of religious elements in kindergarten by children?*
3. *Are there statistically significant differences between parents' opinions on the variants of religious education in preschoolers?*
4. *Are there statistically significant differences between parents' opinions regarding the difficulties related to the educational context and the diversity of religious beliefs, compared to other types of difficulties (related to material and institutional support, organizational type) in achieving religious education in kindergarten?*

Collection of research data

The research was conducted using the questionnaire-based survey method and included Romanian parents who have children in pre-school education. The survey was conducted between December 2024 – April 2025 online via a Google Forms form. Throughout the research, the academic guide on the ethics of scientific research was respected, the participation of the respondents was voluntary, informed consent was requested, no rewards were promised, and no rewards were awarded for participating in the survey. The questionnaire included 9 items of opinion, for this study we used and analyzed the answers to 4 of the items, subsumed to the research questions, all with closed questions. This selection allowed for maintaining coherence between the objectives, the instrument, and the statistical methods applied, as well as for obtaining clear and focused results. The remaining items from the questionnaire can be used in future analyses and studies and may be included in a doctoral thesis currently in preparation.

The validation of the questionnaire was carried out through evaluation by the leaders within the Doctoral School "Didactica. Tradition, Development, Innovation", from the University "Babes-Bolyai" in Cluj-Napoca, Faculty of Psychology and Education Sciences, and reliability through the Crombach Alpha test (alpha Crombach coefficient: 0,884).

Research participants

The questionnaire was answered by 564 preschool parents, 90.2% female and 9.8% male, who fit into three age ranges, as follows: 23% aged 30 years and over, 59.4% aged 31-40 years and 17.6% aged 41 years. Of the total respondents, 68.8% live in urban areas and 31.2% in rural areas. Another variable was the respondents' confession, the distribution being the following: 86.3% orthodox, 4.6% catholic (Romanian-catholic and Greek-catholic), 8.5% protestant and neo protestant (reformed, baptists, pentecostals, evangelical Christians, etc.) and 0.5% other situation (atheists) (the percentages we recorded reflect the confessional distribution reported in the most recent official censuses in Romania). Depending on the number of children, we have the following categories of respondents: 32.3% with one child, 49.3% with two children, 13.5% with three children and 5% with more than three children. Convenience sampling was used, but the number of responses and the geographically balanced distribution across Romania ensure that the results have a high degree of reliability.

Analysis of research data

The data were analyzed using the SPSS statistical package (version 22.0; Armonk, NY, USA: IBM Corp.). In analyzing the data, we used basic statistical indicators, frequency, average, median, module and applied non-parametric tests, considering the type of variables: Shapiro-Wilk test, Mann-Whitney U test for two independent samples, Kruskal-Wallis test for more than two independent samples, McNamar test for two dichotomic pairs, Cochran Q test for more than two dichotomic pair variables. We also used Spearman's correlation coefficient. A staged approach was employed to ensure a coherent structure, combining basic descriptive analyses, examination of distributions, and the application of non-parametric tests appropriate to the data type, in order to obtain a comprehensive and valid overview of the relationships under investigation, in line with the formulated research objectives. The online data collection and analyses conducted using SPSS allowed for the rapid generation of initial results and the formulation of a first set of conclusions relevant to the research.

Results

The importance of studying religious content at preschool level

The literature review shows that the achievement of religious education in kindergarten is related to the value that parents give to this classical dimension of education. Thus, through the first item analyzed in the

present study, we asked the respondents to mention the importance they attach to studying religious content at pre-school level, using a five-stage Likert scale, encoded in the increment: 1 – Very little; 2 – Small; 3 – Medium; 4 – Largely; 5 – Very large.

To answer the first research question: *Are there statistically significant differences between parents' opinions on the importance of studying religious education in kindergarten according to socio-demographic variables (gender, age, residence, level of studies, family extension) and socio-cultural variables (confession)?*, we analyzed the responses to this item through statistical tests, depending on the variables mentioned.

Election frequencies for each stage of the Likert scale show an almost linear increase towards the upper levels of the scale: Very small (6.9%); Very small (4.3%); Medium (13.7%); Largely (28.2%); Very large (47.00%). Moreover, the central trend indicators also show the shift of the results towards values corresponding to the high and very high value: average = 4.04, median = 4, module = 5. The standard deviation value, based on which we calculated the coefficient of variation: CV = 1.183x100/404 = 29.28%, shows a moderate dispersion, which shows that there is no unitary perception of parents on this aspect.

To see what types of statistical tests we can use to interpret the data, we calculated the Shapiro-Wilk coefficient, whose value W = 0.770, $p < 0.001$ shows a significant deviation from the normality of the data. Consequently, we will use Mann-Whitney non-parametric statistical tests for two independent samples and Kruskal-Wallis for more than two independent samples.

Depending on gender, the value for the Mann-Whitney test is U = 13069,000, Z = -0,867, p = 0,386 (p > 0,05), which shows that between the two categories of respondents there is no statistically significant difference in the importance of religious education in kindergarten, even if the average rank is higher for male respondents (MRm = 299,38; MRf = 280,68).

The same conclusion is drawn from the analysis according to the residence environment, the value of the Mann-Whitney test being U = 31541,500, Z = -1,555, p = 0,120 (p > 0,05), which shows that between urban and rural respondents there is no statistically significant difference in the importance of religious education in kindergarten. We notice that the average rankings are higher for rural respondents (MRr = 297,29), compared to urban respondents (MRu = 275,79).

The Kruskal-Wallis test according to the respondents' age $\chi^2(2)$ = 1,620, p = 0,445 (p > 0,05) shows that among the different categories of respondents of different ages there are no statistically significant differences

of opinion regarding the importance given to religious education in kindergarten. If we analyze the rank average, we observe close values for the first two ranges and lower values for respondents aged over 41 years: MRunder 30 years = 282,82; MRbetween 31-40 years = 287,46; MRover 41 years = 265,32.

The level of education is another variable according to which we made the statistical analyses. The Kruskal-Wallis test $\chi^2(2) = 3,549$, $p = 0,170$ ($p > 0,05$) reveals that the level of education does not statistically significantly influence the data of the research, meaning that there are no significant differences of opinion between the categories of parents regarding the importance given to the study of religion. The average rank has very close values for the first two levels of education, lower than for respondents with the highest education level: MRhigh school = 293,41; MRlicense = 290,28; MRdegree = 266,50.

Family extension, expressed by the number of children in the family, was another socio-demographic variable used to analyze the importance given to the study of religious content by the categories of respondents with 1, 2, 3 or 4 and more than four children. The results for the Kruskal Wallis test are listed in Tables 1 and 2.

Table 1. Ranking average for analysis by number of children

	Number of chlidren	N	Mean Rank
Importance of religion	1	182	249,47
	2	278	286,76
	3	76	317,01
	4 and more of 4	28	361,20
	Total	564	

Source: SPSS output generated from authors' own data.

Table 2. The Kruskal- Wallis[a,b] test

	Importance of religion
Chi-Square	20,213
df	3
Asymp. Sig.	,000
a. Kruskal Wallis Test	
b. Grouping Variable: Family extension	

Source: SPSS output generated from authors' own data.

The Kruskal-Wallis test $\chi^2(3) = 20,213$, $p = 0,000$ ($p < 0,001$), which shows that the number of children in a family statistically significantly influences the importance given to the study of religion. The analysis of the average rank shows an increase with the increase in the number of children. To see which of the categories of respondents there are statistically significant differences, we apply the Mann-Whitney U test, and we will analyze all possible category comparisons (6 in our case) and adjust the materiality threshold with the Bonferroni correction according to the number of tests performed: = $p/6 = 0.05/6 = 0.008$. The data were summarized in Table 3.

Table 3. Mann-Whitney test for comparisons between respondents by number of children

Comparison number of children	U	Z	p	MR
1 – 2	21912,000	-2,578	,010	$MR_1 = 211,90$ $MR_2 = 242,68$
1 – 3	5289,000	-3,156	,002	$MR_1 = 120,56$ $MR_3 = 150,91$
1 – 4	1550,000	-3,521	,000	$MR_1 = 100,02$ $MR_4 = 141,14$
2 – 3	9409,500	-1,582	,114	$MR_2 = 173,35$ $MR_3 = 192,69$
2 – 4	2845,500	-2,541	,011	$MR_2 = 149,74$ $MR_4 = 190,88$
3 – 4	905,000	-1,350	,177	$MR_3 = 50,41$ $MR_4 = 58,18$

Source: Authors' own elaboration based on multiple SPSS outputs.

The data in Table 3 show statistically significant differences in two comparisons between the parenting categories with 1 child and 3 children and between the parenting categories with 1 child and 4 or more children, $p < 0.008$. In both situations, the difference in the average rank is in favor of the family with more children, so we can say that more families value at a higher level, statistically significant, the importance of studying religion in kindergarten, than families with only one child.

In addition, we calculated Spearman's correlation ϱ coefficient, the data being entered in Table 4.

Table 4. Spearman's correlation coefficient, religion importance – family extension

			Family extension	Importance of religion
Spearman's rho	Family extension	Correlation Coefficient	1,000	,183**
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.	,000
		N	564	564
	Importance of religion	Correlation Coefficient	,183**	1,000
		Sig. (2-tailed)	,000	.
		N	564	564
**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).				

Source: SPSS output generated from authors' own data.

The data in Table 4 show a weak ϱ correlation (N – 2) = ϱ (562) = 0,183 (the value of ϱ is between 0,1-0,3), but statistically significant, which means that families with more children tend to value the importance of religion more, even if this trend is weak.

The distribution of respondents according to confession led to the grouping of respondents in four categories, in order to be able to carry out statistical analysis: 1. orthodox confession; 2 – catholic confession (Romanian-catholic and Greek-catholic); 3 – protestant/non-protestant confession (reformed, baptist, pentecostal, Christians according to the Gospel, etc.); 4 – another situation (atthew). We conducted statistical analysis by confession through the Kruskal-Wallis test, the data being recorded in Tables 5 and 6.

Table 5. Ranking average for analysis by confession

	Confession	N	Mean Rank
Importance of religion (parents' opinions according to religious affiliation)	Orthodox	487	279,44
	Catholic	26	229,65
	Protestant/Neoprotestant	48	358,58
	Another variant	3	20,00
	Total	564	

Source: SPSS output generated from authors' own data.

Table 6. Kruskal-Wallis[a,b] test

	Importance of religion
Chi-Square	24,290
df	3
Asymp. Sig.	,000
a. Kruskal Wallis Test	
b. Grouping Variable: Confession	

Source: SPSS output generated from authors' own data.

The value for the Kruskal-Wallis test $\chi^2(3) = 24{,}290$, $p = 0{,}000$ ($p < 0{,}001$) shows that belonging to a particular denomination leads to a statistically significant, different valorisation of the importance of studying religion in kindergarten. The analysis of the average rank shows the highest values in the case of respondents belonging to the Protestant and neoprotestant cults. To see which of the categories of respondents there are statistically significant differences, we apply the Mann-Whitney U test and adjust the threshold of significance with the Bonferroni correction according to the number of tests performed: = p/6 = 0,05/6 = 0,008. In our analysis, we do not analyze comparisons with data obtained for respondents who consider themselves atheists, because their number is irrelevant for the statistical analyses used. The data were summarised in Table 7.

Table 7. Mann-Whitney test for cross-referencing comparisons

Comparisons confessions	U	Z	p	MR
orthodox – catholic	5188,000	-1,654	,098	$MR_o = 259{,}35$ $MR_c = 213{,}04$
orthodox – protestant/ neo-protestant	8372,000	-3,491	,000	$MR_o = 261{,}19$ $MR_p = 337{,}08$
catholic – protestant/ neo-protestant	357,000	-3,446	,001	$MR_c = 27{,}23$ $MR_p = 43{,}06$

Source: Authors' own elaboration based on multiple SPSS outputs.

Research data show that although respondents of Orthodox confession attach more importance to studying religion in kindergarten than Catholic respondents, the difference is not statistically significant ($p > 0{,}008$). In contrast, in the case of comparisons with the respondents of protestant/non-protestant confession, we have statistically significant differences in their favor, both in comparison with the Orthodox and with the Catholic respondents ($p < 0{,}008$).

Motivations for studying religious elements in kindergarten by children

The importance of motivation in making decisions led to the inclusion in the questionnaire of an item that asked parents to choose a single option from a list of four motivations that would lead them to accept the study by their children of religious education elements in kindergarten.

An analysis of the content of the motivations (Table 8) shows that the first two motivations are intrinsic and the next two are extrinsic. The first two motivations have a religious content and suggest that parents want the transmission of religious values in a formal setting from an early age, but also the development of an affective and cognitive relationship with God in their children. The third statement has moral content, religion being understood as an instrument for the formation of moral behavior in the child, thus emphasizing the moral dimension of religion. Finally, the last statement values in particular the cultural role of religion. From an educational point of view, we consider more important the priority of the moral motivation at this age, due to its immediate, tangible character, unlike the other types of motivation, mentioned in the list proposed by us, whose effects are observed over time, which also responds to the most important aspects of the pre-primary education goals, mentioned in the Curriculum (Ministerul Educației Naționale, 2019).

So, by analyzing the data, we set out to answer the research question: Are there statistically significant differences between the moral motivation of parents and the other types of motivations (religious, educational-cultural) to support the study of religious elements in kindergarten by children? The frequencies (number and percentage) for each of the four motivations are summarised in Table 8.

Table 8. Frequency (number and percentage) for each motivation

Motivations for studying religion in formal settings	Number	Percent
1. We are religious people and we want our child to learn as soon as possible about the values of our faith	91	16,1
2. Religion helps children to get closer to God.	158	28,0
3. By learning religious things, children change their behavior in relation to others.	216	38,3
4. Religious knowledge is part of a man's general culture.	99	17,6
Total	564	100,0

Source: Authors' own elaboration based on SPSS output (percentages calculated by the authors).

If we look at percentage values, we see the highest values for moral motivation (38,3%). For religious reasons, lower frequencies were recorded (28% and 16,1%, respectively). For the last motivation, which values the cultural aspects of religion, we have a frequency of 17,6%. To see if there are statistically significant differences between these choices, we applied the non-parametric Cochran Q test for more than two dichotomic pairs (Table 9) variables.

Table 9. Cochran test

N	564
Cochran's Q	72,184[a]
df	3
Asymp. Sig.	,000
a. 1 is treated as a success.	

Source: SPSS output generated from authors' own data.

The value for the Cochran Q(3) test = 72,184, $p < 0,001$ shows the existence of statistically significant differences between the four motivations. We further analysed, through the McNemar non-parametric test for two dichotomic pairs, the existence of statistically significant differences in the cases of pairs in which the moral motivation enters (motivation 3) and adjusted the materiality threshold to the total number of pairs that can be made within this item (6): $\alpha = p/6 = 0,05/6 = 0,008$. The results are shown in Table 10.

Table 10. McNemar's test for the analyzed[a] motivation pairs

	3 & 1	3 & 2	3 & 4
N	564	564	564
Chi-Square[b]	50,085	8,687	42,717
Asymp. Sig.	,000	,003	,000
a. McNemar Test			
b. Continuity Corrected			

Source: SPSS output generated from authors' own data.

The value of the McNemar test shows in all cases the existence of statistically significant differences between the choices in all three pairs of variables analyzed ($p < 0,001$).

To see the meaning of the difference in the pair: Motivation 1 – Motivation 3, we analyze the differences, based on the data in Table 11.

Table 11. Frequencies Motivation 1 & Motivation 3

Motivation 1	Motivation 3	
	No	Yes
No	257	216
Yes	91	0

Source: SPSS output generated from authors' own data.

The calculated difference is D = 216 – 91 = 125, in favour of Motivation 3, which means that parents prefer a statistically significant difference to a moral motivation, compared to the motivation that takes into account personal beliefs and the desire to study religion from an early age.

To see the meaning of the difference in the pair: Motivation 2 – Motivation 3, we analyze the differences, based on the data in Table 12.

Table 12. Frequencies Motivation 2 & Motivation 3

Motivation 2	Motivation 3	
	No	Yes
No	190	216
Yes	158	0

Source: SPSS output generated from authors' own data.

The data in Table 12 show that in the case of the Motivation 2 - Motivation 3 pair, the difference is D = 216 – 158 = 58, in favor of Motivation 3, which shows the preference of moral-religious behavior in children more than to develop an affective and cognitive relationship with God.

To see the meaning of the difference in the pair: Motivation 4 – Motivation 3, we analyze the differences, based on the data in Table 13.

Table 13. Frequencies Motivation 4 & Motivation 3

Motivation 4	Motivation 3	
	No	Yes
No	249	216
Yes	99	0

Source: SPSS output generated from authors' own data.

For Motivation 4 - Motivation 3, the difference is D = 216 – 99 = 117, in favor of Motivation 3, which shows that a significantly higher number of parents prefer valuing the moral dimension of religious education, compared to the cultural one.

Ways to achieve religious education in preschoolers

In the plan of organizing the teaching activities, we can identify a variety of possibilities for religious education in preschools: through systematic formal activities (optional with religious themes) or occasional (projects with a certain theme, realized at certain times of the school year), through informal, integrated activities (activities integrated in other areas of activity), respectively through external non-formal activities (partnerships/guests of some people). To answer the research question: *Are there statistically significant differences between parents' opinions on the variants of religious education in preschoolers?*, respondents were asked to choose one of the four types of activities, which they most want for their children, in formulations accessible to parents. The frequencies for each activity are listed in Table 14.

Table 14. Frequency (number and percentage) for each motivation

Motivations for studying religion in formal settings	Number	Percent
1. Learn about God every week through an optional religious assignment.	216	38,3
2. On the occasion of the big holidays, the educator will propose projects on this topic.	130	23,0
3. When the theme fits, whatever the activity, let them be told about God.	176	31,2
4. Invite certain people to talk to them about God.	42	7,4
Total	564	100,0

Source: Authors' own elaboration based on SPSS output (percentages calculated by the authors).

Data show most choices for systematic, weekly study of religious elements through an optional (38,3%). With fairly close percentages, we find the integrated teaching of some religious elements (31,2%), followed by the realization of educational, occasional, thematic projects (23%). The fewest elections (7,4%) were registered for the achievement of religious education in a non-formal way, through persons outside the kindergarten. We tested for statistically significant differences between these variants through the non-parametric Cochran Q test (Table 15).

Table 15. Cochran test

N	564
Cochran's Q	118,950[a]
df	3
Asymp. Sig.	,000
a. 1 is treated as a success.	

Source: SPSS output generated from authors' own data.

The value of the non-parametric Cochran Q test (3) = 118,950, $p < 0,001$ shows the existence of statistically significant differences between the proposed variants. Based on the McNemar non-parametric test, we synthesized the data for the six pairs that can be made, which are related to the adjusted materiality threshold: $\alpha = p/6 = 0,05/6 = 0,008$ (Table 16).

Table 16. McNemar test for analyzed[a] pairs of variants

	1 & 2	1 & 3	1 & 4	2 & 3	2 & 4	3 & 4
N	564	564	564	564	564	564
Chi-Square[b]	20,882	3,880	116,004	6,618	44,006	81,142
Asymp. Sig.	,000	,049	,000	,010	,000	,000
a. McNemar Test						
b. Continuity Corrected						

Source: SPSS output generated from authors' own data.

Of the six comparisons of pairs of variables, we have statistically significant differences in four situations: variants 1 & 2; variants 1 & 4; variants 2 & 4; variants 3 & 4, where $p < 0,008$. In the case of the first pair, D1-2 = 216 – 130 = 86 the differences are in favour of variant 1, which means that respondents prefer the optional religion to a statistically significant difference compared to thematic projects. In the case of pair 1 & 4, the difference D1-4 = 216 – 42 = 174 is in favour of the optional compared to inviting people to talk to children about God. In the case of pair 2 & 4, the difference D2-4 = 130 – 42 = 88 is in favour of thematic projects compared to inviting people to talk to children about God, and in the last pair, 3 & 4, the difference D3-4 = 176 – 42 = 134 is in favour of integrated activities, compared to inviting people to talk to children about God.

In the other two situations, pairs 1 & 3 and 2 & 3, the differences are statistically insignificant, $p > 0,008$. Although respondents prefer the option of religion compared to integrated activities, they prefer integrated activities, compared to thematic projects, which take into account religious aspects, the differences are not statistically significant. The preference for the option of religion is statistically significant only in relation to religious thematic projects and inviting people to talk to children about God.

Difficulties in achieving religious education in kindergarten through an optional

Since in the administered questionnaire, the highest percentage values (38,6%) were in favor of organizing an optional religion, we set out to analyze the difficulties that parents identify in its realization. At the item four analyzed in this study, the respondents were asked to choose a single answer option, with the possibility to formulate other options.

In our proposed list, we can classify difficulties into three categories: difficulties related to the educational context (1. Not all parents will agree to the introduction of an optional.) and the diversity of religious beliefs (4. It will be difficult to choose the theme of the optional where there are children of several confessions.), difficulties related to material support (2. Educators do not always have the necessary materials.) and institutional (5. Educators do not always have the support of the direction for an optional religious.), respectively organizational difficulties (3. Missing children have difficulty recovering lost matter.). Please note that we did not receive answers to the option: *Other difficulties. Whichone?*

Given that in Romania children live in a multiconfessional environment, in which the majority of the population is Orthodox Christian, and that organizing an option on religious issues means an activity with all children in the groups, regardless of their confession, we considered that the difficulties related to the educational context and religious diversity are the most important. So, in order to answer the research question: *Are there statistically significant differences between parents' opinions on the difficulties related to the educational context and the diversity of religious beliefs, compared other types of difficulties (related to material and institutional support, organizational type) in the realization of religious education in kindergarten?,* we analyzed the data through non-parametric tests Cochran and McNemar.

In Table 17, we summarised the frequencies (number and percentages) for each of the five difficulties, for which we asked the respondents' opinion.

Table 17. Frequency for difficulties in introducing an optional in kindergarten

Difficulties in studying religion in formal settings	Number	Percent
1. Not all parents will agree to an optional introduction.	270	47,9
2. Teachers do not always have the necessary materials.	37	6,6
3. Missing children have difficulty recovering lost matter.	21	3,7
4. It will be hard to choose the theme of the option where there are children of several confessions.	185	32,8
5. Teachers do not always have the support of direction for an optional religious.	51	9,0
Total	564	100,0

Source: Authors' own elaboration based on SPSS output (percentages calculated by the authors).

The highest percentages were recorded by the difficulties that take into account the resistance of some parents towards introducing an optional on a religious theme (47,9%), namely the difficulty of selecting content that would ensure a unity in the religious diversity in which children live (32,8%). Summarized, we get over 80% of the answers, the difference up to 100 being distributed among the other three difficulties, related to institutional support (9%), material support (6.6%) and, in the lowest percentage, organizational type (3,7%).

To see whether there are statistically significant differences between the choices, we applied the non-parametric Cochran Q test for more than two dichotomic pairs (Table 18).

Table 18. Cochran test

N	564
Cochran's Q	424,794[a]
df	4
Asymp. Sig.	,000
a. 1 is treated as a success.	

Source: SPSS output generated from authors' own data.

The Cochran Q(4) assay value = 424,794, $p < 0.001$ shows statistically significant differences in observed difficulty responses. Through the McNemar test, we conducted statistical analyses to analyze whether these differences are within the pairs that can be realized with the difficulties that take into account the educational context (Difficulty 1) and the diversity of religious beliefs (Difficulty 4) and we adjusted the threshold of significance to the total number of pairs that can be analyzed within this item (10): $\alpha = p/10 = 0.05/10 = 0.005$.

For the four difficulty pairs formed with Difficulty 1, the McNemar test results are summarized in Table 19.

Table 19. McNemar test for pairs of difficulties in relation to difficulty 1[a]

	Difficulty 1 & Difficulty 2	Difficulty 1 & Difficulty 3	Difficulty 1 & Difficulty 4	Difficulty 1 & Difficulty 5
N	564	564	564	564
Chi-Square[b]	175,322	211,354	15,508	148,050
Asymp. Sig.	,000	,000	,000	,000
a. McNemar Test				
b. Continuity Corrected				

Source: SPSS output generated from authors' own data.

We note that in all cases the McNemar test value shows statistically significant differences ($p < 0{,}001$). The data show that in all cases the difference is in favour of Difficulty 1. So, D1-2 = 270 – 37 = 233, D1-3 = 270 – 21 = 249, D1-4 = 270 – 185 = 85, D1-5 = 270 – 51 = 219, which means that the agreement for organizing an optional is considered essential, compared to the lack of material support, with the organizational difficulties with the need to respect cultural diversity and lack of institutional support.

As regards the comparisons that consider respecting the cultural diversity, we have made comparisons between the pairs 2-4, 3-4 and 5-4, the McNemar test results being listed in Table 20.

Table 20. McNemar test for pairs of difficulties in relation to difficulty 4[a]

	Difficulty 2 & Difficulty 4	Difficulty 3 & Difficulty 4	Difficulty 5 & Difficulty 4
N	564	564	564
Chi-Square[b]	97,338	128,976	74,953
Asymp. Sig.	,000	,000	,000
a. McNemar Test			
b. Continuity Corrected			

Source: SPSS output generated from authors' own data.

We note that in all cases the McNemar test value shows statistically significant differences ($p < 0.001$). In all cases the difference is in favour of Difficulty 4. So, D4-2 = 185 – 37 = 148, D4-3 = 185 – 21 = 164, D4-5 = 185 – 51 = 134, which means that choosing the theme for the optional in a multiconfessional community is considered a greater difficulty, compared to the lack of material support, with the organizational difficulties, respectively with the lack of institutional support.

Discussion and conclusions

The study propose to provide new research data on the opinion of parents on the importance of religious education in preschoolers, as well as their expectations regarding the concrete ways to achieve it, considering that investigations on this topic are still in their early stages in Romania (Opriș, 2014; Santi & Santi, 2014; Pop & Pop, 2019). The investigative approach also took into account the importance and motivations of studying religious education in kindergarten, the place of religion option among other ways/forms of achieving religious education at pre-school level, respectively the difficulties in achieving an optional, from the perspective of parents.

A novelty of the research is the investigation of the relationship between the realization of religious education in kindergarten and the value that parents give to this classical dimension of education. In the context in which international research shows that one of the factors influencing the achievement of religious education is the family, that parents are the ones who notice the first deviations of development of children (Kanniappan et al., 2025) and that both teachers and parents support the collaboration between them (Jiang et al., 2025) in order to make positive changes (Esquierdo & Stehn, 2025) and in order to influence the valorisation of religious practices (Broer et al., 2024), respondents were invited to mention the importance they attach to studying religious content at pre-school level.

In the case of analyses carried out according to the gender and residence of the respondents, there is no statistically significant difference in the importance given to religious education in kindergarten, even if the average rank is higher for male and rural respondents. The same conclusion is drawn from the analysis of data according to the age of respondents, which shows that among the different categories of respondents of different ages there are no statistically significant differences of opinion.

Another variable according to which the statistical analyses were made is the level of education of parents, the research data shows in this case that there are no significant differences of opinion regarding the importance given to the study of religion in kindergarten, even if there are some differences in terms of average ranks. The results confirm research data (Aran & Nayebkabir, 2018) suggesting that the occupation, social status and education level of parents do not significantly influence their attitude towards the achievement of their children's education. Although research data show that there are no statistically significant differences in parental choices, based on the socio-demographic variables mentioned, 75.2% of respondents believe that it is important to study religious content at pre-primary level, largely or to a very large extent. The results of previous

research (Toifur et al., 2022, Dura, 2019) are confirmed, showing the constant interest of parents for the success of religious education at preschool level.

Depending on the extension of the family, data shows that with the increase in the number of children, interest in religious education is also growing. So, we can conclude that more families value at a higher level, statistically significant, the importance of studying religious education in kindergarten, than families with only one child. Also, depending on the confession of the parents, there is a different, statistically significant valorization of the importance of studying religious education in kindergarten. The parents belonging to the Protestant and neoprotestant cults recorded the highest values. There is a difference between Orthodox and Catholic respondents, but it is not statistically significant. On the other hand, between those of orthodox and catholic religion and those of protestant/neoprotested religion there are statistically significant differences in favor of those of protestants/neoprotestants. The results confirm the significant influence of family and confessional factors in the transmission of religious values between generations (Smith, 2021).

The investigation of parents' motivations for studying religious elements in kindergarten by children shows as a priority the moral motivation, which parents value due to its immediate, tangible character, but which responds to the greatest extent also the pre-school education goals in Romania, mentioned in the Curriculum for early education (Ministerul Educaţiei Naţionale, 2019). In the context in which the most recent research shows that it is very important to focus on educating the character of children (Oliveira et al., 2025), it was analyzed whether there are statistically significant differences between the moral motivation of parents and the other types of motivations (religious and educational-cultural). The data show parents' preference for moral-religious behavior in children, rather than developing an affective and cognitive relationship with God.

Recent research data show the role of positive intrinsic motivation (Cataya Rodriguez, 2025; Pop & Pop, 2019) as a key factor for studying religious elements in kindergarten by children and indicate this concern for the formation of moral behavior in the child as being highly discussed at present (Söldner & Paulus, 2025). We therefore considered it necessary to continue the data analysis to highlight with statistical data the opinions of parents on the possibilities of achieving religious education in preschoolers (Hannam, 2024). Respondents prefer the statistically significant religious option in relation to religious thematic projects and inviting people to talk to children about God.

The difficulties that may arise in the realization of religious education in kindergarten, when an optional is made, have also been investigated. Respondents confirm recent research findings showing that the most significant challenges are related to the educational context and religious diversity in a context where contemporary society increasingly expects cultural benefits from this dimension of education (Grümme, 2019; Parker, 2021). The data show statistically significant differences, the agreement for organizing an optional is considered essential compared to the lack of material support, organizational difficulties, the need to respect cultural diversity and the lack of institutional support. The results indicate that the choice of the theme for an option with a religious theme in kindergarten, in a multiconfessional community, raises a greater difficulty in comparison with the lack of material support, possible organizational problems or institutional support. Recent research data is confirmed (Poulter, 2025) showing the major need to adapt the context of religious education achievement at preschool age to the multicultural and multiconfessional peculiarities of the community, as well as to identify teaching strategies that can support the achievement of the formative goals of this classical dimension of education (Essomba et al., 2023; Hyde, 2023).

Directions for research development

A recommendation for the development of research is to conduct a comparative study between the perceptions of parents, educators and educational decision makers on religious education in kindergarten (Hidayatun et al., 2025; Santi & Santi 2014). It would also be useful to investigate the concrete impact of religious activities in kindergartens on the moral and socio-emotional development of children, which could support with new research data teachers and kindergarten management in carrying out such educational activities. Another important direction may be to conduct qualitative studies (interviews, focus groups) to capture more in depth the arguments, dilemmas and experiences of parents, which can then be an additional support in the design of didactic activities with a significant formative character (Stan & Opriş, 2025). Future research could also look at regional differences in the perception of religious education according to the local confessional context, as well as the development of methodological guides adapted to religious education in multicultural contexts. In addition, one can analyze international models of good practice in teaching religion at an early age, with the purpose of substantiating coherent and applicable educational policies in the Romanian system and in educational systems in spaces with similar socio-cultural values and models.

Limits of research

We acknowledge that the use of convenience sampling limits the generalizability of the results and may introduce selection bias. However, since the questionnaire was administered while respecting geographic representativeness, the study provides relevant insights into Romanian parents' perceptions regarding the implementation of religious education in kindergarten. The questionnaire included closed-ended items, which limited the possibility for nuanced expression of opinions. In future studies, we plan to expand using stratified or randomized samples, and to further enhance the representativeness of the conclusions, we will incorporate both qualitative data and additional analyses. Also, the method of data collection – online questionnaire – can exclude parents with limited access to the Internet or with a low level of digital literacy. At the same time, the research is based solely on opinions provided by parents, not including the perspective of teachers or children, which limits the full understanding of the interest in religious and moral training at early age. The high percentage of responses from mothers reflects the reality of their significantly greater involvement in kindergarten-family partnerships in Romania (Dura, 2019). Nevertheless, we consider that the responses reflect the opinions of the entire family regarding the aspects under investigation, as the questionnaire was distributed through parents' social media networks, which most often include both parents, not just mothers. Last but not least, the multiconfessional and multicultural context of kindergartens in Romania is very variable, and the data obtained do not capture in detail these regional or local differences.

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Informed Consent Statement | *Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.*

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