

RELIGIOUS AND MORAL VALUES IN HUMANISING PRE-SCHOOL AND PRIMARY SCHOOL EDUCATION IN BULGARIA

Abstract: *The moral and ethical dimensions of the social reality of which we are a part are characterised by a dynamic influenced by various objective and subjective factors. The dramatic progress in the development of the modern world in the third decade of the 21st century confronts us with the need to uphold timeless human values. This is a way to resist the destructive forces of interpersonal and international conflicts, criminality and soullessness. Appropriate strategies are needed to act effectively in the face of unpredictable reversals in individual and societal development. This paper pays special attention to the specific content-related and organisational-technological characteristics of religious education for children of pre-school and primary school age within the context of the Bulgarian educational system. The aim is to reveal the educational potential of religious values and their role in the humanisation of the pedagogical process in Bulgarian pre-school and school institutions.*

Key words: *religious education, ethics, morality, moral-ethical values, humanisation of the pedagogical process*

ВЕРСКО-МОРАЛНЕ ВРЕДНОСТИ У ХУМАНИЗОВАЊУ ПРЕДШКОЛСКОГ И ОСНОВНОГ ОБРАЗОВАЊА У БУГАРСКОЈ

Сажетак: *Моралне и етичке димензије друштвене стварности, чији смо део, карактерише динамика која је под утицајем различитих објективних и субјективних фактора. Драматичан напредак у развоју савременог света у трећој деценији XXI века суочава нас са потребом подржавања ванвременских људских вредности. То је начин да се одупremo деструктивним силама интерперсоналних и међународних сукоба, злочина и бездушности. Потребне су одговарајуће стратегије да би се деловало ефикасно у суочавању са непредвидивим преокретима у индивидуалном и друштвеном развоју. Овај рад обраћа посебну пажњу на специфичне садржаје и организационо-техничке карактеристике веронауке за децу предшколског и основношколског узраста у контексту бугарског образовног система. Циљ је да се открије образовни потенцијал верских вредности и њихова улога у хуманизацији педагошког процеса у бугарским предшколским и основношколским установама.*

Кључне речи: *веронаука, етика, морал, морално-етичке вредности, хуманизација педагошког процеса.*

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Humanisation of the pedagogical process - in terms of historical dynamics

Pedagogical practice and its theoretical reflection in today's world, as in centuries past, are characterised by a constant search for the pedagogical potential and ideological intensity of the complex reality of "pedagogical communication". In pedagogical interaction, as the basic mechanism for the realisation of the "great sacrament" of truly valuable learning, the right "keys" are always sought for the doors of knowledge of the world opened to the learner. In connection with the problem of humanisation of the pedagogical process discussed in this paper, we make a fully justified and clear reference to the philosophical, social, and pedagogical views of J. A. Comenius.

Contemporary humanistic approaches to educational practice would not be fully grounded without the support of the high value of ideas that have emerged in a world as *distant* and yet as *close* as that of *Comenius*. Distant - in the formal and material dimensions of time and space, but close - in the ideas that continue to excite educators and inspire searching minds to discover the right strategies for educating children.

We devote special attention to pansphyia, whose ideas permeate all the works of the great pedagogical thinker. Humanism and Pansphygia are the basis of Comenius' social and pedagogical views. The way in which humanist and pan-Sophist ideas are woven into Comenius's coherent pedagogical system is impressive. The scholar managed to raise to a new level the ideas of the humanists who had preceded him in the Renaissance, as well as the ideas of encyclopaedism that were widespread in the seventeenth century.

The great pedagogical thinker developed, in a unique way and with astonishing consistency, ideas that became the basis for many ideas in the science of education in the following centuries. One of Comenius' most striking thoughts on the great purpose of education – "*Man is the highest, the most absolute, and the most excellent of things created*" - is charged with extraordinary optimism and humanism. The thoughts and actions of the great educator are far more prescient, they transcend the time and space in which they were conceived, and they still ring modern and have not lost their inspiring meaning.

According to Comenius, the right behaviour of man is based on the right understanding of everything that exists. The source of knowledge is the triple light: "the eternal - divine wisdom, the earthly - natural, and the inner – man's reason and will" (Piskunov, 1982: 22). In *The Great Didactic*, Comenius passionately urges that the process of education should form a consciousness and behaviour based on all human virtues - wisdom, temperance, manliness, perseverance in work, justice, honesty, etc. - should be formed. This is possible, according to the educational thinker,

if children are influenced from a very early age by instruction, guidance supported by concrete deeds. In our peculiar “dialogue” with Comenius on the problems related to the development of moral-ethical values, we find many points of contact with the modern understanding of the content and technology of the entire educational process. For moral education, the great pedagogue stresses the special importance of the moral behaviour of the educator, but also of the examples that can be taken from history and classical literature. Increasingly related to moral education are Comenius’s thoughts on the great importance of discipline. He ironically said: “A school without discipline is like a mill without water” (Comenius, *Great Didactics*, XXIII, 17). Comenius reflected his basic ideas about the moral guidance of students in *The Laws of a Well-Organised School*, and in *Rules of Conduct Collected for Adolescents* in 1653. The astonishing foresight of an extraordinary mind ahead of his time is the legacy we enjoy today, and we continue to seek its projections in the theory and practice of modern education.

The analysis of the current state of the problem of the formation of moral-ethical values and humanisation of the pedagogical process in modern educational institutions would not be complete if we did not turn our attention to some of the brightest ideas of the late 20th century, which were expressed in the pedagogical space by Shalva Amonashvili. With boundless love for children, Amonashvili’s work presents an astonishing approach to childhood, learning and children’s education. He shows and proves how love, respect, and challenge for the child can support its overall development in a wonderful way and how incredible results can be achieved with all children, according to their individual characteristics. His pedagogical works are filled with such natural curiosity about the child and such concern for his welfare that the reader begins to think that the complex science of education has other, very attractive dimensions. They are highly scientific without being offensively didactic. This is the other face of pedagogy, which has always excited the loving educator who seeks untrodden paths to his pupils. Sh. Amonashvili considers the establishment of human relations in the educational process as an indispensable condition for the success of learning and cognitive activity of students. “In the atmosphere of love, benevolence, trust, empathy, respect the student willingly and easily accepts the learning-cognitive task” (Amonashvili, 1990: 179).

Sh. Amonashvili identifies a number of starting points that seem to be fundamental for the establishment of human relations between the educator and his students, as well as between the students themselves. He points to the need for the management of education and the whole school to be tailored to the interests of the learners. “To elevate the student to the pedagogically organised environment” (Amonashvili, 1990: 180) - emphasised by the great pedagogue as an effective strategy for efficient education and training, taking into account the needs and potential of the child’s personality.

Another important condition for the humanisation of the pedagogical process is the constant manifestation of faith in the abilities and perspectives of each student. No less important is the cooperation between the educator and the pupils. The child's personal self-esteem and confidence in his or her strengths and abilities are supported. Ethics in relations with the pupil, respect and support of his personal dignity Sh. Amonashvili also points out the necessary conditions for the human image of the school and the educational process. This is possible by establishing mutual trust; increasing the authority of each pupil in the class community and in the family; constantly forming and maintaining mutual respect and ethics of relations in the children's collective; taking great interest in the passions, interests and activities of each pupil (Amonashvili, 1990: 187-189). Amazingly clear messages, told in a completely understandable way, without showing even a drop of superiority of the scientist over those to whom they are addressed - present and future teachers. In this modest way, one can see the genius of a mind whose strength lies above all in love and faith in the child and its possibilities.

The humanistic educational paradigm has its deep historical roots in philosophical cognition and emphasises the conscious and creative role of human beings and human relations in the integrity of the spiritual and material world. "In methodological terms, humanisation and democratisation have a general scientific character, as a socio-pedagogical phenomenon they are one of the most important manifestations of subject-subject relations between the participants of the pedagogical process, serve to establish harmonious interaction with nature, society and other people" (Smantser, Rangelova, 2011: 8) The humanisation of education can be considered at different levels: *social* - related to the understanding of the humane orientation of education; *pedagogical* - places emphasis on the content and procedural-technological characteristics of training and education, in accordance with the latest achievements of science and pedagogy in particular, providing the most supportive environment for learners; *personal* - raises the value, uniqueness and individual potential of the learner for self-construction, self-construction.

Moral and ethical values in the context of contemporary philosophical, social and pedagogical research

Values as a norm for preferred, incentivised, socially approved behaviour and action are present in the publications of several contemporary researchers. As a result, they are characterised by both constancy and dynamism, which determine their nature and specificity. *The unchanging, the constant*, can be commented on in the context of defining the content characteristic of the concept. One of the researchers in this field, Milton Rokich (1973), associated them with ideal ways of behaving or achieving ultimate goals according to personal beliefs,

preferences and convictions. The above is also related to the individual value system – “an enduring organisation of beliefs” that determines a person’s behaviour according to his or her conceptions of the meaning of existence (according to Todorova, 2012: 99). Other famous names using and defining the concept of value are Schwartz, 1992; Triandis, 1995, Feather, 1992; Olson & Zanna, 1993, Maio & Olson, 1994. According to Schwartz, values are desirable common goals that serve as guiding principles of varying importance for human life (cited in Garvanova, Papazova, 2016: 105).

The dynamism of values stems from the fact that they are associated with different stages of human development and with different aspects of human life. It is also necessary to take into account the change in individual and collective values according to the social situation, as well as their relationship with science, culture, politics, etc. A person’s behaviour is guided by his or her value system, which reveals his or her attitudes and motives. Values are also related to a person’s reactions, emotions, perceptions and actions **in** and **towards** their environment, centred on themselves and their idea of right/wrong, good/bad, true/false, forbidden/allowed, just/unjust.

Awareness of these concepts and processes is essential at an early age, when the child gets to know himself/herself, perceives the variety of objects and phenomena in nature, orientates in social relations and interactions. This is the period when the child can and should perceive himself as a value by others, as well as build a valuable attitude to everything that surrounds him (Dzhorova, 2018). The discovery and awareness of the meaning, significance, role of any object, subject, or phenomenon and its definition as a value determine the actions and reactions towards it. The right strategy for effective behaviour is based on generally accepted virtues such as: respect, love, compassion, empathy, fostered by a sense of community and sharing.

The aim of any educational institution should be to educate and develop learners to become good members of society. Therefore, values and character education is a necessity that plays a vital role in shaping a responsible, empathetic and ethical generation of the future (Hermawan, Kusniasari, 2023; Marquez, Florendo, 2023). Fostering values and strong character is beneficial in creating individuals who are not only academically intelligent, but also have a strong personality, good ethics and integrity in their actions. Some important effects of this type of educational influence and interaction can be outlined. *Strong moral development* helps to understand right and wrong in depth, thus strengthening the moral foundation of the individual. This also helps in making right decisions in various life situations. In addition, character education helps to form positive attitudes and values in individuals, thus influencing their behaviour in the future (in Hermawan, Kusniasari, 2023). It is also seen as a compass for making decisions that not only benefit the individual but also contribute positively to the

wider community (in Hermawan, Kusniasari, 2023). *Improved leadership* cultivates strong leadership skills as young people learn to set a positive example for others and lead with integrity, inspiring and motivating those around them. The development of empathy and social concern increases empathy for the feelings and needs of others, influences attitudes towards diversity and fosters concern for social welfare. *Increased resilience* is associated with mental and emotional stability, i.e. young people learn to overcome challenges with integrity and to face obstacles that may arise along the way with courage. *Promoting responsibility* is associated with the child taking responsibility for actions, considering their impact on themselves, others and the environment. Improving interpersonal relationships helps to build healthy and respectful relationships with others. This creates a positive social environment within the educational setting and in the wider social environment. *Preparing for a successful future* provides a solid foundation for success in professional and personal life by developing reliable, honest and quality individuals (Hermawan, Kusniasari, 2023).

In the context of our study, it is worth reiterating that many religious teachings emphasize the values and virtues that guide human behavior and support decision-making. This underlines the essential role of moral and ethical values in religious education and their crucial importance for children's development. Concerning the integration of RE into the overall educational process, it can be noted that there is a place for programs that draw attention to the religious, moral, and ethical dimensions of education (Hyde, 2024). Today's global society implies interaction in a multicultural and multi-religious environment in almost every human activity, including education. Moral education helps the child to navigate in the globalised world, retain or reject values, and make sense of his or her environment. According to M. Kyuchukova, "religion, through its sacred-mystical, communicative and moral-ethical function, fulfils its social role by marking the values necessary to guarantee peace and stability of our coexistence" (Kyuchukova, 2022: 184).

The focus of this article is the influence of religious values on the humanisation of the pedagogical process. The logical question is: What should be the place of religious values in the pedagogical process in order to contribute to the change of the world's attitude to the child and the child's attitude to the world? The new millennium is supposed to bring a globalised world in which "anyone can be anyone", regardless of culture or nationality. The only prerequisite must be the ability of the individual to contribute efficiently and effectively to the development of human society by sharing a set of core values. The educational process that takes place in a national context is expected to have a genuine openness to the world, to values and challenges beyond the national monoculture. Education itself is a process with internationalisation tendencies, which can mean "broadening and enriching the curriculum, building bridges between cultures" (in Niculescu, Norel,

2013: 338-339). This statement is supported by the thesis of J. Horowski (2020), according to which the support of the moral development of the child is linked, on the one hand, to the family or religious community and, on the other hand, to the school as an educational institution. The school is the place where the child meets people who do not belong to his family or his immediate community. In this institution, he or she has to cooperate with people from different cultural and religious backgrounds. In the period of schooling, moral virtues are crucial for the further functioning of a person in the public sphere and for the effective performance of his professional tasks.

Moral and ethical values have a significant and multifaceted impact on individual development. In terms of *social cohesion*, they foster a sense of unity and understanding by encouraging people to work together. They help individuals to *make ethical choices* that contribute to the functioning of a moral society. They contribute to *personal growth*, the strengthening of character and the development of emotional intelligence. Moral and ethical values are an integral part of the formation of a well-developed personality capable of making a positive contribution to society (Ambrose, Arnaud, & Schminke, 2008; Schinkel & de Ruyter, 2017).

Also of interest is the question of how teachers can integrate moral values through religious education. Incorporating values such as love, integrity, compassion and humility into daily interactions with children in the educational setting undoubtedly contributes to the *character development* of learners. *Dialogue and sharing of real life* experiences promotes openness in relationships and provides an opportunity to learn about the diverse religious structure of society (Suryani, Muslim, 2024).

The theoretical review on the issue of moral and ethical values in religious education and their role in the process of humanisation of the pedagogical process has conclusively proved that there is an increased interest in this issue in the pedagogical space. The results of a number of scientific studies confirm the relevance and importance of the topic under consideration, which is the subject of research and analysis within the framework of our survey conducted in the current year 2024.

Building moral and ethical values through religious education - empirical dimensions

The aim of the empirical research we have carried out is to identify and analyse the opportunities and challenges of educating moral-ethical values through the teaching of religion and to explore its place in the humanisation of the pedagogical process in educational institutions - kindergarten and primary schools. This report analyses only some of the data obtained in the course of the survey, which are most closely related to the stated topic.

A 16-question survey was structured for the study and distributed to current teachers and pre-service students. We assumed that there would be no differences in the attitudes of the two main groups of respondents - teachers and students - future teachers, i.e. that the presence of teaching experience would not influence their position on the role of religious education in the process of building moral-ethical values. A total of 41 teachers participated in the study, 28 of them in kindergarten and 13 in high school. 62 students of the Faculty of Pedagogy of the South-West University "Neofit Rilski", who are studying at the undergraduate and graduate level, also took part in the survey. All respondents stated that their participation was voluntary, that they understood the purpose of the survey, and that they agreed to the results being used for scientific purposes. The largest relative proportion of respondents was in the 19-29 age group (37%), followed by the 29-39 age group (30%) and the 39-49 age group (24%). The 49-59 age group (6%) and the 60+ age group (3%) were also represented in the survey.

It is worth noting the values that, according to the respondents, characterise today's society. 61% of respondents gave their opinion. A colourful palette of responses emerges, which in their entirety support our reflections in the theoretical review on moral and ethical values. The respondents' position on the values of contemporary society can be summarised as follows:

- Values that can contribute to the well-being of society and nature were mentioned by 41% of respondents. The frequency of the choices shows the values that are important to them: morality (11), respect (9), tolerance and love (8), compassion, honesty and kindness/goodness (5), empathy, justice and understanding (3), empathy, faith, freedom (2). The values mentioned once also outline the whole range of personal opinions - humanity, dignity, trust, responsibility, wisdom, sincerity, honour, good behaviour, integrity, cooperation, education, initiative, generosity.
- Values focused on personal wellbeing and that of loved ones were identified by 32% of respondents. Nine of them believe that leadership in today's society is material - abundance, money, wealth, possessions; 8 of the answers are united around leadership, greatness, superiority, power and control; 2 - around popularity and fame. All the others are complementary: glamour, sexuality, vision, beauty, knowledge, creativity, sharing, gratitude, resourcefulness, self-realisation, personal happiness, individualism, honesty, self-esteem, family, laws, social adequacy, ambition, adaptability, creativity, health, courage, determination, optimism.
- Lack of values and/or those with leading negative characteristics were mentioned by 27% of respondents, with some clarifying comments: lack of harmony in communication and spirituality; high self-centredness, low self-esteem; disrespect, aggression, screen addiction; envy, greed, selfishness; fast money, popularity, unwillingness to work physically; devaluation

of all values. In the context of the problem of building moral-ethical values and humanising the educational process, the above data are very valuable for us. The sketched colourful picture of ideas, attitudes and values that dominate the life of society and relations between people gives us reason for optimism, because for the overwhelming majority of respondents' spirituality and timeless moral values are in the foreground. At the same time, the data reveals many negative trends in social life and the individual being and consciousness of modern man. There is a clear perception of a threatening advance of militant materialism and self-centredness that seeks to displace and devalue spiritual values in human life.

For 85% of respondents, religious education is a factor in the process of forming moral and ethical values, while 13% deny this. Two added that it could not be determined precisely and that it should not be. Respondents strongly accept that religious education for children should be organised in educational institutions (kindergarten and school) (78% - yes), but of course, some express a negative attitude (17% - no). Relatively few respondents (5%) specified their answers. They point out that such a subject *"should not be imposed, but rather be an opportunity to broaden general culture, general knowledge"*. They note that the introduction of religious education is *"a complex issue as our country is multi-religious, parental consent is important and in mixed areas with many Christians and Muslims it will be difficult"*.

The analysis of the answers of the respondents allows us to summarise that the teaching of religion in educational institutions will mainly contribute to the education of virtues such as empathy, compassion, respect, etc. (78%), will positively influence the child's behaviour (75%), will promote unity, understanding and cooperation in the group of children (74%), will contribute to the initial construction of the child's value system (72%).

It is possible that religious education can help a child to make good decisions and appropriate choices (60%). A small percentage of respondents (29%) were undecided and unable to judge whether it would be difficult for children from different religious communities to find a common basis of values (47% "no and rather no" versus 24% "yes and rather yes") and whether it would complicate the learning process due to different cultural norms as a result of globalisation (52% "no and rather no" versus 19% "yes and rather yes").

When asked about the Christian principles of morality and ethics and their role as a universal regulator of the moral behaviour of individuals, 23% believe this to be the case "to a great extent" and 64% are less clear, saying "to some extent" (Fig. 1). An overwhelming majority of teachers and students accept the moral and ethical norms of Christianity as an important regulator of human actions and relationships without excluding the influence of other factors.

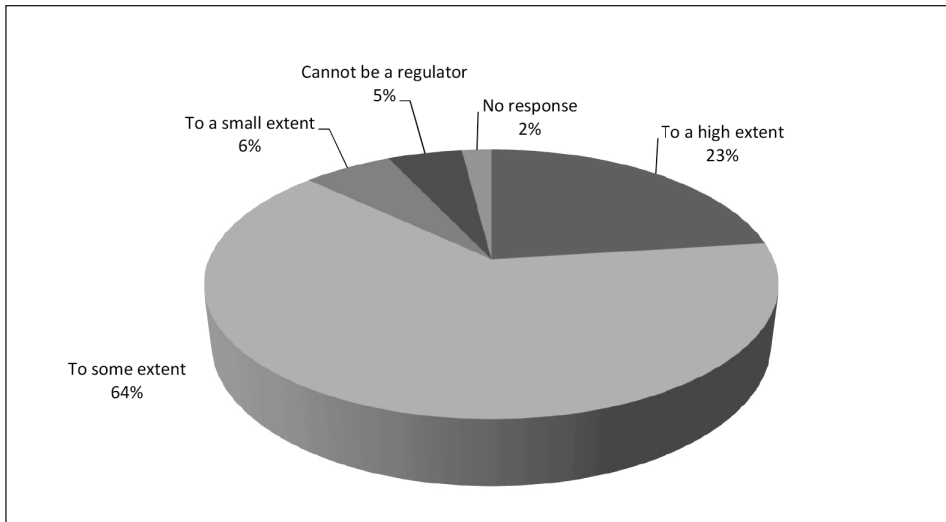


Figure 1. Distribution of respondents according to their opinion on the extent to which Christian principles of morality and ethics can be a universal regulator of the moral behaviour of individuals in modern society.

The role of the teacher, as discussed in the theoretical review, is also highlighted in the respondents' responses, which show that the teacher can integrate moral, ethical and religious values into his/her teaching practice by guiding children towards love, humility and integrity in everyday activities (90%), by encouraging interactions, exchanges and experiences in an ethnically, culturally and religiously diverse environment (80%). A large majority of respondents believed that this could also be done by teaching religious content in line with societal values (66%). Doubts and uncertainties were expressed about the teacher's ability to influence the child's values education by organising additional activities in partnership with legitimate religious institutions or their representatives (54% had a positive attitude, 32% could not judge, the remaining 14% had a negative attitude). Regarding "opening the doors" of the kindergarten/classroom to representatives of religious institutions, 42% of respondents give a positive answer, 37% cannot judge and 21% have a negative attitude. These data confirm the complexity of the problem of defining the content and organisational parameters of religious education. They also underline the difficult position in which the teacher finds himself when choosing approaches, methods and means. Also important is the question of the teacher's effective partnership with representatives of out-of-school institutions and organisations relevant to the child's education.

Of interest is the opinion of the respondents on the effectiveness of pedagogical approaches in the development of moral and ethical values in children of pre-school and primary school age.

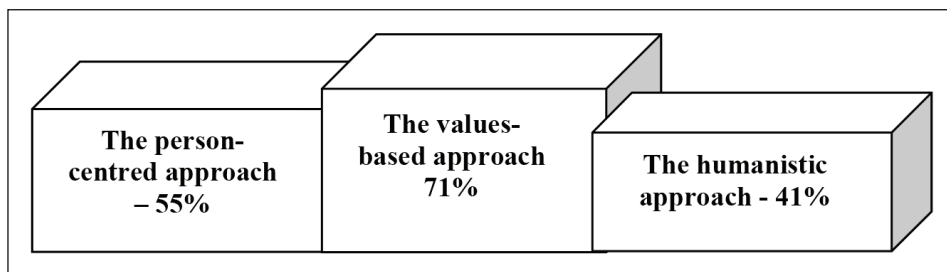


Figure 2. Pedagogical approaches in the development of moral and ethical values in children of pre-school and primary school age

The logic in this ranking can be sought in the nature of the approaches and the relationship to the problem under study (Fig. 2). *The values-based approach*, which focuses on the values and beliefs of the individual and their influence on decisions and actions, has its significant place in the education of moral-ethical values in children. *The person-centred approach* emphasises the importance of self-realisation and personal development through self-knowledge and self-improvement, which in turn support the development of individual values. *The humanistic approach* focuses on the overall well-being of the person and stresses the importance not only of the development of the individual's potential and self-fulfillment, but also of empathy. Equal percentages of respondents ranked the *activity and cultural approach* fourth (34%), with the *person-centered approach* (16%) and *holistic approach* (9%) identified as the least effective.

The survey data allow us to summarize that good personal example (94%), mutual respect and trust (93%), praise and rewards (86%) and emphasis on the child's experiences (85%) are the most important prerequisites in the process of forming moral-ethical values in the child. A not so large role is given to proactive behaviour (51% positive responses). Strict demands and guidance, reprimands and punishments were identified by 40% of respondents as undesirable and unnecessary in the process of building moral-ethical values.

Interaction with parents was considered successful by only 22% of respondents, while the majority (68%) considered it satisfactory. Considering the important place given by the respondents to parents and teachers in the process of formation of moral and ethical values, the above result arouses interest in exploring the possibilities of improving the interaction between teachers and parents for the formation of moral and ethical values in children.

Conclusion

From the point of view of historical dynamics, the ideas of humanisation and democratisation of education have not lost their relevance and importance and

continue to excite the minds and hearts of everyone professionally and personally-emotionally connected with the “art of education”. In pedagogical theory and practice, research enquiries encompass both the substantive and the procedural-technological sides of the issues at hand.

In summary, the following areas can be identified as requiring research efforts within the Bulgarian pedagogical context:

- To reveal the nature and importance of moral and ethical values and their role in the process of overall personality development;
- To search for effective pedagogical approaches, educational and instructional technologies, as well as appropriate methodological solutions for the development of moral attitudes and values in children and students within the Bulgarian educational system
- Exploring the possibilities of religious education for solving important problems related to the education, development and socialisation of modern children;
- Focused efforts to improve the interaction between educational institutions and the family, united by their common goal of the welfare of the child and the development of the young person;
- Opportunities for the thoughtful integration of the spiritual, moral and ethical messages of religion into the overall process of educating pre-school and school-age children in order to prepare young people for a full life in society;

The need to “build bridges” between the rational-scientific and the emotional-spiritual as two interrelated aspects of human existence, and to achieve a balance between them as a condition for the well-being of the individual and society.

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