

Psycho-Social Benefits of an Afterschool Program in Romania: Qualitative Analysis of Parental Perceptions

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Abstract

Keywords:

parental perceptions, afterschool, compassion-based education, focus group.

This study investigates in a qualitative manner the psychosocial benefits perceived by the parents of children enrolled in a private Afterschool (AS) program in Romania. The theoretical background includes aspects of school-family-community collaboration and characteristics and legislative frames supporting Afterschool programs in Romania and in the EU space. By using an online focus group approach, the objective was to identify the dimensions of the children-related benefits of the Afterschool program perceived by the parents (6 participants) at social, emotional and cognitive levels, as well as to identify their needs and suggestions regarding the compassion-based educational activities that the AS program might offer to their children. The results indicate a general satisfaction with the AS program, as well as the readiness of the parents to get involved in activities oriented towards community together with their children and the personnel of the AS program.

Zusammenfassung

Schlüsselworte:

elterliche Wahrnehmungen, Afterschool-Programm, mitfühlende Erziehung, Fokusgruppe.

Diese Studie untersucht auf qualitative Weise den psychosozialen Nutzen, den die Eltern von Kindern wahrnehmen, die an einem privaten Afterschool (AS)-Programm in Rumänien teilnehmen. Der theoretische Hintergrund umfasst Aspekte der Zusammenarbeit zwischen Schule, Familie und Gemeinschaft sowie Merkmale und rechtliche Rahmenbedingungen zur Unterstützung der Afterschool-Programme in Rumänien und im EU. Ziel war es, mithilfe eines Online-Fokusgruppen-Ansatzes die Dimensionen des kindbezogenen Nutzens des Afterschool-Programms zu ermitteln, die von den Eltern (6 Teilnehmer) auf sozialer, emotionaler und kognitiver Ebene wahrgenommen werden, sowie deren Bedürfnisse und Vorschläge zu identifizieren über die auf Mitgefühl basierenden Bildungsaktivitäten, die das AS-Programm ihren Kindern anbieten könnte. Die Ergebnisse zeigen eine allgemeine Zufriedenheit mit dem AS-Programm sowie die Bereitschaft der Eltern, sich gemeinsam mit ihren Kindern und dem Personal des AS-Programms für gemeinschaftsorientierte Aktivitäten zu engagieren.

1. Introduction

The partnership between school, family and community is one of the important aspects addressed by educational policies around the world. In Romania, according to the National Education Law no. 1/2011, parents are considered to be the main partners and beneficiaries of the educational process, so it is assumed that they should be involved in developing educational offerings for children, including extra-curricular activities and organizing afterschool programs. In the literature (for example, Epstein et al., 2009) it is considered that the involvement of parents in collaborating with the school can play a significant role in terms of education and socio-emotional

development of children. This cooperation can have positive effects for parents, teachers and community. An important role in supporting the process of the cooperative interactions between school, family and community is played by the educational counseling services, but also the psycho-pedagogical assistance offices. An optimal relationship between the three components is generally considered to bring an educational balance, allowing a positive approach to the education process and adaptive flexibility in changing societies (Cara, Bulat, & Globu, 2018).

The school-parents-community collaboration is expected to include relationships based on respect,

sympathy, mutual admiration and acceptance. In addition, it is considered that it must be based on understanding and collaboration in order to achieve a high level of quality of education in each school. Building this partnership is a deliberate action that is done with multiple efforts of the people involved. Some studies support the idea of effective partnership programs, which allow both active involvement in the education of children, but also the involvement of parents from all backgrounds regardless of socioeconomic status, membership or living environment (for example, Cankar, 2009).

2. Theoretical foundation

The development of an educational climate in which the children feel comfortable, accepted, understood and desired, is an important goal to be pursued, so that the learning and development can be achieved in optimal conditions. It is well known that positive interactions with teachers/caregivers can have lasting effects on the academic achievements of the children, but also on the development of social skills and emotional and behavioral self-regulation. According to a study conducted at Vanderbilt University, children who experienced more positive interactions with their peers and with their teachers (who spent most of their time reinforcing positive behaviors), developed significantly higher social skills compared to problematic behaviors (Farran, 2016). To create a positive climate in communication contexts, including educational ones, one of the important factors is the need of children for belongingness and social connectedness, which are associated with a safe environment.

According to a study by Broderick (2013), social and emotional well-being play a key role in achieving school success in children. It is emphasized that school success comes when cognitive skills work simultaneously, and these acquired skills can help the child manage stress, understand and manage emotions, feel and empathize with others, make responsible decisions and maintain positive relationships (Broderick, 2013). The caregiver/teacher can set goals to encourage an environment of trust and mutual respect in which the children feel confident enough to express feelings and thoughts, to encourage their social relationships, increasing the feeling of belonging to community or the adaptability to cope with certain emotional situations (Brown, 2012).

Afterschool Programs (AS)

According to a report published in 2016 by the Ministry of Education and Research in Romania, the afterschool program is defined as a complementary, structured program that offers both formal and informal learning opportunities, aiming to strengthen skills through educational and recreational activities. AS programs can be carried out either before or after the compulsory school program, depending on the schedule of each level of study. These types of programs have been around for more than a century, as Robert Halpern relates in his work (Gayl, 2004). According to the Order no. 5349 issued in Romania in September 7, 2011, amended by the Ministry of National Education (No. 4802/ 31.08.2017), in addition to the activities carried out within the AS program, the project of implementing at national level the AS programs targets several aspects, such as learning remediation, social integration, personal development, keeping students in a safe space etc., as an alternative to spending free time in environments with development potential that meet the needs of all students.

AS programs exist in various forms in different parts of the world, with the goal to provide children and young people with a safe place to spend outside the school hours. Such programs often come to meet the needs of the parents, who desire to have qualified support for their children in order to increase their school performance, personal development and talent cultivation. Moreover, in socio-economically disadvantaged communities, it has been found that such programs, funded and implemented by the state or by private institutions, can contribute substantially to increasing the well-being of the families of pupils (Gayl, 2004). Studies conducted internationally have highlighted the positive impact that such programs can have on children, i.e. if properly targeted and well implemented, AS programs contribute to increasing school performance and personal development of children (Weissberg & Durlak, 2007).

Official reports and statistics indicate that Romania is facing high dropout rates and early school leaving, despite efforts aiming to implement specific public policies addressing these problematic aspects (Eurostat, 2020). In Europe, in 2015, there were more than 4 million young people who left school early, of whom only 40% had found an occupation. According to data provided by Eurostat (Eurostat, 2020), Romania is the only country in the EU where the rate

of early school leave has increased, which is currently about 19.1%, double the EU average. Therefore, AS programs represent one of the measures that can be implemented to reduce the rates of school dropout and early school leave, also increasing the school performance and the well-being of the students (Petre, Arnăutu, Georoceanu, & Darie, 2013).

In Romania, the findings of several projects that aimed to reduce the risk of leaving school early (Tîncă & Dulman, 2012) highlight the fact that the activities of the AS programs usually take place in spaces specially designed and equipped with appropriate equipment and furniture, not in classroom settings, that do not always allow AS-program related activities. The special designated spaces for AS-programs allow the planning of activities on several areas of interest, in which the children can work individually but also in groups, in which they can assume responsibilities but can also develop a feeling of community belongingness. Regarding the involvement in the AS-related activities of all the parties, an integrated approach was developed, the interventions being addressed to parents, children, but also teachers. Teacher training included topics such as: communication, how to manage conflicts, differentiated approach to learning, methods and techniques of non-formal education, classroom management, etc. At the level of several schools, the AS programs also included a component of parental counselling in order to develop parenting skills among others. For example, in the model developed within the AS project implemented by Dâmbovița County School Inspectorate and its partners, parents benefited from counselling both individually and in small groups aimed at respecting the child's rights to develop healthy relationally, intellectually and emotionally (Tîncă & Dulman, 2012). Analyses carried out by the NGO's that piloted AS programs in Romania recommend this type of programs as being efficient in reducing the risk of dropping out of school (Petre, Arnăutu, Georoceanu, & Darie, 2013).

As indicated in several studies and reports, afterschool programs promote positive development and contexts for the prevention of problematic behaviours in children, by addressing several aspects, such as: consolidating various prosocial behaviours, pursuing values and goals, but also promoting psychological flexibility. In addition, AS-programs include strategies to promote self-regulation in relation to mental health, special education and child welfare, and strategies to promote alternative thinking,

such as social-emotional learning for emotional awareness and understanding of the rules (Cavoukian, 2018). We consider that parental awareness of the positive effects of AS-programs on the socio-emotional development of children and on the level of dropout is an important aspect of the school-family-community partnership.

3. Research methodology

General objective and research questions

The general objective of this study is to investigate the perceptions of parents of children enrolled in an afterschool program in Romania regarding the benefits of the program in various aspects of the quality of life of the children and of their families. The following research questions (RQ) were formulated: RQ1. What are parental perceptions of the afterschool activities in general? RQ2. What are the social, emotional and cognitive benefits perceived by parents? RQ3. What are parental suggestions for developing compassion for the needs of others and for the community in which they live?

Research participants

Participants were included based on convenience sampling, according to homogeneity criteria of the group, i.e. 6 parents of children from Ideo Academy Afterschool, Cluj Napoca, Romania, aged between 34 and 38 years (Table 1). Initially, a number of 10 subjects were approached, of which only 6 gave an affirmative answer for participating in the study, while the remaining 4 did not answer, or gave a negative answer supported by the lack of time to participate in it.

Table 1. The demographic characteristics of the participants.

Parent initials	Gender	Age	Family type	Number of family members	Level of education	Current profession
I.H	F	38	biparental	3	higher education	afterschool coordinator
I.Ș	F	34	biparental	3	higher education	freelancer photographer
S.K	F	38	biparental	4	higher education	economist
R.I.N	F	35	monoparental	2	higher education	accountant
Ș.R.L	F	38	biparental	3	higher education	economist
L.B	F	38	biparental	3	higher education	entrepreneur

Data collection

The method of online focus group was used in this research for data collection. The focus-group method does not have a clear or precise definition of the term

designating a variety of techniques (Carey, 1994). Broadly speaking, this focus group designates the realization of a built group that is focused on a certain theme. Merton, Fiske and Kendall (1940) legitimized it as a research technique in social psychology and later on, it became used at a large scale in marketing. In social sciences, it started to be used relatively recently in exploratory studies in medical research, education sciences, research conducted from feminist perspectives etc. The method comprises two distinct stages (I) Preparing the focus group and (II) Conducting the interview and recording the data, with several sub-stages (Stănciulescu, 2007).

Procedure

The group moderator (A.G.) proposed that participants voluntarily participate in a qualitative study and informed them about the subject of the questions and about the agreement regarding the recording of the session and collection of personal data. The moderator together with the participants agreed on a common date and time (the meeting took place online using the platform for connecting and recording the meeting: Whereby). When connecting to the meeting, but also before it (through informed consent) the participants were notified of the confidentiality of the data provided. The collection of personal data was carried out using Google forms questionnaire in which each participant in the study provided demographic data such as age, profession, and family composition (number of members). They were also informed about the number of questions to be asked and the need to answer each of them honestly, the time allotted for each question (approximately 3-5 min), and that there are no correct or wrong answers, i.e. each answer or all experiences/opinions are equally valuable.

The questions formulated during the online focus group meeting were chosen according to the degree of their relevance for the topic of the afterschool program:

Q1: "Why did you choose an afterschool program for your child?" This is a general question that refers to the perception of parents and why they decided to choose such a program for their child.

Q2: "What do you think are the most important activities they have in this type of program? Name the 3 most important of these from your point of view." This question aims to find out the hierarchy of activities carried out within the AS program from the

point of view of parents but also possible arguments for which they are in the top of important activities for their children.

Q3: "How safe do you think this type of program is for your child? What are your fears and thoughts?" This question leads to an introspective analysis of the thoughts and fears that parents have about the program and implicitly their child.

Q4: "Which of the activities at Ideo Academy do you think bring the most social, emotional and cognitive benefits to your child?" This is a general question regarding the specifics of play and learning activities within the program that can facilitate social, emotional and cognitive plans through curiosity, exploration, manifestation of feelings, desire for knowledge, etc.

Q5: "Ideo-Academy offers, as you know, programming courses for the little ones but also creative-educational activities. What would you suggest we include in these activities to develop children's compassion for the needs of those around them and for the community in which they live?" This question aims to highlight the importance of developing compassion in children and to generate answers through which this skill could be developed and included in the environment of which they are part.

Q6: "Do you have any suggestions for activities in which you could get involved as a parent in the afterschool program?" This question concerns the expression by parents of their willingness to get involved in the afterschool program taking into account values such as patience, compassion, etc. It aims to initiate the planning of parent-child-educator activities in an emotionally secure space, in which the child is the main beneficiary.

Data analysis

The verbal responses recorded in the focus group were transcribed verbatim. The content analysis method used is the one described by Erlingsson & Brysiewicz (2017), with the following three steps: text transcription, text condensation by identifying units of meaning (codes), identifying themes and categories. According to the authors, content analysis is a method often used in qualitative research, allowing the exploration of reflections in the direction of identifying meaningful information from the life experiences of the interviewees.

4. Results

The results of the qualitative analysis are presented according to the questions posed during the focus group.

Q1: *Why did you choose an afterschool program for your child?*

The analysis of the answers received from parents indicates that most parents decided to choose an afterschool program in response to personal problems, such as lack of time and investments they did not want to make in a nanny, but also due to the perceived benefits of the program on the development of their children. They describe the AS program as being a safe learning space, an environment for social interaction and spending quality time with qualified staff who pay attention to the emotions, conflict resolution, safety and questions of children while pursuing academic development through foreign languages, programming and other creative-educational activities. Performing a frequency analysis of the occurrence of the answers, we can see that 2/6 share the same opinion on the decision to choose such a program. The codes to identify parents' perception related to the afterschool program were grouped into three categories, with several subcategories (Table 2).

Table 2. Coding and categorization of the responses to Q1.

Theme	Category	Subcategories	Codes
Afterschool program choice decision	Safe learning space/ environment		"The fact that it is in a safe, organized environment." L.B.
			"A good environment for him to unleash his imagination." L.B.
	Social interaction		"Plus it interacts and socializes." Ș.R.L
			"I knew he would have more children from his class, which is an advantage." Ș.L.R
			"I really wanted him to be surrounded by children: to be able to observe, to see what social interaction means, to figure out what are the right rules to interact with other children" L.B.
	Child benefit		"I really wanted to belong to a group." I.Ș
		Learning through play	"It's all through play and I think that's very nice" S.K.
		Socialization	"Learn everything through play" I.Ș
			"For us it was more the socializing part" L.B.
	Parent benefit	Quality time	
			"We opted for this option in which he spends quality time supervised by someone who takes care of them" S.K.
Time restrictions			"Our work would not allow us to go and pick up the child from school" S.K.
			"Because the work schedule did not allow us to take the child out at 12:00." Ș.R.L
Investing in nannies		"First and foremost for time." I.H.	
Program features	Child management		"First of all, because of the schedule, my job." R.I.N
			"He can spend quality time supervised by someone who takes care of the children and not just some nannies who could just walk him in the park and bring him home" S.K.
	Working with emotions		"Sitting at home, in the yard with the nanny, he wouldn't have learned so much." L.B.
			"We know what it's like to manage children a little differently." R.I.N
	Transport safety	"Attention to emotions." R.I.N	
	Attractive program		"The minibus doesn't leave until all the children are secured with seat belts, that's why we turned to an authorized child transport company." I.H.
			"I found the program very beautiful." S.K.
Foreign languages		"Many other extra options very nice for them." R.I.N	
		"I really liked the fact that it covers two foreign languages: English and German." S.K.	
Coding for kids		"Two foreign languages." Ș.R.L	
		"The fact that I do a little basic programming." S.K.	
Outdoor activities		"Plus programming." Ș.R.L	
		"That you have all kinds of activities, that you go out a lot with them." S.K.	
		"Plus the fact that they're going out." Ș.R.L	

Q2: *What do you think are the most important activities they have in this type of program? Name three most important of these from your point of view.*

The answers indicate the parents' propensity to choose activities related to the academic environment, mainly those activities related to the harmonious and beneficial development of the children, such as time spent outside, socializing and diversity of play. Parents indicated that the children feel part of a group, learn social rules together and learn a lot through playing. Performing a frequency analysis of the occurrence on the answers provided by parents, we can see that 3/6 share the same opinion on the order in which they describe the most important activities of the program. Following the analysis, the codes were grouped into eight categories (Table 3).

Table 3. Coding and categorization of the answers to Q2.

Theme	Category	Codes	
Important activities of the program	Creative activities	"Creative activities, whatever you draw, collages, she really likes these." S.K.	
	Socialization	"Through socializing we actually played and that seems very nice to me" S.K.	
			"Learn how to communicate, play in a team, work in a team" I.Ș
			"Activities, socializing, are very important to them." Ș.R.L
	Time spent outside	"They are all nice kids and I'm glad they socialize" I.H.	
			"And going out" S.K.
	Foreign languages	"For me, it's important that you go out with them, that you stay out with them as much as possible, I think that's a plus." L.B.	
			"I also like the fact that I go out, I spend time and time outside." Ș.R.L
		"I have to connect with foreign languages, it seems to me that he is learning without realizing that he has something to do." S.K.	
The diversity of the game	"I can't support the german side and the fact that they learn german there helps us a lot." I.H.		
		"The fact that you play really well with them and learn all kinds of games." S.K.	
School-related tasks	"The way you play with them and learn everything through play" I.Ș		
		"It's clear that something very beautiful is happening there, since every time we go to pick up the children we have to wait for them outside for a while because they are never ready to leave" Ș.R.L	
Time management	"The most useful thing is that they do their homework there" S.K.		
		"We took it as a minus for us as parents that we didn't have enough time to go with them to those places." L.B.	
Parental benefit	"If we had to do homework with them in the evening with them, it would be a disaster." S.K.		
	"Somehow I would have liked to do this with them, but I'm glad you do it" L.B.		

Q3: *How safe do you think this type of program is for your child? What are your fears and thoughts?*

Parents provided a large amount of information regarding the fears they face and less revealed thoughts regarding the safety of the program. Regarding the safety of the child during transport by car during trips, most parents expressed that the fear decreased after receiving information from the staff on safety procedures during transportation, but also in the event of injuries. Performing a frequency analysis of

the appearance on the answers provided by parents, we can see that 4/6 choose to share their fears about the program and only 2 of them consider that the program is a completely safe space / place for learning and development. Following the analysis, the codes were grouped into two categories with several subcategories (Table 4).

Table 4. Coding and categorization of the answers to Q3.

Theme	Category	Subcategories	Codes
Safety of the Afterschool Program	Fears	Crisis management	"What are your first aid procedures?" L.B. "If a child gets injured, whom do you call, do you have a first aid kit, can you give first aid...and other safety issues" L.B.
		Closing decisions	"My only fear is to not letting you keep working (due to the pandemic)" S.K. "I always think about what D. would do if the afterschool closed" Ş.R.L
		Adaptability to new environment	"My only fear was if he would adapt, if he would get along with the other children" Ş.R.L
		Change	"I wont change the afterschool, do you understand?" Ş.R.L
		Child safety during transport	"When I went by bus, I was wondering if A. was going to stay put" I.Ş "It gave me a lot of confidence that the staff sent us pictures of how the children board, how they stay in the bus, for me, I think it's safe" R.I.N
	Thoughts	The child's motivation for afterschool	"I can honestly say that I didn't expect him to tell me that he really likes him and that he wants to keep going on the first or second day when I take him out." Ş.R.L

Q4: Which of the activities that take place within Ideo Academy do you consider to bring the most benefits to your child? In terms of social, emotional and cognitive levels?

Table 5. Coding and categorization of the answers to Q4.

Theme	Category	Subcategories	Codes
Benefits of the program	Emotional	Attachment	"It seems to me that you miss them over the weekends" S.K. "He already has an attachment to you" S.K.
		Trust	"When D. has a problem, he trusts you to tell you; he knows that together you will find a solution." Ş.R.L "I see her much more confident and much calmer." S.K.
		Positive emotions	"I see she's happy." S.K. "She's in such great shape" S.K.
		Emotional and behavioral regulation	"It seems to me that the program raised her a lot emotionally" S.K.
	Cognitive	Communication	"She's super excited that she has new friends with whom she gets along, with whom you share your toys and her time there" R.I.N
		Troubleshooting	"I appreciate the way you relate to them and for the way you show them that they can solve problems" L.B.
	Social	Accumulation of knowledge	„T. comes home with a lot of information, new games, songs" R.I.N "He talks a lot, he tells us many new words" Ş.R.L "Clearly german is super important to us and it can be seen that it is deepening very well." Ş.R.L
		Social behaviors/ Interpersonal relationships	"It was such an oasis in which he managed to socialize a lot there with his children, to make friends." S.K. "The fact that you call us and talk and somehow in parallel we try to keep an eye on the whole thing" R.I.N
		Conflict resolution/ Normative behaviors	"I really wanted him to be able to observe, to be able to figure out what are the right rules to interact with other." L.B. "When there are conflicts between children, you get involved and try to make them understand" R.I.N. "For me, the part of your involvement in the conflicts between them is very important." R.I.N
		Gentle education	"I think it's great that you're super open and leave them and don't annoy them." R.I.N. "The gentle education you are promoting" L.B.

After qualitatively analysing the answers, it appears that the parents had more easily identified the benefits on cognitive and social levels compared to the emotional dimension. They stated that they would need a longer amount of time to be able to identify all the emotional benefits of the program. Parents refer to the gentle education achieved through the program, compassion-based education, interdisciplinary curriculum development and community learning, expressing gratitude to educators for the way these aspects are approached. After the analysis, the codes were grouped into three categories with the related subcategories (Table 5).

Q5: Ideo-Academy offers, as you know, programming courses for the little ones but also creative-educational activities. What would you suggest that we include in these activities to develop children's compassion for the needs of those around them and for the community in which they live?

It is noted that most parents have specified donations and volunteering as the main action for the development of compassion. Parents approached in a unitary way the activities oriented towards people, conservation of the environment, community but also those oriented towards animals. Their answers uniformly complete the four categories, while they requested other ideas/ suggestions to come from the educators regarding the development of their child's compassion. They indicated that attention should be paid to small actions with high impact on the ecological literacy, adapted to their needs and age. Following the analysis, the codes were grouped into four categories with the related subcategories (Table 6).

Table 6. Qualitative analysis of the responses offered to Q5.

Theme	Category	Subcategories	Codes
Suggestions for developing compassion	Community-oriented activities	No direct contact with the beneficiary	"Yeah, I'd say donations" Ş.R.L "Donate for Christmas and mak little things to sell later" S.K.
		Direct contact with the beneficiary	"To go to a nursing home or a puppy shelter to volunteer" L.B.
Suggestions for developing compassion	Environmental conservation activities		"Activities related to ecology: selective collection or care for plants and everything around us" Ş.R.L "More efficient use of resources, managing of waste" L.B. "Small greening actions can be done in the park" L.B. "To draw their attention to the way the bank of the Someş looks, which means pollution; teaching them to care for the environment and everything around us, all on a much smaller scale and adapted to their needs and understanding capacities" L.B.

Q6: *Do you have any suggestions for activities in which you could get involved as a parent in the afterschool program?*

Parents expressed willingness to get involved in the activities of the afterschool program by proposing visits, thematic days, volunteering, but focusing mainly on involvement in creative activities. Most parents stated that they can come with ideas and proposals for activities, but at the same time, they also emphasized the insufficient time they have to organize them. Following the analysis, the codes were grouped into five categories (Table 7).

Table 7. Coding and categorization of the responses to Q6.

Theme	Category	Codes
Activities with parental involvement in the afterschool program	Reading time	"I know reading a book has caught on very well" S.R.L. "So in the reading phase, yes, it sounds great to have a parent go one by one that every child would enjoy" I.S. "Yes, it may be reading time." I.H.
	Involvement in creative activities	"One made lanterns, one made Christmas decorations" R.I.N. "Yes, I also come to the arts & crafts side" S.K. "Let's have them paint a jar for cookies" L.B. "Or let them decorate the windows" L.B. "Let each one decorate a jar, we provide them with stickers and we think of two or three products with which to fill that jar and they decorate it" L.B.
	Organization of visits in the community	"A visit to a music school." I.H. "They could come to the warehouse to make some cookies and sweets presents" L.B.
	Volunteering	"If he were to volunteer at the puppy shelter, I'll go there." I.S.

5. Discussion and conclusions

Regarding the activities offered within the afterschool program, the participating parents consider creative activities to be very important. Parents especially appreciated the time the children spend outdoors, were satisfied with the way they speak foreign languages and solve school-related tasks, and they considered that socialization and the diversity of play are key elements as part of a harmonious development of their children. Parents expressed satisfaction with the benefits of the AS program at cognitive and social levels. As for the emotional plan, they stated that they need to spend more time observing the possible benefits of the AS program on their children. Parents expressed gratitude towards the gentle education carried out within the program, as well as towards the activities related to the education based on compassion and learning towards the community.

The responses received from the parents included in our study, although a small number, indicate that they are turning their attention to interdisciplinary curricular development, with suggestions for activities that include compassionate development, specifically

referring to people-centered actions, environmental conservation, animals and the community. We consider that the factors that optimized the data collection in this focus group, in terms of disclosure, are represented by the openness of parents and availability to share various thoughts and ideas, the possible factor that could interfere negatively would refer to the applicability of the recommendations (omission of parental vision in implementing and conducting the program). Even though the small number of participants represents a limitation of the study, it is important to specify that we consider this research as a useful exploratory study of the perceptions and the needs of the parents in relation to the AP program. Moreover, by using a focus group method, a small number of participants is accepted in terms of data collection and qualitative analysis.

Following the qualitative analysis of the data, several recommendations were elaborated on the needs of the parents and the needs of the children in order to increase the confidence and good development of afterschool programs:

- Reducing parental fears in terms of AS program safety procedures by attaching to the contract of documents proving the first aid training of the staff.
- Informing parents about the afterschool program from the perspective of benefits on children and families.
- Elaborating of a guide with suggestions and activities regarding the development of compassion, but also of other activities allowing the parental involvement.
- Designing and implementing targeted activities for parents to provide relevant information and feedback about the program, conflict management and management procedures, safety circle etc.
- Establishing an open diary containing suggestions and ideas regarding the optimization of the afterschool program taking into account the needs of parents.

As future directions, we are considering performing longitudinal studies on larger samples to obtain quantitative results, as well as pre- and post-test investigations of the parental perception following their involvement in various activities in afterschool programs. Studies conducted internationally (e.g. Harvard Family Research Project, 2008) highlight a positive impact of AS programs on children and their

families in terms of social functioning and general well-being of the family members, indicating that these programs require constant support and long-term investment, both in the public and in the private sectors.

Authors note:

The authors had equal contributions to this article.

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