

THE EFFECTS OF PARENTS' PARTICIPATION IN APPRECIATIVE PARENTING PROGRAM IN REDUCING CHILD ABUSE IN THE FAMILY

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Abstract. The family environment in Romania is one of the most abusive for children, 87.7% of reported cases of abuse are in the family. Moreover, the main methods of discipline used by parents are raising their voices, threats and physical punishment. In order to respond to such problems, HoltIS Association with the support of the UNICEF Representative in Romania developed a parenting education programme to support the development of skills for parents from the vulnerable and disadvantaged categories. (1) Background: The present study aims to investigate how parents' participation in parenting education courses contributes to changing parents' behaviour towards children and reducing child abuse. (2) Methods: The study is a qualitative one, using the focus group and individual interview for data collection. From the 85 schools where such parenting programmes were organized, 6 schools were selected, whose parents, parent educators and representatives participated in the focus groups and individual interviews; (3) Results: Parents' participation in parenting education courses contributes to developing self-control, to change the behaviours into positive ones towards their own children, to spending quality time with their own children; at the same time, parents' participation has positive effects in terms of reducing school dropout, improving children's school results, reducing absenteeism and changing children's behaviour towards school and towards their peers. In addition, the organization of parenting courses by trained teaching staff has beneficial effects on school culture; (4) Conclusions: Parenting programmes are one of the most effective forms of preventing child abuse, the family being the most abusive environment for children. The data collected from parents and teaching staff emphasize the transformations of behaviour at the level of all three actors: child, parent and teachers, with effects on the reduction of child abuse.

Keywords: Parenting education, appreciative parenting, prevention child abuse, programme evaluation, neglect, child maltreatment, school participation.

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1. Introduction

Between January and September 2022, the National Authority for the Protection of Children's Rights and Adoption (ANPDCA) registered a number of 12,761 cases of child abuse, neglect and exploitation in Romania (Table 1), out of which 11,201 were in the family (87.7%), which means that the family environment is the most abusive one for children. The number of reported cases is much lower than the real situation. In a UNICEF (2013) study it is shown that 60% of the population considers that raising one's voice, threatening and beating are normal for disciplining the child; therefore, parenting education is considered one of the forms of intervention that can be successful in modelling positive behaviour of parents towards children and reducing the risk of child abuse, neglect or exploitation (WHO, 2016).

Table 1. Distribution of types of child abuse according to gender

Cases of abuse	Distribution by gender		
	Male	Female	Total
Physical abuse	703	711	1,414
Emotional abuse	727	825	1,552
Sexual abuse	142	1,001	1,143
Neglect	4,059	4,253	8,312
Exploitation through labour	103	109	212
Sexual exploitation	4	30	34
Exploitation for committing crimes	63	31	94
Total	5,801	6,960	12,761

Source: ANPDCA (2022): <https://copii.gov.ro/1/date-statistice-copii-si-adoptii/>

Parents' beliefs, attitudes and practices are the conditions for whether abusive behaviours towards children are manifested or not. That is why parenting programmes, in their intensive forms, respond to these preconditions, aiming to develop parenting skills, reduce stress, change parenting attitudes and practices, etc. Parenting interventions are a strategy for lowering the risks of violence against children and preventing the development of violent behaviour among children (Knerr *et al.*, 2013), because it addresses parenting beliefs, attitudes and practices. In a US study, Prinz *et al.* (2009) show that parenting programmes lower the incidence of child abuse in low-income families, which is an argument for the feasibility and benefits of large-scale development of parenting education programmes. Webster-Stratton and Reid (2010) argue for parenting education "to reduce harsh parenting, increase positive discipline and nurturing parenting, reduce conduct problems and improve children's social competence". In 2007, the WHO included parenting education as one of the strategies which need to be developed to reduce child abuse. Parenting programmes have demonstrated effects on reducing family stress (Baker-Henningham *et al.*, 2012), on increasing self-efficacy (Hatef *et al.*, 2018; Cojocaru, 2011; Correia *et al.*, 2022) and on child abuse (Barlow *et al.*, 2006; Solehati *et al.*, 2022; Sanders *et al.*, 2018).

1.1. Brief description of the programme

The *Appreciative Parenting Programme* (APP) helps reduce the stress experienced by families and lowers the risk of parents taking their frustration out on their children. It gives parents the opportunity to improve communication and develop the skills needed to deal with stress. It reduces parent isolation by putting them in contact with other parents in similar situations and it promotes a positive approach to raising and disciplining children. Moreover, this programme specifically addresses factors that lead to abuse and neglect, including inadequate or lacking information and parenting skills, low self-esteem, feelings of isolation, unrealistic expectations and misunderstanding of a child's development and of the parent's role and it helps parents create a social support system that may continue to exist after the parenting courses have been completed. APP is not meant to be the only solution to life's major problems. This programme is a starting point - a place where parents can learn more about their parenting style and the options they have for guiding their children, as well as a place where they can gain more self-confidence as people and as parents. We believe that, by giving parents the opportunity to share and receive information designed to raise awareness of positive alternatives and of mutual support, we can encourage them to take steps to improve the quality of their

lives and of their children's lives. The programme focuses on the importance of parents and on their strengths. The basic programme principles are: appreciate, respect and support parents. After the completion of their theoretical training sessions, parent educators must undergo practical training, consisting of the actual organization and teaching of parenting education courses to parents. Each parenting education course includes *10 sessions/meetings with the same group of parents. Each module lasts about 2 hours*. The 10 sessions address topics of interest to parents, such as: self-care, stress and anger management, effective communication, child development, positive approach of child behaviours, prevention of child abuse, health education etc. The average group size for the APP course is between 10 and 15 parents for a group, so that parents have sufficient opportunities to get actively involved. Groups of less than eight people are not recommended because absences due to illness and other factors further diminish the size of the group and have an impact on its dynamics. Out of the 10 session, 7 are basic and 3 may be chosen out of the optional ones, according to the specificity of the group and the parents' choices. Starting from the intensity level of parenting programmes presented by the WHO, the APP is a 4 and 5 level programme, meaning that it is an intensive parent training and approaches wider family issues, such as conflict, stress and anger.

Table 2. The themes of the sessions of the parenting education programme

Sessions	Topics	Status
1	How to be a wise parent	Basic
2	How to be relaxed in stressful situations	Basic
3	How to communicate effectively with your child	Basic
4	How to be your child's reliable partner	Basic
5	Positive approach to your child's behaviour	Basic
6	How to prevent abuse and its effects on the child	Basic
7	How to accompany the child on the path of his/her development	Optional
8	How to promote health education	Optional
9	Teenagers' entourage and free time	Optional
10	Self-control and avoidance of harmful substances	Optional
11	How to play with our child	Optional
12	How to develop non-cognitive skills	Optional
13	Bullying and cyberbullying	Optional
14	The importance of supporting children in their transition from middle school to high school	Optional
15	Immunity and vaccination. Useful information for parents	Optional
16	How can we understand gender equality?	Optional
17	What do we do next?	Basic

Source: HoltIS (2024; 2024a-m); Popescu et al. (2024); Popescu et al. (2024)

1.2. Some statistical data about parenting education in Bacău

For documentation, we chose Bacău County, a county where good practice models in the field of education and social services have been developed intensively over a longer period of time. The Inclusive Quality Education model was initiated by UNICEF and was developed in partnership with the Ministry of Education, the Bacău County Council, the Bacău County School Inspectorate, the HoltIS Association, the Institute of Education Sciences, the Împreună (Together) Agency and the Step by Step Foundation, School of Values. This model was preceded by the experimentation and initiation by UNICEF of the Priority Education Zones projects and the "Come to School!" Campaign. In Bacău County, a total number of 557 teaching staff (teachers, school principals, school

counsellors, etc.) participated in training in the field of parenting education; of these, 382 parent educators organized parenting sessions in schools, while the rest of the sessions are to be organized in the next period. The running of some projects with support from UNICEF made Bacău County a special area also from the point of view of the development of parenting education. At the same time, the participation rate of fathers in parenting education courses is also important for Bacău County, namely 22.5%. In short, the data is presented in the following table.

Table 3. Some general statistical data regarding parenting education in schools in Bacău County

No.	Category	Total no. per county
1	Total number of teaching staff trained in the field of parenting education	557
2	Total number of active Parent Educators in schools (who have organized at least one parenting education group)	382
3	Number of organized parent groups	1,081
4	Total number of parenting education sessions (periodic meetings with the same group of parents)	8,087
5	Total number of participating parents	12,310
5.1	Out of whom, Women (77.5%)	9,540
5.2	Men (22.5%)	2,740
6	Total number of impacted children (children whose parents attended parenting education sessions)	19,568
7	Number of parent support group meetings	1,634
8	The number of teaching staff who attended parenting education sessions, as participants	1,182
9	Number of school units where parenting education courses were organized	85

Source: www.qie.ro

2. Methodology

2.1. Context of the research

Previous studies carried out by HoltIS with the support of the UNICEF Representative in Romania demonstrate the importance of parenting education in changing parents' attitudes and behaviours towards children (Cojocaru & Cojocaru, 2011; 2011a). Parents who have benefited from parenting education courses highlight the fact that they have improved their relationships with their children, they encourage the child to communicate, they pay more attention to the child's needs, etc. In order to support and consolidate the child's and parent's participation, we believed it necessary to intervene at the level of the entire school, so that parenting education would be as strongly integrated as possible into the school culture, being a support for children and parents, but also for the teaching staff. Involving teachers in the promotion of parenting education aimed to make them familiar with practices regarding child participation and a positive approach to children's behaviours. Thus, the research was carried out in six schools in Bacău County. The data collected in the field indicates that during the period when the research took place in the schools included in the study, several types of intervention were running parallel to the Parenting education programme (HoltIS, 2024; 2024a-m; Popescu *et al.*, 2024; Popescu *et al.*, 2024): Quality Inclusive Education (with HoltIS, ISE, Together Agency, Step by Step), the Second Chance programme, as well as other extracurricular activities organized with the help of non-governmental associations and foundations.

Under these circumstances, we aimed to analyse which main factors and which type of intervention contributed to the improvement of parents' behaviours towards children, as seen by both the parents and teaching staff.

2.2. The purposes of this research

The purpose of this study is to evaluate the influence of parents' participation in the parenting education programme on parents' attitudes, beliefs and practices in order to reduce child abuse. At the same time, due to the fact that parenting education takes place in the school environment, being offered by teaching staff trained to be parent educators, we also propose to explore the influences that parenting education has on school culture and participation.

2.3. Research strategy

The design of this research is a qualitative and exploratory one, it falls within the logic of the intervention-research, through which we analyse how different contexts of application of parenting education influence parents' attitudes, beliefs and practices, with several variables being tracked: (1) Number of parent educators (schools with more than one active parent educator); (2) Schools with one or more groups of parents present at parenting education courses; (3) The training and information sessions with school teachers regarding the child's participation and the positive approach to children's behaviours (the sessions took place with school teaching staff); (4) Three schools from the urban environment and three schools from the rural environment.

The purpose of this type of intervention is to produce social change according to the interests and needs of the target group, while also tracking the effects of the interventions that took place in schools. Thus, data were collected on the influence of parenting education from the schools included in the study, after the intervention on parents and teachers.

2.4. Criteria for selecting research participants

The selection of the participants for the focus groups and interviews was carried out following the selection of 6 schools out of a total of 85. The focus groups with both parents and teaching staff had an average of 7-10 participants. The participation of all subjects - parents, teaching staff, parent educators and school principals was voluntary. The schools and participants that took part in the study were selected according to the following criteria:

- Criteria for selecting the schools included in the study: the availability and openness of the parent educator to organize the parenting education sessions, the quality of the activities carried out (the ability to mobilize parents and teaching staff, meeting deadlines, communication with the HoltIS supervisor), schools with one parent educator or two parent educators, rural and urban schools.

- Criteria for the participants in focus groups and interviews: participation in Parenting education sessions, availability to participate in meetings requested for focus groups, teaching staff's schedule.

In order to evaluate the influence of parenting education on the participants, the research was carried out in the following school units. The table below shows the particular statistics of the participants from the schools included in the study.

Table 4. List of schools selected for research

No.	Community	Type	APE*	PEG	PES	PP	IC	SGM	TSP
1	Beresti-Tazlau	Rural	9	36	267	414	612	57	45
2	Bacău	Urban	9	30	215	314	446	35	35
3	Beresti-Tazlau	Rural	8	28	178	287	456	24	24
4	Bacău	Urban	8	26	197	335	423	25	25
5	Targu Ocna	Urban	7	24	153	232	320	59	59
6	Gaiceana	Rural	4	18	132	218	398	23	23

Source: www.qie.ro

Note: APE - Active Parent Educators, who organized parenting education courses

PEG - Groups of Parents who participated in parenting education courses

PES - Parenting education Sessions (meetings with parents)

PP - Parents Participating in parenting education courses

IC - Impacted Children (children whose parents participated in parenting education courses)

SGM - Support Group Meetings (groups made up of parents who have completed the parenting education courses)

TSP - Teaching Staff Participating in the two appreciative parenting sessions organized in the school

2.5. Data collection

Data collection involved the organization of focus groups and individual interviews with teaching staff, parents, parent educators and principals from the following schools: Octavian Voicu Middle School - Bacău, Constantin Platon Middle School - Bacău, Middle School No.2 Târgu Ocna, Middle School No.1 Sănduleni, Berești Tazlău Middle School, Găiceana Middle School.

Table 5. Subjects participating in data collection

Code	Collection technique	Subjects	Residence
FG1	Focus group	Parents	Urban
FG2	Focus group	Parents	Rural
FG3	Focus group	Parents	Urban
FG4	Focus group	Parents	Urban
FG5	Focus group	Parents	Rural
FG6	Focus group	Parents	Rural
FG7	Focus group	Teachers	Urban
FG8	Focus group	Teachers	Rural
FG9	Focus group	Teachers	Rural
FG10	Focus group	Teachers	Urban
FG11	Focus group	Teachers	Rural
FG12	Focus group	Teachers	Urban
S1	Interview	Parent educator	Urban
S2	Interview	Parent educator	Urban
S3	Interview	Parent educator	Rural
S4	Interview	Parent educator	Rural
S5	Interview	School principal	Rural
S6	Interview	Parent educator	Urban
S7	Interview	School principal	Urban

In each of the schools included in the study, parent educators organized parenting sessions with a group of 10-12 parents. Also, the parent educators supported two parenting education sessions from the curriculum, namely *How to be your child's reliable partner* and *Positive approach to your child's behaviour*. Thus, data collection was

carried out by organizing 6 focus groups with parents, 6 focus groups with teachers, 5 interviews with parent educators and 2 interviews with school principals. The focus groups were conducted in schools, with an average of 7-10 participants. The discussions took place in the schools, in a room made available by the school principal, the conversations being audio-recorded with the participants' consent. Out of the focus groups organized with teachers, only two focus groups were attended by school principals, as well. The average duration of the focus groups and interviews was between 60-90 minutes, which was also mentioned in the consents of the participants who took part in the meetings. Facilitating access to the data was preceded by a series of telephone discussions with the parent educators, to clarify the data collection approach and the date on which these meetings would take place was mutually agreed upon.

2.6. Data analysis

The focus group discussions were audio-recorded to ensure the authenticity of the data extracted from the transcriptions. After transcription, the "in vivo" codes were selected, after which the categories were built. Thus, concepts related to parenting attitudes, beliefs and practices were identified within the categories; the NVIVO programme was used for analysis and categorization. The participants in the focus groups and individual interviews were asked for written consent to participate in the discussions with the operators through the consent dated and signed by each individual subject, respecting the principle of confidentiality and providing the assurance that the collected information will be used only for scientific purposes. Focus groups and individual interviews lasted an average of 60-90 minutes and were audio-recorded with the participants' consent. After collecting the data from the field, they were faithfully transcribed and the database necessary for the study was drawn up, without using the names of the participants in the discussions.

3. Results

The participation of parents in the parenting education programme has multiple effects on parents, teachers and children; we now present some recorded results regarding parental practices that participate in reducing the risk of child abuse, as well as some regarding the practices of the teaching staff, a fact that influences school culture.

3.1. Freedom offered to the child

The parents taking part in the courses talk about certain changes with regard to parental control. Their reactions in the parenting education sessions can be seen in the change in their attitudes of authority in support relationships, in understanding the child and changing their attitude regarding the freedom offered to the child.

"I have learnt to stop saying "no" to my child. I still have to work on it, but I'm thinking about it..." (FG1, parents).

"I can say that I've learnt to let my child do stuff from time to time. I was the mother who... my child was supposed to stay where I put him or to play. I would never let him do anything, because I thought he was too young, I had no experience, I was young, he's my first child and during the class I learnt that I could and it would even be constructive for me to get him to do stuff from time to time. He wanted to,

but I wouldn't let him. I can say that has been a benefit, it opened by mind to it." (FG6, parents).

Changing the parents' attitudes of authority in the support relationship for children also helps the child's voluntary determination to act, without the need for imposition. The reward received by children from parents strengthens children's trust in their own parents.

"Let's exclude that word "no" completely, let's find all kinds of remedies to get them to do that activity, giving them a surprise, an incentive" (FG4, parents).

3.2. Communication with the child

Communication with the child is one of the most frequent topics brought up in the discussion by parents. Parents notice some changes related to the improvement of listening skills and the willingness to a lot time to listen to their children. An interesting aspect of the quality of communication between parents with multiple children is the parents' concern for distributing time and attention to each child individually, so that no one feels neglected. The availability and willingness of the parents to listen encourages the child to tell his own experiences.

"I see [the child] getting closer to us." "He's happier, he tells a story differently." "More open" (FG5, parents).

"I listen to her more carefully. I'll give an example. I'm watching TV and she comes to me to ask me something. Well, when she comes to ask me, now I pause the TV and then I talk to her, I talk to her directly, not only with her, but with all three of us and after I have finished talking, the situation has become clear, I hit "play". Before [participating in the course], it used to go in one ear and out the other" (FG1, parents).

"We learned to listen more" (FG4, parents).

Communication with the child implies the possibility to reflect on the child's qualities and needs. The identification of the child's preferences is accompanied by increased attention from the parents, so that they may get to know the child.

"We learned to communicate with our children differently. I'm not telling you something and you have to do it, now you have to listen to him first and then..."

"We have to enter their souls" (FG 6, parents).

3.3. Becoming aware of a parent's role

One of the goals of parenting education is to make parents aware of the importance of the parent's role in the formation and education of children. Parents understand that the children's future depends on them and this empowerment, achieved during parenting education sessions, makes parents responsible to reflect on the parental model they pass on to their children.

"These courses, I was brought up like this by my parents, to be a normal mother, I give the child everything he needs and when I came to these courses, I felt special and being with my child is like saying that I am special, the differences, I have an important role for him" (FG 2, parents).

"Education first starts with the parent. As he is educated at home, he goes on afterwards"... "The parental model matters a lot" (FG 4, parents).

Parents admit the difficulty of improving parenting practices. The increase in parents' reflection competences within the parenting education programme can be seen in parents' willingness and openness to learn new parenting practices.

"Why don't we admit that we parents have a style, we create a style, but it can be even better and the moment you realize what the problem is, you can do better... it's not that you don't know, you can't do better because you are taught as you are taught. It's how you educated yourself as a parent, but the courses help you a lot to change." (FG5, parents).

"We were taught in a certain way and now we can approach the problem differently, even if we know it is right to do otherwise... It is difficult. With anger management, it's like... I have a problem with this and having so many children, I explode anyway, but then [I say to myself] "I should have done that". It's good that I remember that I should have done that and I try not to explode the next time." (FG6, parents).

"Opinions are divided and I have met people who said that regardless of the situation, I would raise my child the same way. Well, it's not like that. You don't raise them the same way because you learn, you discuss, you can't just go ahead like that. Personally, I've learned a lot and changed... when he annoys me, I think more about how to react." (FG3, parents).

3.4. Parent self-control

For the majority of parents, the period of participation in the parenting education courses resulted in an improvement in their mental and emotional state generated by the resources of calm and good mood created during the course, reducing their family stress. A number of parents feel the state of mental comfort as having the effect of psychological counselling. This effect of the meetings within the parenting education courses is due to their openness to participate and to the degree of confidentiality regarding the group discussions.

"That period was a time of relaxation for me, from my point of view, I felt very good..." (FG3, parents).

"Calm". "I don't yell so much anymore..." "I probably no longer yell so loudly that my mother at home can hear me! It is heard less!" (FG5, parents).

"We have more patience"! (FG6, parents).

"I smile more, I deal with the situation differently, I look at my child and I burst out laughing, now I don't know if that's good or not." (FG1, parents).

"I applied [the methods learned in the course]; before, I was more stressed out, I was yelling at them. I am calmer now. The boy even said one day "Mom, look how good it is now, you've stopped yelling at me!" (FG4, parents).

"Yes, exactly, like a psychological therapy" (FG2, parents).

3.5. Building a support group

The purpose of parenting education sessions is to involve parents and give them time and space to observe and act more carefully, systematically and rigorously than they are used to doing every day (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1992). The opportunity offered to parents to reflect on their own situation in a support group facilitates the sharing of

experiences and parenting practices (Pfannenstiel & Seltyer, 1985) and helps to improve them.

“We did say some confidential things. We knew each other, but they were “secrets”. We opened up. We said something that we knew, but the others didn’t know.” (FG4, parents).

“Our troubles, too. Like, “What do you do in the situation? I do it this way, look, this works better for me; this doesn’t work for me”. Each child being special, you need to adopt special measures.” (FG5, parents).

“It was good that we had something to learn, new things, from each other. We listened to each other’s stories, we drew conclusions...” “In our community we’ve never had such courses before.” (FG3, parents).

3.6. Adjusting the teaching methods and techniques

The training and information sessions organized and carried out by the parent educator touching on the two topics (child participation and positive approach to children’s behaviour) aimed to improve school participation, so that parenting education could be a support not only for parents and children, but also for the teaching staff. The teaching staff invoke the students’ listening skills, acquired following the reading of the guides made available during the training and information sessions. The availability of the teaching staff to listen to the students is manifested in the way the students get closer to school. The teaching staff highlight the importance of the subjects from the training and information sessions that focus exclusively on the child (the child’s participation and the positive approach to the child’s behaviours) and show changes primarily in the attitudes towards the students. Awareness of the importance of adjusting teaching methods and techniques as resources for child development requires not only reflection on the attitude of teaching staff towards students, but also reflection on students’ qualities, needs and interests.

“The biggest gain was the one that concerned teaching, adjusting the curriculum to the needs and interests of the student. We don’t have freedom, scripturally, but... Also in my attitude towards children, the main idea to remember is that the student should be involved and do something that will give him the feeling of satisfaction, of accomplishment, of success, that he also managed to do something and that he is appreciated for something...” (FG10, teaching staff).

“Participation in activities is done in accordance with the child’s development – a primary school child does not participate in a general knowledge contest for middle school, let’s find ways to get down to their level.” (FG7, teaching staff).

“The fact that the child’s ability to understand, his mentality, his style of behaviour must be taken into account...” (FG8, teaching staff).

3.7. Learning new practices

The two training sessions were aimed at promoting the active participation of children in the decisions and actions that concern them, as well as providing some methods with which their behaviour could be positively influenced and directed. The application of the techniques for positive guidance of the child’s behaviour also has an effect on the calm state of the teaching staff and helps to reduce stress in their professional activity.

"Let's not focus too much on what children don't do and let's see what they do right, what they do well and encourage such behaviours. If we notice or are faced with a child's negative behaviour, let's try to get him out of the conflict without a classic punitive measure and give him a break. I ended up doing this instinctively because I was tired and then - everyone knows I have very careless boys, so I have to use my lungs a lot - and then I got tired of hearing "Alex did this, Alex did that" and I say "Alex, get in the classroom", so that I can have a break too"...(FG10, teaching staff).

The relevance of the topics in the training and information sessions also aimed to promote a risk-taking environment that encourages teaching staff to try new ideas and strategies for student engagement (Short & Greer, 2002). Participating in the meetings within the programme offers teaching staff the opportunity to discover new methods of involving students in school activities.

"I went only once, but on this occasion I learned new ways of non-formal teaching that attract children" (FG7, teaching staff).

3.8. Encouraging the student

One of the objectives of these training and information sessions also aimed to encourage students in various activities and decisions, with the final objective of increasing school participation. Reflecting on teaching practices helps participants design appreciative behaviours towards students. The identification of positive methods of encouragement is also accompanied by the teaching staff's attention to discovering the qualities of the students.

"I was left with the fact that, first and foremost, for these children we have, we must try to get attached to them and find those methods, procedures, exercises that highlight their qualities. When we have requirements with a very high level of difficulty, they will be disappointed." (FG10, teaching staff).

"...In the preparatory class we don't give them grades, but there needs to be a reward, like a smiley face. I'll tell you that I didn't really use these things, but whatever the kid did, really anything, I was like, "Well done, very good!" even if he didn't do it very well. "But you know something? It can be even better! Let me show you! Like this!" If you tell him what he got, in terms of grades, I prefer to give them different assignments, at least if they each do something, so that I don't use S or I [sufficient or insufficient] because they get demotivated. "I got the S, I got the I, why bother?" (FG9, teachers).

"I have been in this school for a year, I got closer to the children, to the parents, I try to do the learning through play, just as I learned in your class, I try to encourage them with a positive approach, with the parents most of the time in the meeting, I try to value the child as well..." (FG8, teaching staff).

3.9. Interventions in situations of noticeable abuse

Child abuse is detectable in situations where the child is carefully observed and supervised by the teaching staff. The example below proves that early intervention by the teaching staff can reduce child abuse and neglect (Olds *et al.*, 1999) and contributes to fighting violence against children.

"I found out about an abuse and I reacted in a very nasty way at the time. I called his mother in Italy and got her to come home. I told her, "If you don't come home in a week, I'll give the child to Child Protective Services". She had left him with his father (...), his father got drunk on Christmas and got him and his brother (who's three years younger, in 2nd grade, I think) out in the snow in their underwear. The neighbours took them. He was beaten, hit, I asked him what was wrong with him. "I fell out of the tree" "What tree did you climb now, in winter?" "A cherry tree." "What cherry tree? Your father beat you." I called his mother, I understood that there were still some conflicts, they got divorced and I called her and said "If you don't come..." and she came from Italy with her mother. I told her that I would send the Interpol after her and give the child to the state services. I could submit a statement that he was beaten and molested and they would take him. She came home and fixed it. She got divorced and gave the child in the custody of some relatives." (S1, parent educator).

3.10. Disciplining children

In response to discipline problems, schools typically apply a reactive approach—implementing a consequence after a problem has occurred (Sugai & Homer, 2002). Common consequences used include verbal reprimands, suspensions and bad grades in conduct. The logic behind these consequences seems to be “by experiencing these consequences, students will learn the right way to behave and be motivated enough to obey schools’ expectations” (Colvin *et al.*, 1993). These consequences may stop the problems in the short term, but they do not reduce the probability of these problems occurring again in the future (Sprague *et al.*, 2001), statements also supported by the teaching staff.

Children who are neglected by their parents use this and know that they cannot be punished for their actions. Punishment can be temporarily effective in stopping inappropriate behaviour, but its negative effect on the child’s emotional health makes this tool unsuitable for the role of parent and teacher (Sanders *et al.*, 2018). A recommendation from the teaching staff to eliminate the undesirable behaviours of children is to insist on making children feel more responsible.

“...I have taken such measures before, but not the fines that the mayor’s office should give them, they never fine these people, as they cannot pay the fines, but I think that responsibility should be insisted on more, because they [students] say that nothing will happen to them anyway, father is not at home, mother is not at home, no one can do anything to them”? (S3, parent educator).

4. Discussion

As it appears from the participants’ accounts, the risk of dropping out of school is preceded and accompanied by a series of factors and causes that negatively influence school participation. *Improving school participation requires a holistic approach that addresses school as well as external factors. Supporting parents to exercise their parenthood under the conditions of the values promoted by children’s rights, as well as the involvement of the teaching staff in the promotion of parenting education contributes significantly to increasing school participation, reducing the risk of child abuse, changing*

the attitudes, beliefs and practices of parents, but also those of the teaching staff. The data collected from the field indicate that, at the school level, there is no permanent strategy to encourage the prevention of child abuse, as they only intervene in the cases they notice. *The students' involvement in school and extracurricular activities* which can provide each student with the opportunity to develop their cognitive and non-cognitive qualities and abilities is necessary for effective education.

In a world that is constantly changing, teachers are faced with various tasks to fulfil. For them to be successful in the teaching profession, *conventional skills related to learning and teaching students are not enough*. There is a need to use approaches and teaching methods appropriate to social, cultural and ethnic diversity in courses and there is a need for teamwork, collaboration and cooperation with other teaching staff. While involving students and particularly students who rarely attend school, the school staff cannot simply change failure by focusing on students. They need to assess the problems within the school structure and culture (Mitra, 2003), involving parents as active partners of the school.

A strong school culture is correlated with students' *interest in learning, in being motivated, in being attracted to school*. School culture is a relatively stable phenomenon and it takes a long time to change. The most significant steps towards change are the school staff's awareness of the importance of change and creating an effective school. However, *the issue of school participation cannot be solved by the teaching staff alone*. An important factor of school culture (Schoen & Teddlie, 2008) is *the involvement of parents in the actions undertaken by the school*. The intervention on teachers and parents aimed at *improving the relationship between the school, parents and students*, with the ultimate goal of increasing school participation (Cojocaru & Cojocaru, 2011). To capture the influence of parenting education, the exploration of perspectives in schools demonstrates the fact that perceptions and attitudes towards students, which are usually taken for granted, give meaning to teachers' activities. They form the school culture that requires a systematic and long-term intervention in order to be changed (Stoll, 1998).

The training and information sessions for teaching staff with the two subjects (*Child participation* and *Positive approach to children's behaviours*) were aimed at promoting the active participation of students and *providing some methods of positive direction of children's behaviours*. The participant teachers' becoming aware of the importance of adapting teaching methods and techniques as resources for child development involved not only the reflection on the attitude of the teaching staff towards the students, but also the reflection on the qualities, needs and interests of the students.

Reflecting on the teaching practices, as well as directing them towards an appreciative approach in order to highlight the students' qualities, had an effect of reducing stress in the work of the teaching staff. *The clinical effect found in the teachers' reports* is also observed *among the parents participating* in the parenting education sessions. Parents highlight changes in parenting behaviours and skills (Cojocaru *et al.*, 2011). Their becoming aware of the parental model offered to the children is perceptible *in the parents' willingness to listen and allot time for each individual child*. Accounts of undesirable parental behaviours are invoked in the past tense, while the new behaviours are actions taking place in the present tense.

The need for intervention in the family environment is also supported by the teaching staff. Solving and reducing the factors of child abuse require a stable partnership between school and family (Chaffin *et al.*, 2001). Parenting education, from the perspective of the study participants, is a solution that contributes to improving the way

parents are involved (Cojocaru & Cojocaru, 2011a). The introduction of parenting education programmes in schools contributes to new perspectives for parents, students and teachers (Costache *et al.*, 2025).

As we can see from the accounts of the participants in our study, parenting education helps to rethink the unwritten rules, the norms of school culture, the behaviours and attitudes of teaching staff towards parents and children. Providing teachers with opportunities for collaboration and participation can develop a culture of encouraging change (Tsela *et al.*, 2022). “Participation is a cornerstone of school and professional communities – a stone that we usually leave unpolished” (Lambert, 2003). Also, parenting education allows for *the differentiation of subcultures that appear* (Van Houtte, 2005), therefore we can talk about the culture of teachers, parents and students. Parenting education provides a framework for reflection on behaviours and on “what is hidden behind these behaviours” (Van Houtte & Van Maele, 2011). Analysing each behaviour of the group, *parenting education*, as a form of group intervention, *contributes to the reconstruction and the remodelling of school culture*. However, circumstances appearing in schools and in the personal lives of teachers and families are barriers that prevent the involvement of parents in the students’ education. Many barriers can be reduced or eliminated through appropriate support and efforts to involve parents. Maintaining parenting education as a permanent strategy in school culture requires a long time and commitment to change deeply ingrained perceptions and habits. These statements are also supported by the recommendations of teachers and parents after participating in the parenting education programme.

4.1. Limitations

One limitation of the study is the small number of schools included in our research. On the other hand, the identification of interventions discovered at the time of data collection from the field limits the accurate capture of the influence of parenting education on school culture and school participation. We also note that the opinion of parents who did not participate in the parenting education programme was not captured. Another factor that was not captured in this study is the students’ perspective. The point of view of the parents participating in the parenting education programme, of the teaching staff from the schools involved in the study, who were trained as parent educators and of a limited number of school principals, was privileged here.

4.2. Future research directions

The present study is a qualitative exploratory one, with the role of highlighting the perspectives of parents and teaching staff participating in the parenting programme. In order to measure the effects of parenting programmes in reducing child abuse, a pre- and post-intervention evaluation is also necessary, measuring some indicators in a control group and a group that participates in parenting education.

5. Conclusions

The parents who participated in APP highlighted changes in personal attitudes, beliefs and practices, which are appreciated as beneficial for children. Reflective parenting skills (Nunes *et al.*, 2016), such as reducing stress and anger, developing the skills to listen and communicate with children, understanding how the freedom granted

to children does not undermine the authority of the parent (Steinberg, 2001), approaching positive discipline strategies, etc. are highlighted by the parents as new things, which they learned and practiced during the participation in the parenting courses.

The teaching staff participating in the training and information sessions emphasize the importance of parenting education that contributes to solving school problems, increasing school participation, improving results, reducing the risk of dropout, preventing and reducing child abuse and creating an appropriate framework for the development of each child. Bringing parents closer to the school is a first step towards improving school participation. Also, the participation of a larger number of parents in the parenting education programme is necessary, without imposing specific criteria and we need to resume courses for parents after a certain period of time or even have them as a permanent practice in the community; this is necessary to change the local culture. The need for parenting education is all the greater as parents realize that they need support in the education and training of their children and want to participate in parenting education sessions. From the point of view of the teaching staff, the provision of information and the methods provided in the courses help parents communicate better with children and manage difficult situations that arise in the parent-child relationship, reduce child abuse and develop harmonious relationships between parents and children.

The need to include a greater number of parents in the parenting education programme and the frequent running of courses are also included in the parents' perspective. The intervention on a limited number of parents is not sufficient for improving school participation and changing parenting attitudes, beliefs and practices in the local culture. Changing old habits and practicing new behaviours requires sessions over a longer period of time.

The teaching staff participating in the training and information sessions are aware of the importance of parenting education as an investment strategy in the educational future of the child. The parents' awareness is not enough to support parenting education as a permanent practice in schools, but there is also a need for dissemination in the community (Lachman *et al.*, 2016) and awareness of institutions to contribute to the sustainability of this practice. Even if there are "waiting lists" of parents wanting to participate in the parenting education programme, public policies are needed to support this type of intervention with resources; although such a public policy to support parenthood is necessary, even if the local authorities support it, the approval of a National Strategy for Positive Parenting has been under debate for over 15 years; it comes up every now and then, but is constantly postponed.

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