

PARENTS AND THEIR INVOLVEMENT IN CHILDREN'S LEISURE ACTIVITIES

E. N. UNTARU¹ R. G. ALBU¹ M. R. LUCA¹

Abstract: *The study proposes an analysis of the opinions of the parents of Braşov concerning the offer of leisure activities for preschool children. The objectives of this exploratory study aimed at the identification of the leisure activities in which the children of the interviewed subjects engage, the reasons why they engage in such activities, as well as at identifying the extent to which the offer of leisure activities for preschool children is known to the public and finding manners in which the offer could be improved. The research method was the semi-structured in-depth interview, applied to 12 subjects. The data analysis reveals the fact that the parents are preoccupied with the leisure activities aimed at the development of their children's personality, and that they are not satisfied with the variety, content and quality of the services available at present.*

Key words: *leisure activities, non-formal education, preschool children, in-depth interview.*

1. Introduction

The growth of the young generation, the development of the preschool children's personality and the parents' involvement in their children's education has been a constant concern of researchers. Any parent wishes a harmonious development for his child. The challenges of the contemporary world lead to a reconfiguration of the roles different forms of education (i.e. formal, non-formal, incidental) play in the balanced development of preschool children.

The meaning of the concept 'spare time', named *loisir* (in French), *leisure* (in English) or *freizeit* (in German) does not differ significantly from one culture to another. Joffre Dumazedier defined leisure as '*a complex of activities to which the individual can dedicate himself entirely according to*

his wishes either to recover, to have fun or to develop his intellect and formation according to his free will, after having completed his professional, familial and social tasks' [3, p. 29]. Dumazedier states that the fundamental functions of leisure are defined by three 'D' words: *délassement* (detachment), *développement* (development) and *divertissement* (eng. entertainment).

According to the Romanian Language Dictionary the term '*loisir*' is defined as '*optimal use of one's spare time according to the individual's wishes and inclinations*' [17]. The term has recently been defined by economists and sociologists as '*non-work time*'. *It is also regarded as a way of life marked by a sense of freedom and independent choice, and as the individual's opportunity for achieving self-actualization*'. [9, p. 5].

¹Transilvania University of Braşov, Romania.

The term 'play' is defined by the Romanian Language Dictionary [16] as '*physical or mental activity conducted for pleasure*'. Psychologists consider that playing is essential for the healthy development of children.

The term 'recreational activity' shares some common meanings with the previous terms, but it differs in that '*it encompasses many types of experiences that are not at all play like, such as reading, attending cultural events, or other intellectually based hobbies. Today it is understood to be a much more complex phenomenon, with meanings that extend far beyond simply taking part in activity.*' [9, p. 5].

2. Literature review

In the field literature, we have identified the following research topics related with the subject approached by this study: the importance of the children's early education [2], [8]; the children's play time [4], [5]; leisure activities for children [6], [7], [12]; children's indoor and outdoor play patterns [13], [14]; preschool children and physical activity [6]; the preference for certain types of activities [10]; the benefits of leisure activities [1], [11].

During the life span, the social interaction plays a special part in the development and structuring of the personality, being as important as the heredity [2]. The socialising effect of physical activity and of sports generates a multitude of positive effects on the children and the young. Early childhood is the time when physical activity is vital for the socialization, the child being sensitive to the cognitive and moral development, assuming different roles, learning that he is different from the others and, most importantly, learning to build relationships with the others [1].

Giving the due importance to playing activities during childhood represents the

premise of a healthy development, physically, socially and cognitively, allowing the children to gradually adopt different social roles which give them the possibility to acquire competences and abilities which they will later on use in larger contexts [1]. '*Through play, children recreate roles and situations that reflect their sociocultural world, where they learn how to subordinate desires to social rules, cooperate with others willingly, and engage in socially appropriate behaviour. Over time, these competencies are transferred to children's everyday behaviours*' [5, p. 33].

Some authors consider that the social and the cognitive development are influenced by the way in which children spend their spare time. "*We complain that they spend too little time studying, reading, or helping around the house, and too much time watching television or hanging out with friends*" [7].

Several studies emphasize changes in the structure of leisure activities of children. Gleave [4] identifies the following tendencies in the children's play patterns:

- '*Children's free time has declined more than seven hours per week from 1981 to 1997 and a further two hours per week from 1997 to 2003. It seems children have nine hours less free time than 25 years ago*' (research from the US).

- '*Children's time to play has decreased. The 2002 research suggests children have 12 hours less free time every week than they did 20 years ago. This includes a 25 per cent decrease in play and 50 per cent decrease in outdoor activities*' [4, p. 2].

3. Methodological aspects of the qualitative research

The aim of the current study is to investigate on the opinions of the parents regarding the leisure activities in which their children engage. To that aim, an

exploratory research was conducted, using in-depth and semi-directed interviews. Although the used method stimulates the individuals to offer information on the leisure services available in Braşov, it also presents a series of shortcomings, among which: the exploratory nature of the research, therefore leading to the impossibility of generalising the results at the level of the whole county; the difficulty of conducting such interviews, the quality of the results depending to a great extent on the ability of the interviewer; the heterogenous character of the obtained information, determined by the semi-structured nature of the answers.

In order to reach the above-stated aim, the following objectives were established:

1. The identification of the leisure activities in which the children of the interviewed subjects engage.
2. Knowing the reasons which motivate those activities.
3. Finding out the extent to which the leisure activities offer for preschool children is known to the public and identifying a means of enriching this offer.

The interviews were conducted on a sample composed of 12 mothers. The selection of respondents was done using the 'snowball' technique, aiming to include in the study the individuals who fulfil the condition of having at least one preschool child. The structure of the interviewed people is presented in Table 1.

The questions addressed to the participants aimed to find out the activities in which their children engage, the activities which they have quit during the last year and the reason why they decided to quit, the activities which the parents want their children to engage in in the near future, as well as the information sources on available leisure activities, and options given to improve them.

The research sample Table 1

Participant	Demographics (number of children, occupation)
1	3 preschool children, stay-at-home mother
2	One child, teacher in the higher-education system
3	2 children, one of which is at preschool level, psychologist
4	2 children, one of which is at preschool level, teacher in the higher-education system
5	One child, teacher in the higher-education system
6	2 children, one of which is at preschool level, teacher in the higher-education system
7	One child, teacher in the higher-education system
8	One child, teacher in the higher-education system
9	One child, nurse
10	One child, lower education teacher
11	2 children, one of which is at preschool level, pharmacist assistant
12	One child, teacher in the higher-education system

The interviews were conducted in March 2013, during the school year, with the aim of identifying leisure activities in which the children of the participants were involved at the time being. The interviews were afterwards transcribed in order to conduct a content analysis. The coding and grouping of information in categories, as well as the analysis of the frequency of answers were done using the Nvivo 7 software. In order to ensure the anonymous character and the confidentiality of data, the names of the children participating in the study and the names of the playgrounds in Braşov county, their names were abbreviated using only the initials.

4. Content analysis

The analysis of the interviews has highlighted the existence of a significant number of leisure activities which the children participate in. These activities were grouped in three categories, considering the particularities which they entailed (the time span, the season of practice, the place of practice and the reasons why the activity was chosen-entertainment, relaxation, social reasons, knowledge acquisition, aptitudes, etc.)

4.1. Leisure activities in which children participate at kindergarten

Among the activities mentioned by the interviewed subjects as being included in the weekly schedule of their preschool children, the most frequently brought up ones were: English language (10 interventions), modern dances (7 interventions), and creativity (5 interventions). Other less frequent activities (one intervention for each activity) were: German language, French Language, martial arts, painting, folk dances, drama classes and computers.

The choice of the mentioned activities was motivated by the interviewed subjects considering the following aspects:

1. The acquisition of certain aptitudes, pieces of knowledge or the discovery/valorification of the child's potential:

(...) 'I wanted to see if he demonstrates any talent in something (...) at least (s)he knows a bit of everything.' (S10)

'The kindergarten teacher told me a few times that she is keen on German language.' (S5)

2. Saving the time which the parents would use if the courses were held outside the kindergarten:

'(s)he's doing [such courses] at kindergarten most often. Extra-activities

are more seldom a focus, due to the fact that our time, as parents, is limited.' (S6)

3. The choices that the other parents or groupmates have done:

'(...) (s)he will feel bad if he stands aside while other children dance, speak English or create something.' (S2)

4. The low fees attributed to the activities, due to the high number of participants:

'3 or 4 lei per session. It is an acceptable price and I am happy for it.' (S5)

The analysis of the results has revealed the fact that the parents' assessment of these activities is difficult due to the lack of transparency of teachers in presenting the results, or in transmitting supplementary information to the parents concerning the class organisation, or the progress made by the children during the semester, or the school year:

'(...) I have seen some products of activity for the painting class, in the other classes I have not seen any results or the direct involvement of the teacher, so that he can show us what he is doing. For a long time, I didn't even know the teacher's name.' (S6)

The assessment that the children have given to the activities taking place at the kindergarten and implicitly their degree of satisfaction is done by the parents as well, through the positive feedback which the children send at home:

'I have never thought [which the favourite activity of the child is]. However, I think it is the dance classes. Yes, certainly, as I see that she is thrilled about it and she keeps on practicing.' (S5)

'(...) I will now refer to the dance classes held at kindergarten. The progress registered by A., the pleasure she was telling me about 'the dance teacher', the dance shows at the end of the year, when they danced waltz, tango or folk dances have brought me many moments of joy and satisfaction.' (S7)

Another means throughout which the parents can assess the level and quality of the optional activities taking place at kindergarten, the professionalism and the involvement of the teachers, as well as the progress registered by the children constitutes the assisted lessons and the school celebrations organised at the end of the school years or around the holidays (Christmas, Easter, etc.):

'I have taken part in the activities a couple of times and I observed how the teacher acts during the school celebration programme (...) He has a sense of humour and he knows how to lead the class, he knows how to properly motivate them. Furthermore, besides the fact that they develop, they learn how to cooperate and how to know their body.' (S5)

Nevertheless, the interviewed subjects noted that there are some optional activities towards the children do not feel attracted, as they do not tell their parents about them at home, nor are they impatient about them, as is the case of other activities. The low level of attractiveness is equally due to the low level of involvement of the teachers and/or the lack of adaptation of the tasks to kindergarten level:

'the relationship between the children and the teacher is cold enough during the English classes, where the children are asked to repeat structures in an old-fashioned manner, and not to learn by using games, and this acts as a demotivator.' (S6)

4.2. Subscribed activities (indoor and outdoor)

The subscribed activities are those activities in which the children take part during a certain amount of time. Among the activities mentioned by the interviewed subjects as pertaining to this category, we mention: swimming, tennis, ski, football,

foreign languages, creative activities, dances, gymnastics, etc.

The analysis of the answers given by the subjects with respect to the above mentioned activities has highlighted the fact that the motivation of choosing these activities is strictly related to explicit educational objectives.

1. The acquisition of certain aptitudes, complementary knowledge or the development of the child's potential:

'(s)he started saying a few words in German (...) it is obvious that something is happening there and that (s)he studies.' (S8)

'(...) after only two months of assisted practice, she swam the whole length of the pool, I am very happy, it is an activity which clearly helps her development and I obviously want her to continue the swimming classes.' (S10)

2. The existence of a potential of the child, which parents value by choosing the right activities:

'I have chosen the creative workshops and the painting classes because (s)he generally likes to work with her hands.' (S2)

'I have observed that A. has some musical abilities and I want to enroll her in piano classes at the Popular School of Arts starting this autumn (...) I have chosen tennis as a sport due to the fact that the trainer thought that A. had a potential to practice this sport(...).' (S7)

3. The possibility for the children, and in some cases for the parents, to interact:

'And we have friends, groups. I have two or three friends who also come with the kids and then we get together, talk and go to the creation workshops together.' (S5)

4. The child's need to engage in physical activity or consume his extra energy:

'V. is a very energetic child and we had to find a way for him to let loose of this energy.' (S3)

5. The need of physical development or the need to solve certain health issues of the child:

'We took up swimming because she is a little fat.' (S2)

6. The adaptation of the activity to the age and/or gender of the child:

'(...) considering the age I don't see what other activities would be fit. I've chosen ballet classes because she is a girl (...).' (S1)

[Talking about the motivation of choosing the activity] *Well, football, because he's a boy (...) I could have chosen from ice-skating and roller-blading equally, but he's still a little kid and I don't know if that is OK.'* (S9)

7. The existence of some demo lessons meant to convince the parents that if children go to the classes, they will acquire the expected aptitudes or knowledge:

'She [a friend of the interviewed subject] saw the poster and we went together to see what it was all about. We had some demo lessons at the beginning (...).' (S8)

A series of situations which triggered the temporary or permanent withdrawal from the activities and a series of necessary conditions for the attendance of the activities were also brought into discussion, aiming several aspects.

- The prices of the activities:

'In January I wanted to enroll her in private drama classes, but they seemed too expensive and I gave up the idea.' (S2)

'The X swimming pool is very expensive. I will just wait for swimming pool Y to open, as it is cheaper.' (S6)

- The attitude, the behaviour, the involvement and the professionalism of the teachers in various activities, as well as the atmosphere which they create during the classes:

'I have also attended another music class at a club, where the teacher came with a guitar, with a story; with music...the child was fascinated.' (S8)

- The options or the past experience of the parents/other members of the family

with the activities in which they want to involve the child:

'I'm thinking of taking her to dance classes as well. Probably classic or modern dances, which I enjoy as well.' (S11)

'(...) the fact that my husband is a coach has decisively contributed to this decision. The sport skills inherited from the father and the will to continue this tennis tradition were decisive.' (S3)

- The spare time that the parents have available:

'(...) my husband said he wants to enroll her in tennis classes, but I don't know (...) if he has time to go with her, because I will certainly not have the time to go with her.' (S1)

- The existence of a consistency between the daily, weekly and yearly schedule of the optional classes and the kindergarten schedule, also considering the holiday time:

'(S)he goes to ski classes from November to March and afterwards (s)he goes hiking with the same teacher during the whole school year.' (S4)

The quality of the rooms where the classes are held, as well as the used equipment are important reasons of their choices; likewise, some of the interviewed subjects consider that accepting the parents and actively involving them in various activities together with the children is an advantage, particularly when the children are little. On the other hand, if this is not possible (the activity requires the individual involvement of the child) some subjects who participated in the interview suggested a higher degree of transparency/visibility in the organisation of activities or the payment of greater sums of money for the activities where only one child is involved:

[Talking about possibilities to improve the leisure services] *'Maybe some locations.... Where we have participated, the locations are not always fit for children (...) for example, at the music class, they have some horrible stairs... the ones that go in*

spiral, so you can barely get the child upstairs (...) they had a carpet on the floor that could not be cleaned and there was a lot of dust.' (S8)

4.3. Activities which take place at the 'Children's Palace'

A special place among the subscribed activities is held by the activities organised by 'Children's Palace'. It offers a wide variety of services addressed to children aged between 6 and 18. Among these services we can mention: ballet and modern dance, pottery, seaming classes, fashion design, pop music, vocal-instrumental music, painting and graphic design, wood sculpture, English culture and civilisation, Hungarian culture and civilisation, folk dances, folk and ethnography, drama, aeromodels, electronics, floriculture, Information Technology, eco-tourism, travel orientation, cross-country skiing, biathlon and alpine skiing, etc. [15].

The preference of some of the interviewed subjects for the activities offered by 'Children's Palace' is justified by some important aspects, such as:

1. The free-of-charge aspect of most activities included in the offer:

'I am not very happy with the activities conducted at Children's Palace because I have the feeling that the teachers there get very little involved in the education of the children, but I will continue to go because the classes are free.' (S2)

2. A high level of professionalism of the teachers who work there:

'There aren't many teachers in the leisure system. There is Reduta, for a change, which has qualified teachers, there is Children's Palace and a few others which are top-notch, but generally there are all kinds of people whom I do not consider as qualified.' (S12)

Another part of the interviewed subjects consider that the courses offer from 'Palatul Copiilor' could be enriched, starting from the weak points which they have identified.

- The selection of the children starting from the age of 6 (with only two or three activities where younger children should be accepted):

'(...) maybe it would be fit for 'Palatul Copiilor' to hire more teachers and work in smaller groups and accept children who are younger than 6, even if they don't do (n,n. understand) many things.' (S10)

- The schedule of the activities, which in many cases is not compatible with the schedules of the kindergartens or the ones of the parents:

'On Thursday we go to the painting class. Before that, we also went to the English class, but we gave up because of the schedule, they changed the class form 4:30 p.m to 5:30 p.m.' (S9)

- The low motivation and/or involvement level of some of the teachers who work for 'Children's Palace':

'(...) last year I also took her to the English classes, but she didn't like the teacher. She either didn't know how, or was unable to reach the level of preschool children and she was rather strict (...) the painting teacher is really nice, but I feel that R. has not registered any progress since she attends the classes.' (S2)

4.4. Ways of improving the leisure activities offer in Braşov according to the respondents

When asked to describe the offer of leisure activities in Braşov and to give ideas of improvement, most of the respondents brought up a series of aspects related to the diversity and quality of the offer, to the attitude, behaviour, training and involvement of the teachers in such activities. They also referred to the degree

of information offered on leisure activities aimed at preschool children, to the price of the activities and even to the geographical accessibility of such activities and to the measure in which they can address more consumers considering the age.

As far as the offer of leisure services for preschool children in Braşov is concerned, the opinions of the respondents were generally related to the existence of a relatively high number of such activities and to their high diversity. The respondents also consider it necessary to adapt these services to the needs of different age groups, to increase their geographical accessibility or to adapt the physical space of the location to the children's needs:

'The offer is satisfying (...) I found out from the mothers who have children almost the same age as V. that you can choose from a variety of options.' (S3)

'(...) I'd vote for an enrichment of the services on offer (...) it would be nice if such services were available in more neighbourhoods of the city.' (S2)

On the other hand, there were opinions contrary to the ones above, some respondents considering that the offer of leisure activities for preschool children could be enriched from as number of activities, diversity and reorganisation so as to group the children according to the performance which they wish to attain during certain activities:

'rather poor...besides 'Children's Palace' which does have an offer...but it is always crowded and you never get a chance to be on the list' (S10)

'[talking about ways to improve the activities] an offer of modular activities adapted for different categories of children. For example the painting classes, which could be organised for highly-talented children or for the children who are not naturally talented with painting, but find it relaxing and who can grow as a result of this activity (...) without the

demand that the children should be future painters. I think this is valid for ballet, sports or other types of activity as well.' (S7)

'There is a total lack of activities, I mean there are some activities copied from one offerer to another (...)' (S12)

The teachers in leisure activities in Braşov represent another component which could be made better, the respondents bringing into discussion the attitude, behaviour, level of training and involvement in the activities involving children. Nonetheless, the assessment of the teachers' activity is difficult for some of the subjects, who consider that the training of the teachers is heterogenous and the competences cannot be assessed 'on the whole':

'(...) the teachers should be trained (...) mostly regarding the attitude towards their customers (children and parents) (...)there should be a greater transparency of the teachers towards the parents (...).' (S2)

As far as the information provided on the leisure services in Braşov is concerned, this aspect can be analysed both from the perspective of involvement of the subjects in looking for information and from the perspective of promotion of such services. If one considers the first aspect, the analysis of the answers has highlighted the fact that the percentage of respondents, who do not hold information on the leisure activities, either because they were not interested to obtain it, or because they did not know where to obtain it from, is low. On the other hand, the promotion activity of such leisure services is low too and it does not correspond to the information needs of the respondents:

'(...)there are no information sources which could help me find out more things about the current offer. The websites, if available, offer little or outdated information, the phone numbers listed there are either not valid or no one

answers when you call (...) the lack of information is absolutely fantastic.'(S2)

'The offered advertisement is not enough and the best means of promotion is currently the opinion of other parents who recommend a certain activity and, most importantly, a certain teacher.' (S7)

The price represents another variable, which should be considered in order to satisfy the needs of consumers, according to the respondents. The opinions of the subjects related to the price stated that the activities should be cheaper considering the frequency of activities and the salary levels in Braşov:

'The price should be reconsidered because the salaries are kind of low for activities such as skiing, swimming or tennis'(...) [Talking about means of improvement] *lower prices, maybe ensuring the loyalty of the customers by offering them sales.'* (S2)

5. Conclusions

The conducted research aimed at investigating the opinions of the consumers in Braşov concerning the leisure activities offer directed to preschool children. To that aim, the objectives targeted were related to the identification of the leisure activities which the children of the interviewed subjects attend, to the identification of the reasons why they attend those activities, to identifying the extent to which the leisure activities offer for preschool children in Braşov is known to the consumers and to the identification of some means of improving the current offer.

The analysis of the answers has highlighted the existence of a diversity of opinions concerning these activities, and these differences were determined by the high number of leisure activities brought into discussion, by the particularities of each leisure activity (considering the content, organisation, price, schedule, location, geographical accessibility,

frequency of participation, etc.), by the spare time of the parents and by their financial possibilities etc.

Although the results obtained in the course of the research are valuable, they cannot be generalised at the level of the whole county, due to the fact that a qualitative research method was used (in-depth and semi-directed interviews) and the investigated sample was a particular, non-representative one, recruited using the 'snowball' technique-the innovators in preschool leisure services consumption. Nevertheless, the results could be used as research hypotheses for some marketing qualitative research, of large dimensions, with the aim of verifying them. Likewise, in the course of future research one could consider a limited number of activities (or even only one activity) with the aim of highlighting some particularities which appear in the offer-consumption process, as well as conducting some comparisons between different types of consumers (regarding the financial status, the profession, etc.) in order to identify the existence of significant differences concerning the request and consumption of certain leisure activities.

The consumption of non-formal educational services is the result of the parents' intention to enlarge the spectrum of extra-curricular activities, most of them being paid. The mechanisms standing at the basis of the decision to consume such services could be interesting for the ones who offer such services, helping them to promote their work in an attractive manner for the potential customers.

The mothers from the studied sample belong to a social category which benefits from a high level of education and medium wages, but are intensely concerned with the education of their children and willing to allot a considerable part of the family resources to their education. For this reason, they can be considered 'innovators'

in the consumption of leisure activities for children and their opinions could constitute starting points for new research directions of consumption preferences in this field.

Another research direction is related to the pedagogical training of the teachers and instructors who teach these classes. Considering the age particularities of preschool children, the teaching competence becomes decisive in growing the interest of children for instructive leisure activities as well, not only for the recreational ones.

Other information may be obtained from the address: elena.untaru@unitbv.ro.

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