

Assessment of the impact of educational services quality on consumer satisfaction and loyalty

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Abstract: *The present paper aims to determine the way in which the quality of the services provided by a private kindergarten from the city of Braşov impacts the satisfaction and loyalty of the parents as service beneficiaries. Thus, the objectives of the research have taken into account the analysis of the parents' expectations and perceptions regarding the services offered by the kindergarten, as well as the differences between them, using the Servqual model, the analysis of the correlation between perceptions and satisfaction, perception and loyalty variables, as well as the evaluation of the general quality of the service. The results of the research indicate that the kindergarten should identify the most efficient strategies for improving medical services, personnel training, daily menu, modernizing the safety systems, purchasing outdoors playground equipment and fixing the exterior aspect of the building.*

Key-words: *educational services, quality, satisfaction, loyalty, Servqual*

1. Educational services quality

According to Rahaman (2011), quality is a watchword for all the service-providing organizations nowadays, as it decides competitiveness during the age of globalization. Service quality has been labelled as an important differentiator and the most powerful competitive weapon that service organizations wish to possess (Pacheco and Reddy, 2016). The current tendency among service providers is to discover their clients' needs and desires, in order to adapt and respond timely to their expectations, as well as to construct and maintain a relationship with their clients, offering added value under the shape of commodity, amusement, promptitude, comfort, health, etc. (Quinn et al., 1987).

Service quality is the result of the subtraction between the clients' expectations and their perceptions. If the expectations are met, service quality is perceived as being satisfactory; on the contrary, if the expectations are not fulfilled, the consumer will be disappointed; if the expectations are exceeded, the consumer

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will be delighted (Parasuraman et al., 1985). However, one must not understand quality as the best service in an absolute sense, but rather as the best service within the conditions imposed by the client, which stem from usage and the retail price (Ilieş, 2003).

Christian Grönroos (1984) stated that service quality has two dimensions which are perceived and evaluated by the clients: technical quality and functional quality. The *technical quality* of the service refers to what is offered by the organization as a technical result of their performance. In the context of educational services, this represents the technical and material resources of the education unit, the aesthetics of the environment, physical facilities, capacity, personnel numbers, utilized materials, etc. *Functional quality* resides in the way the service is performed. In the case of an education-providing institution, this refers to accessibility, staff courtesy, comfort, competence, professionalism, credibility, staff availability, precision, efficient communication, hygiene, security, reliability and safety. There is a strong link between the two dimensions of quality, which demonstrates the institution's concern with being as well equipped as possible, with hiring and keeping efficient teachers, with offering appropriate resources and assistance, and with creating opportunities for teachers to improve their teaching practices (Hornig and Loeb, 2010) in their interactions with the kids, in teaching them the spoken language and the alphabet (Mashburn et al., 2010).

Romanian legislation guarantees education quality through Order no. 75/2005 empowered by Law no. 87/2006. According to this order, education quality represents "a sum of characteristics belonging to a study program and to its provider, which are meant to fulfil the expectations of the beneficiaries, as well as the quality standards that form the beneficiaries' conviction that the education provider meets the quality standards" (OUG 75/2005, p. 2). Simultaneously, education quality is ensured by: institutional capacity – internal organization, material assets, human resources, and the institution's capacity to attract human resources from outside, within legal limits; educational efficiency – the study programs' contents, academic achievements, financial activity; quality management – objective and transparent procedures of evaluating academic achievements, periodic revisions of the programs and activities performed, procedures of periodic evaluation of teaching staff quality, accessibility of learning resources, updated database, concerning the internal guarantee of quality (OUG 75/2005, p. 2).

Although Romania is at an early stage regarding the awareness of the importance of quality in kindergarten education, it has been highlighted in the advanced countries that it is important for young children to acquire high quality education experiences (Yoshikawa et al., 2013). It has also been recognized that many of the state programs do not meet the criteria set for providing high-quality early-learning experiences (Adams et al., 2007). This has led to the effort to improve the quality of the teaching practices through coaching, which, combined with other forms of professional development – courses, development communities –, has

helped to improve children's achievements and acquired abilities (Aikens et al., 2011).

The quality improvement initiatives required by a Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS) target a range of quality features, such as: teacher-child interaction – through a specifically designed pre-school curriculum and by applying strategies such as modelling, observation, reflection; provision to ensure the health and safety of children; environments of stimulation, teaching, learning; qualification of the staff and management of the educational program; financial incentives for teachers; on-site technical assistance as well as access to multi-level professional development opportunities: teacher, principal (Tout et al., 2015), preparing for school by monitoring the learning level of children and providing support for development and learning. Although there is surprisingly little empirical research on the impact of incentives and identifying the most effective incentives (Boller et al., 2014), established literature highlights that applying financial incentives to teachers (for example, being paid for performance) is relatively inconclusive, because the connection between incentives and student performance has not been demonstrated so far (Springer et al., 2012). The 2010 QRIS Compendium provided a description of the different types of incentives that can be offered at program or supplier level and may be of financial or non-financial nature. Thus, the financial incentives can be spent on quality prizes or bonuses to achieve or maintain quality, scholarships for higher education, funds for specific program improvements, while the non-financial ones can be used to improve child and family services, free or low-cost training, consultation or coaching, free or subsidized marketing, curriculum and assessment materials, free or subsidized classroom materials, free or subsidized outdoor playground equipment, free or subsidized technology advances, networking opportunities (Tout et al., 2010).

1.1. The Servqual method in the context of educational services

In services, quality often involves a comparison between the service provided and the one expected by consumers (Darbelet, 1993). Thus, in order to appreciate a service from a qualitative point of view, the consumer compares the “experience during delivery” with “what they expect from the service” (Fliter, 2006). Servqual is a model for measuring service quality by assessing the differences between customer expectations regarding service and perceived performance of the service (Parasuraman et al., 1985). In the original, Parasuraman et al. (1985) identified ten determinants, called service quality dimensions (tangible aspects, reliability, responsiveness, competence, courtesy, assurance, credibility, security, access and sympathy). Subsequently, these were grouped into five main service quality dimensions (Berry et al., 1990) that were obtained through focus-group interviews with different consumers and refer to: tangible elements, reliability, responsiveness, trust, empathy. These constitute the “basic skeleton that outlines the quality of

services” (Hoffman and Bateson, 1997). *Tangible elements* are evidence of the physical existence of the service and relate to: physical facilities, equipment, personnel, advertising material, etc. *Reliability* is the capacity to deliver the service correctly and at the promised performance level. *Responsiveness* captures the desire to help customers and provide them with prompt service. *Trust* is the ability to inspire confidence, security in customers, largely due to the competence, respect and honesty of the employees, but also to the reputation of the institution or company. *Empathy* refers to easily communicating with the client and treating every customer with careful consideration (Bădulescu, 2008).

Research on the quality of public services such as education is particularly rare. From the point of view of the quality of education services, studies illustrate mainly the points of view and concepts that emphasize the need and importance of conducting research on the quality of education services. The mechanism for assessing the quality of education services remains under the microscope, notably because of the lack of strong empirical research.

In pre-university education, a kindergarten is a “product” that includes education, teaching, management and services. Kindergarten education services, compared to other services, have the same characteristics. They are all characterized by intangibility, heterogeneity, perishability and inseparability (Han et al., 2012). A study made by the School of Economics and Management within the University of Science and Technology of China (Hong, 2006) started from these premises and provided a number of 14 kindergartens with an index system for assessing the quality of services in a kindergarten. Each of the dimensions identified has been converted into specific questions that have been used to investigate the parents’ expectations of service quality and their true feelings following service delivery (Ru, 2007). The questionnaire used by Han et al., 2012, from China’s School of Economics and Management included five parts: (1) basic information on parents; (2) parents’ expectations regarding the quality of service provided by the kindergarten; (3) parents’ perceptions regarding the quality of kindergarten services; (4) what is the most important factor in the service provided by the kindergarten: such as tangibility, reliability, receptivity, assurance and empathy; (5) parents’ general perception regarding the kindergarten services (Jing-lun and Jun, 2006).

1.2. The impact of Quality on Satisfaction and Loyalty

Previous studies (e.g. Anderson et al., 1994) highlighted that quality and consumer satisfaction are seen as key elements that bring financial performance and profitability to service providers. Thus, organizations in the sphere of services have to determine the dimensions of satisfaction-generating services as well as those that lead to lower levels of satisfaction due to poor performance, but which are important to consumers and require improvements (Anderson et al., 1997). Sanchez-Gutierrez

et al. (2011) concluded that consumer satisfaction is a complex human process involving extensive cognitive, emotional, psychological and physiological interactions, which implies a cognitive condition for the buyer to be rewarded appropriately or inappropriately for the sacrifices he has made (Howard and Sheth, 1969). Giese and Cote (2000) consider satisfaction to be a certain type of answer, linked to a central point and whose temporary existence is determined by a triggering phenomenon. Thus, the “response” is an affective one, based on a cognitive evaluation and of different intensity over time – which demonstrates the holistic nature of satisfaction; the keystone of satisfaction is represented by the choice, purchase and consumption of the product and/or service; the determining moment of satisfaction varies depending on the situation, whose duration is generally limited, which explains the temporary existence of satisfaction.

Satisfaction has two conceptual limits: an upper one that is identified as consumer delight, and a lower one, which appears as consumer dissatisfaction. The attributes of a product or service can belong to one of the following three categories of factors that can measure satisfaction (Fuller and Matzler, 2008): the necessity factors – their lack leads to strong dissatisfaction, but their existence does not increase consumer satisfaction; the enthusiasm factors – they lead to an increase in consumer satisfaction when offered, but do not generate dissatisfaction through their lack; the performance factors – they can evolve in both directions, generating satisfaction when working optimally or dissatisfaction when they fail to meet the customers’ expectations. Surprisingly positive confirmation of consumer expectations generates feelings such as euphoria or joy, which actually express consumer delight, while consumer satisfaction only involves meeting consumer expectations, as satisfaction is recognized as a key antecedent of loyalty (Rust and Oliver, 2000).

There is an undeniable relationship between the high quality of services and customer satisfaction (Johns et al., 2004), and the two influence the consumer’s loyalty level (Cronin et al., 2000). The general consensus is that a high quality service level should lead to an increase in customer satisfaction and, moreover, in customer loyalty (Shahin and Janatyan, 2011). A high level of satisfaction, generated by a high level of service quality, implies a high probability of the customer repeating their acquisition, developing a long-term relationship with the service provider and passing on positive recommendations to potential clients, those contributing to ensuring future income for the service provider (Zairi, 2000). Loyal customers are the ones who repeat purchases and tend to buy additional services, generate favourable advertisement and pay a higher price (Reichheld and Sasser, 1990). Loyalty is therefore a combination between a favourable attitude and the consistent and repetitive acquisition of a single brand over time (Dick and Basu, 1994), even when situational influences and marketing efforts are directed towards generating an unstable purchasing behaviour (Oliver, 1999). Most researchers approach and treat customer loyalty as a behavioural dimension and respectively an

attitudinal one (Moisescu et al., 2011). In this approach, attitudinal loyalty includes cognitive, affective and behavioural intent components (such as intentions of repetition of purchase or recommendation), while behavioural loyalty reflects the act of repeated purchases itself (Dick and Basu, 1994) or recommendations actually achieved.

2. Research methodology

2.1. Services offered by the Private Kindergarten

The private kindergarten included in this study offers, besides the basic curriculum, the opportunity for preschoolers to choose between activities such as chess, dance, gymnastics, music, swimming, skiing. The kindergarten's peculiarity is that it provides an intensive German language learning program, where children learn through activities and games to answer questions, ask questions and have conversations.

In order to maintain a healthy environment, there are certain special requirements that need to be met: medical examinations two times per week, increased attention to medication prohibited in the kindergarten, foods that are high in vitamins, periodically disinfected toys, hygiene and first aid courses followed by the staff, proper food – carefully selected ingredients in home-made healthy dishes.

The kindergarten principal defines the quality of education that they offer to the children as a close relationship based on trust, care, individualized education with appropriate activities for each child and the whole group, normal socio-emotional development, a partnership with the family, and last but not least ensuring the safety and health of the children.

2.2. Materials and methods

The quality of the services offered by an educational centre do not only refer to the healthy growth of children directly, but also to the development of the centre. By the existence of Order no. 3613/19.06.2014 regarding the granting of accreditation to private pre-university education units, the private kindergarten was in compliance with the provisions of HG136/2016, which entitles it to financing from the state budget for accredited private education, an opportunity that relieves part of the kindergarten's own funds from receipts, which then can be used for the development and modernization of the services provided by the educational centre.

The evaluation of the quality of the services offered by the private kindergarten that is the present paper's topic of study aims to identify the crucial point of the offered services' quality-related problems. At the same time, it is intended to establish how service quality determines the satisfaction and loyalty of the parents as service beneficiaries.

Taking into account the purpose set above, the research objectives are as follows:

- ✓ analyzing the expectations and perceptions of the respondents regarding the services offered by the private kindergarten, as well as analyzing the differences between them;
- ✓ analyzing the correlation between perceptions and satisfaction, as well as between perceptions and loyalty variables;
- ✓ evaluating the overall quality of the service.

The population surveyed consists of the parents of the children attending kindergarten. For the 2016-2017 school year, 92 kindergarten children and 30 nursery children were enrolled, meaning a total of 122 children on the approved places, while the number of parents who applied was 97, out of which 22 parents have two children and 2 parents have more than 2 children. Because the researched population is small, the sample is non-aleatory and consists of the 97 parents.

Starting from the system of service quality assessment indicators that was designed with reference to the Servqual model by Parasuraman et al. (1985), each of the indicators presented has been converted into specific attributes that have been used to investigate parents' expectations of service quality, parental perceptions that reflect true feelings in the delivery of the service by the kindergarten, and specific questions about satisfaction and loyalty. Thus, a questionnaire was formed containing four parts, namely: (1) Personal data regarding parents; (2) Parents' expectations about the quality of service provided by an educational centre (expressed in 36 variables); (3) Parents' perceptions of the quality of service provided by the kindergarten (expressed in 36 variables); (4) Questions expressing satisfaction (5 variables) and loyalty (3 variables). A five-point Likert-type scale from Extremely disagree (1) to Extremely agree (5) was used for these items. All measurement items used in this research are displayed in Table 1.

Between March 23 and April 10, 98 questionnaires were taken to the kindergarten included in the study and handed to the parents. A total of 91 questionnaires were returned. A questionnaire was partially completed and therefore cancelled, and 90 questionnaires were finally used for data analysis. This shows a response rate of 91.83%. With the help of the software SPSS17, the data from the questionnaires were introduced and processed in order to obtain the necessary and useful information for detailing relevant conclusions.

No.	Items
1.	The kindergarten has a convenient location and is accessible.
2.	The parking space of the kindergarten is adequate.
3.	The outside of the kindergarten and its surroundings are attractive (buildings, façades, green areas, gardens, kindergarten park).
4.	The outside of the kindergarten is equipped with outdoor playground facilities.
5.	The interior of the kindergarten has a pleasant, modern appearance.

No.	Items
6.	The teaching and pedagogical materials are visually attractive and specific to the age of the children.
7.	The physical facilities with which the children come into contact are hygienically maintained.
8.	The physical facilities with which the children come into contact (bathrooms, stairs, indoor and outdoor playgrounds) feature safety systems in use.
9.	The children's daily menu is varied, healthy, with fresh natural ingredients and can meet the nutritional needs of children.
10.	The kindergarten staff are presentable and dress appropriately.
11.	The kindergarten has Internet access.
12.	The kindergarten's website contains up-to-date information on the educational offer, the operating schedule, the practiced rates, etc.
13.	The kindergarten provides educational services in accordance with the pre-school curriculum.
14.	The kindergarten provides security services so that children can be safe.
15.	The kindergarten provides medical services for children.
16.	The kindergarten provides permanent supervision of children on the premises.
17.	The kindergarten offers children the promised services.
18.	The kindergarten has a sincere interest in solving the problems that arise.
19.	The kindergarten staff are very aware of the children's individual needs and satisfy them promptly.
20.	Kindergarten employees are always willing to help children with their education, care, feeding, etc.
21.	Kindergarten employees provide counselling services for parents and show understanding for the issues reported by the parents.
22.	The kindergarten staff are impartial, objective in providing services of: education, health, care, etc.
23.	Kindergarten employees are receptive to the suggestions and notifications made by the parents, and resolve them in a timely manner.
24.	Kindergarten staff are never too busy to meet the demands of the children and their parents.
25.	The kindergarten has a good reputation.
26.	Teacher behaviour inspires trust and the teachers are professionally well prepared.
27.	The kindergarten staff provide clear, complete information about the children's activity in class.
28.	The kindergarten staff are always kind, polite with the parents and their children.
29.	The kindergarten staff ensure confidentiality to parents regarding the particular situation of each child.
30.	Children feel safe in the kindergarten.
31.	The toys and playground facilities for the nursery children are different from the ones for the kindergarten children.
32.	The kindergarten program is flexible, adapted to the work schedule of the parents.
33.	The kindergarten staff always think about the interests of the parents and the children, and adapt the services provided in accordance with their needs.
34.	Kindergarten employees pay individual attention to each child.

No.	Items
35.	Kindergarten employees understand the special needs of the children and treat them appropriately.
36.	Kindergarten employees understand the individual needs of the parents and treat them appropriately.

Table 1. *Measurement items*

3. Results and discussions

3.1. Respondents' profile

After analyzing the demographic structure of the respondents, it was observed that 94% of the respondents are people with higher education; 54% are people between the ages of 30-39, and at the opposite end are those between the ages of 50 and 59, with a percentage of 3%. Approximately equal percentages, respectively 22% and 20%, are people aged between 20-29 and 40-49. Net income per family member divides the respondents into two categories: 36% with high income (over 3000 lei), followed by 27% with average income (2501-3000 lei).

3.2. Assessment of expectations and Perceptions

According to Figure1, the average values for expectations are above 4 points, indicating that respondents consider the quality of the services important.

Thus, for the statement that teacher behaviour inspires trust and the teachers are professionally well prepared (statement 26), a maximum average score of 4.96 was recorded, and for the statement referring to the existence of an adequate parking space in a kindergarten (2), a minimum value of 4.21 was recorded. Among the expectations that have high values are: the hygiene of the physical facilities with which the children come into contact (bathroom, kitchen, dining room, classroom, hallways, corridors, playroom and auditorium, etc.) (7) (average score is 4.91), the safety of the children in the educational centre (30) (score 4.91), the children's daily menu – which should be varied, healthy, with fresh natural ingredients and meeting the nutritional needs of the children (9) (the average score is 4.88), the employees of the educational centre – which should provide parents with confidentiality regarding the particular situation of each child (29) (score 4.88). Expectations such as the following have been placed near the lower limit: the fact that the educational centre should have Internet access (11) (score 4.48), that the educational centre's program should be flexible so as to adapt to the work schedule of the parents (32) (score 4.39), that the staff should never be too busy to meet the demands of children and parents (24) as well as the fact that the outside of the educational centre and its

surroundings should be attractive (buildings, façades, green areas, gardens, kindergarten park) (3) (score 4.39).

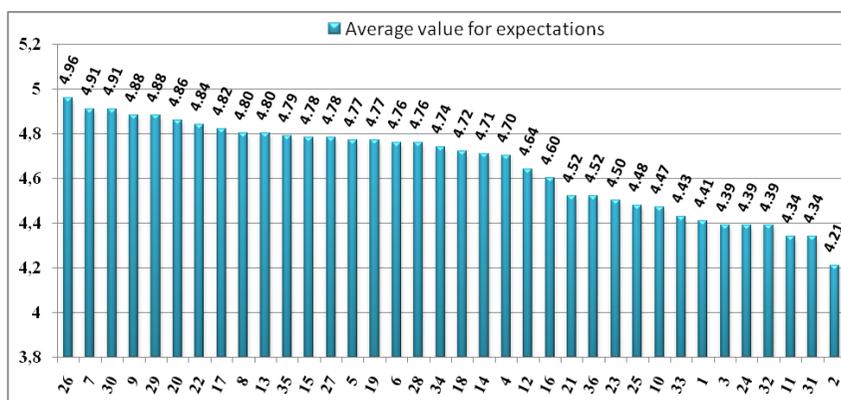


Fig.1 *Graphic representation of the average score for Expectations*

According to Figure 2, the average value for perceptions is above 4, indicating that respondents consider the quality of the kindergarten services to be satisfactory.

Thus, for the statement that children feel safe in the kindergarten (30), a maximum value of 4.96 was recorded, and for the claim referring to the kindergarten's adequate parking space (2) a minimum value of 4.30 was recorded. The respondents also found the following variables to be satisfactory (average score above 4.92): teacher behaviour inspires trust and the teachers are professionally well prepared (26), the hygiene of the physical facilities with which the children come into contact (bathroom, kitchen, dining room, classroom, halls, corridors, playroom and auditorium, etc.) (7), the kindergarten offers educational services in accordance with the pre-school curriculum (13), the kindergarten staff are always kind and polite with the parents and their children (28), employees ensure confidentiality with regard to the particular situation of each child (29). The following perceptions have been placed towards the lower limit: the outside of the kindergarten and its surroundings are attractive (buildings, façades, green areas, gardens, kindergarten park) (3) (average score of 4.37), the kindergarten program is flexible, adapted to the work schedule of the parents (32) (average score of 4.64), the kindergarten provides security services so that children can be safe (14) (average score of 4.66).

In order to assess the quality of the services offered by the kindergarten included in the study, the difference between parents' perceptions of the quality of the services received and their expectations regarding these services was calculated (Figure 3). Also, to assess the extent to which these differences are significantly different from zero, the t test was calculated.

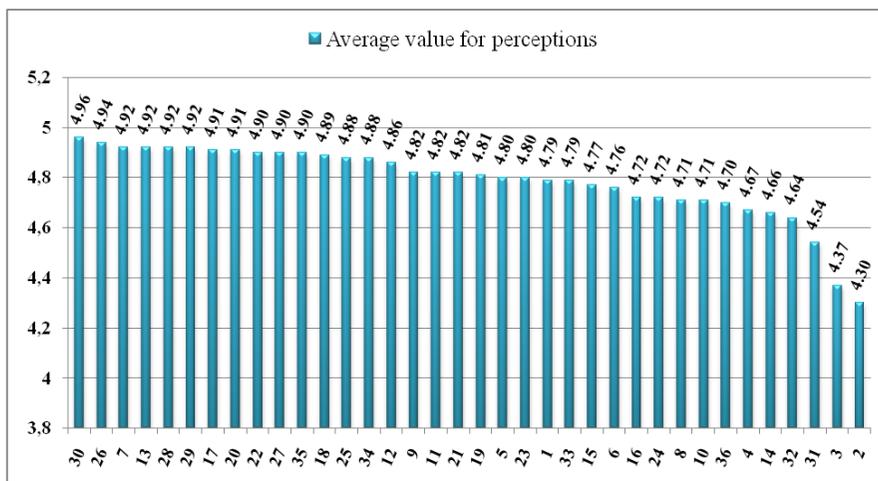


Fig.2. *Graphic representation of the average score for Perceptions*

From the analysis of the difference between the average score of perceptions and expectations, it can be concluded that only one variable has the value zero – educational and pedagogical materials should be visually attractive and age-specific (6). This means that the parents' perceptions of the quality of the materials used to work in the kindergarten reach the expected level and they are satisfied.

As shown in Figure 3, positive values constitute the majority and they will be grouped by significance level (p). Thus, the biggest positive differences, which are significantly different from zero ($p \leq 0.05$), are registered in the case of the following statements: Internet access (11) ($t = 5.69$, $p = 0.000$), the centre's reputation (25) ($t = 4.43$, $p = 0.000$), convenient and accessible location (1) ($t = 6.17$, $p = 0.000$), employees who always think about the interests of the parents and their children (33) ($t = 6.17$, $p = 0.000$) and the fact that employees are never too busy to respond to the demands of the children and parents (24) ($t = 4.72$, $p = 0.000$). Moreover, the respondents are delighted by the counselling services they receive (21) ($t = 4.55$, $p = 0.000$) by responsiveness to suggestions, notifications (23) ($t = 5.18$, $p = 0.000$), by the program flexibility (32) ($t = 3.14$, $p = 0.002$) and by staff's presentable manner and attire (10) ($t = 3.35$, $p = 0.001$).

Figure 3 indicates the fact that 7 attributes have registered negative values, and these refer to: medical services (15) ($t = -0.23$, $p = 0.820$), teachers who inspire trust (26) ($t = -0.33$, $p = 0.741$), the exterior and surroundings (3) ($t = -0.28$, $p = 0.779$), outdoor playground facilities (4) ($t = -0.56$, $p = 0.580$), varied daily menu, healthy, natural (9) ($t = -1.09$, $p = 0.278$), security services (14) ($t = -0.87$, $p = 0.387$), and that physical facilities with safety systems in use (8) ($t = -1.58$, $p = 0.117$). These gaps indicate that there is a negative disparity between respondents' perceptions and expectations, which means that they are not satisfied with those attributes.

Therefore, the centre should identify the most effective strategies to improve healthcare, staff training, daily menu, upgrade the safety systems, purchase outdoor playground equipment, and fix the exterior appearance of the building.

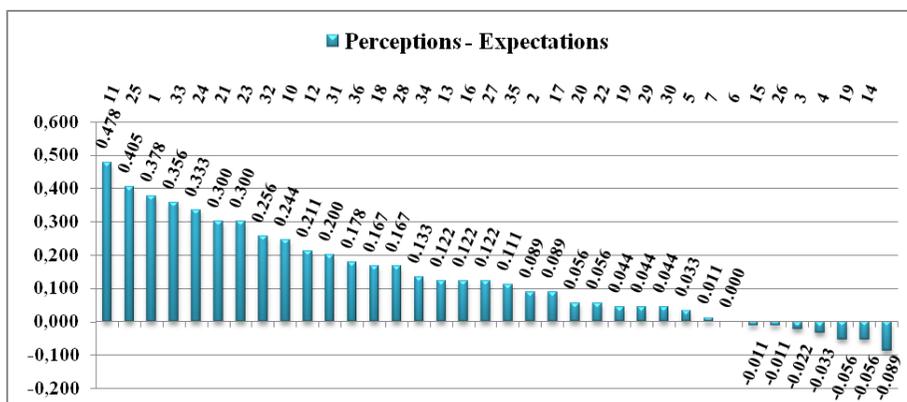


Fig.3. *Graphic representation of the difference between perceptions and expectations*

The overall quality of the service (calculated as the arithmetic mean of the differences) shows a positive value of 0.14, which indicates a better than expected service, a relatively high level of delight and general satisfaction from the respondents.

3.3. Analysis of the correlations between the respondents' perceptions about the quality of the kindergarten's services and the level of satisfaction and loyalty

In order to analyze the extent to which the perceptions of the respondents significantly influence their satisfaction and loyalty to the kindergarten included in the study, Pearson's correlation coefficient was used (Coef. P).

The relationship between the perceptions of the respondents and the declared satisfaction for the education services provided by the kindergarten was first calculated. The resulting data were centralized in Table 2, in which each of the respondents' perceptions has Pearson's correlation coefficient (Coef. P) values and significance level p (p) values for each variable related to the satisfaction of the respondents.

Table 2 includes 35 positive Coef. P values, which indicates a direct correlation between the perception and satisfaction variables, and a negative value, indicating an inversely proportional correlation between them. The highest Coef. P value corresponds to the correlation between the assertion that children feel safe in

the kindergarten (30) and the satisfaction with the education services (Coef. $P = 0.448$, $p = 0.000$), indicating a relatively strong link between the two variables. Satisfaction with the education services is also heavily influenced by the following perceptions: the outside of the kindergarten is equipped with outdoor playground facilities (Coef. $P = 0.412$, $p = 0.000$), kindergarten employees are presentable and have a proper attire (Coef. $P = 0.407$, $p = 0.000$), kindergarten employees always think about the interests of the parents and children and adapt the services provided according to their needs (Coef. $P = 0.396$, $p = 0.000$), kindergarten employees are impartial, objective in providing education, health and care (Coef. $P = 0.372$, $p = 0.000$), the kindergarten program is flexible, adapted to the work schedule of the parents (Coef. $P = 0.368$, $p = 0.000$).

Furthermore, the following were analyzed: the relationship between the respondents' perceptions and the declared loyalty for the intention to choose the kindergarten for child enrolment from nursery to kindergarten, the desire to stay in the same kindergarten in the future until the end of the preschool cycle and the desire to enrol the second child in the kindergarten as well.

Perceptions	Satisfaction regarding education services (S)	Enrolment from nursery to kindergarten (L1)	We will not change the kindergarten (L2)	Enrolment of the second child in the same kindergarten (L3)
1.	0.117	0.077	0.101	0.108
2.	0.137	0.003	0.110	0.028
3.	0.216*	0.108	0.186	0.293**
4.	0.412**	0.367**	0.111	0.299**
5.	0.324**	0.366**	0.182	0.380**
6.	0.239*	0.371**	0.362**	0.235*
7.	0.189	0.237*	0.007	0.181
8.	0.203	0.241*	0.331**	0.323**
9.	0.260	0.410**	0.446**	0.423**
10.	0.407**	0.367**	0.375**	0.309**
11.	0.097	0.061	0.303**	0.282**
12.	0.259*	0.321**	0.019	0.250*
13.	0.293**	0.414**	0.231*	0.263*
14.	0.080	0.155	0.229*	0.279**
15.	0.339**	0.319**	0.080	0.226*
16.	-0.007	0.116	0.075	0.283**
17.	0.259*	0.290**	0.309**	0.305**
18.	0.294**	0.385**	0.349**	0.310**
19.	0.365**	0.411**	0.286**	0.261*
20.	0.336**	0.523**	0.384**	0.340**
21.	0.241*	0.185	0.381**	0.224*
22.	0.372**	0.446**	0.250*	0.438**
23.	0.138	0.272**	0.344**	0.186

Perceptions	Satisfaction regarding education services (S)	Enrolment from nursery to kindergarten (L1)	We will not change the kindergarten (L2)	Enrolment of the second child in the same kindergarten (L3)
24.	0.158	0.348**	0.101	0.204
25.	0.077	0.166	0.182	0.062
26.	0.334**	0.416**	0.289**	0.173
27.	0.323**	0.498**	0.279**	0.343**
28.	0.360**	0.489**	0.247*	0.248*
29.	0.346**	0.516**	0.299**	0.373**
30.	0.448**	0.603**	0.358**	0.423**
31.	0.232*	0.163	0.123	0.125
32.	0.368**	0.281**	0.342**	0.211*
33.	0.396**	0.314**	0.401**	0.330**
34.	0.268*	0.573**	0.414**	0.548**
35.	0.289**	0.304**	0.340**	0.242*
36.	0.318**	0.372**	0.391**	0.352**

Table 2. *The Correlation between Respondents' Perceptions and Satisfaction, between Respondents' Perceptions and Loyalty (Coef. P)*

Note. * $p \leq 0.05$; ** $p \leq 0.01$. S = satisfaction, L1,2,3 = loyalty

Analyzing the correlation between the perceptions of the respondents and the intention to choose the kindergarten in the future for enrollment from nursery to kindergarten, 36 positive Coef. P values are noticed, which means that any of the perceptions directly affect the loyalty in question. The correlations significantly different from zero ($p \leq 0.05$) can be seen in the statements that: children feel safe in the kindergarten (30) (Coef. P = 0.603, $p = 0.000$), kindergarten employees give individual attention to each child (34) (Coef. P = 0.573, $p = 0.000$), kindergarten employees are always willing to help children with their education, care, feeding (20) (Coef. P = 0.523, $p = 0.000$), the kindergarten employees ensure confidentiality regarding the particular situation of each child (29) (Coef. P = 0.516, $p = 0.000$) (Table 2).

Regarding the correlation between respondents' perceptions and the desire to stay in the same kindergarten in the future until the end of the preschool cycle, 36 perceptions with positive Coef. P values are noticed, which indicates their direct influence on the loyalty concerned. Among the correlations significantly different from zero ($p \leq 0.05$), the following stand out: the children's daily menu (9) (Coef. P = 0.446, $p = 0.000$), the fact that the kindergarten employees pay individual attention to each child (34) (Coef. P = 0.414, $p = 0.000$), the fact that the kindergarten staff always think about the interests of parents and children and adapt the services provided in accordance with their needs (Coef. P = 0.401, $p = 0.000$) (Table 2).

From the analysis of the correlation between respondents' perceptions and the desire to enrol the second child in the kindergarten as well, a number of 36

perceptions of positive Coef. P values emerged, which indicates that any of the perceptions directly influences this variable of loyalty. From the correlations significantly different from zero ($p \leq 0.05$), we exemplify: the fact that the kindergarten employees pay individual attention to each child (34) (Coef. P = 0.548, $p = 0.000$), kindergarten employees are impartial, objective in providing education, health and care (22) (Coef. P = 0.438, $p = 0.000$), children's daily menu (9) (Coef. P = 0.423, $p = 0.000$), children feel safe in the kindergarten (30) (Coef. P = 0.423, $p = 0.000$), etc. (Table 2).

4. Conclusions and Managerial Implications

The present research aimed to investigate the quality of the services offered by a private kindergarten in Braşov, starting from the Servqual model, by assessing the expectations and perceptions of the parents, beneficiaries of the services.

The research was conducted in a field in which, in Romania, to our knowledge, the Servqual method had not been applied before – the preschool education field. This research aimed to assess the expectations of the respondents regarding the quality of the desired services and the perceptions regarding the quality of the services received, starting from the conceptual framework of Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry's Servqual model (Parasuraman et al., 1985). The purpose of this research was to evaluate the quality of the services provided by a private kindergarten in Braşov, in order to identify the services that are important to the respondents and the problems perceived in the quality of the kindergarten's services. At the same time, the research aimed to determine how service quality influences the satisfaction and loyalty of the beneficiaries.

The evaluation of perceptions showed that their average score is within the value range of 4.96 – 4.30, which emphasizes the fact that the respondents consider the quality of the services received from the kindergarten to be satisfactory. Towards the maximum limit of the perceived service quality score there are attributes such as: the children feel safe in the kindergarten, the teachers' behaviour inspires trust and they are professionally well prepared, the physical facilities with which the children come into contact (the bathroom, the kitchen, tables, classrooms, halls, corridors, playroom and auditorium, etc.) are hygienically maintained, kindergarten employees are always friendly and polite with parents and children, etc. Lower scores are related to attributes regarding the outside of the kindergarten and its surroundings (buildings, façades, green areas, gardens, kindergarten park), the flexible kindergarten program, the fact that the kindergarten provides security services so that children can be safe, etc. For the attributes in this category, the centre's decision-makers should try to increase performance to meet the expectations of the parents.

Subsequently, the difference between the respondents' perceptions and their expectations was analyzed, resulting in (1) a number of 28 attributes that exceeded expectations, which signifies the delight of the respondents and achievements in the provided services, and (2) a number of 7 attributes that registered negative scores, indicating dissatisfaction. The highest scores were registered for the following attributes: the existence of Internet access, which influences the loyalty expressed by the desire to stay in the kindergarten in the future as well; the reputation of the centre; convenient and accessible location; the fact that employees think about the interests of the parents and children, which influences satisfaction for education services and all the loyalty variables; employees are never too busy to respond to the demands of children and parents, which influences the enrolment of the child from nursery to kindergarten, ensuring that the respondents are loyal to the kindergarten, etc. Consequently, there is an opportunity to capitalize on any of these high-score attributes in the kindergarten's marketing campaigns, taking this information into consideration.

The attribute that attains the expected level is related to teaching and pedagogical materials – workbooks, boards, moulds, CDs, DVDs, toys, playground equipments – visually attractive and age-specific. This attribute influences poorly but significantly the satisfaction for education services, as well as all the loyalty variables. Because this attribute reaches the expected level and generates multiple correlations, it is recommended that the kindergarten improve the qualitative level of this attribute.

The variables that require improvements as soon as possible are related to: the medical services, which have a weak but significant influence on the satisfaction with education services and the enrolment from nursery to kindergarten; teacher behaviour inspiring trust, professionalism, which weakly but significantly influences satisfaction with education services, enrolment from nursery to kindergarten, willingness to remain at the kindergarten in the future as well; the outside, the attractive surroundings, which create a weak but significant link with the satisfaction regarding education services; the outdoor playground facilities, which create a poor but significant link with the satisfaction regarding education services and the enrolment from nursery to kindergarten; the healthy, varied, natural, nutritional daily menu that influences the satisfaction with education services, enrolment from nursery to kindergarten, continuation of the activity in the same kindergarten in the future and enrolment of the second child; the security services, which influence the continuation of activity in the same kindergarten in the future, as well as the enrolment of the second child; the physical facilities with safety systems in use, which influence all loyalty variables.

The medical services for children require slight improvements through better counselling of parents/legal representatives of children, through greater involvement in the early detection of various diseases, and, last but not least, through the

application of a non-discriminatory selection when allowing the participation of sick children to the daily activities.

Teachers' behaviour in terms of professional training and inspiring trust could be improved by accessing training and specialization programs, by providing financial/non-financial incentives according to established performance criteria.

Depending on the financial resources of the kindergarten, the following can be done: modernization of the building's façade, the green area and the playground, by accessing architectural, urban design and landscaping services. At the same time, the exterior with playground facilities implies purchasing new leisure equipment in line with the parents' suggestions.

The daily menu does not rise to the level expected by the parents; therefore, in order to find out the cause of the dissatisfaction, it is necessary to openly discuss with the parents, who should be stimulated to make suggestions for diversifying the menu or, in order to ensure anonymity, to apply questionnaires with open questions.

Security services and safety in the kindergarten can be improved by requesting the services of a specialized company or an authorized security guard. For the physical facilities with safety systems in use, the kindergarten has to equip the bathroom, stairs, indoor and outdoor play areas with anti-slip carpets, bumpers, handles, video cameras.

The overall quality of the service provided by the kindergarten is 0.14, which shows a relatively high level of satisfaction from the respondents, but can also be improved by allocating resources to the components whose perceptions are below expectations.

The correlations between the respondents' perceptions about the quality of the kindergarten' services and their satisfaction and loyalty were analyzed. The highest values were registered in variables such as:

- ✓ children feel safe in the kindergarten, employees are always kind and polite with the parents and children – these variables have the highest identical Coef. P values, which indicates a link of moderately high intensity between the two variables and the ones of satisfaction and loyalty;

- ✓ kindergarten staff who are always willing to help the children with their activities also generate a significant correlation with the variables of satisfaction and loyalty;

- ✓ kindergarten employees pay attention to each child individually, kindergarten employees are always willing to help the children with learning, feeding, etc., kindergarten employees ensure confidentiality with regard to the particular situation of each child, these having a significant influence on the intention to choose the kindergarten in the future, for enrolment from nursery to kindergarten.

The overall conclusion that emerges from this research is that the quality of the services offered by the private kindergarten in Braşov that has been included in the study plays an important role in generating and maintaining the satisfaction and

loyalty of its clients, which in the long run is essential for business sustainability, especially in a sector that is sensitive to macroeconomic dynamics. The kindergarten needs to develop its institutional capacity of keeping and attracting efficient teachers, and to persuade its own staff to love the brand, to live it and thus to become its personified manifestation when interacting with the clients. In order to accomplish this, it is necessary that the staff define very clearly and assume the values to which they relate, while taking into account the analysis of the clients' perceptions about the functional quality of the kindergarten.

5. References

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