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Daniela COJOCARU, Ștefan COJOCARU, Oana Mariana CIUCHI

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Conditions for Developing the National Program for Parent Education in Romania

Daniela COJOCARU¹, Stefan COJOCARU², Oana Mariana CIUCHI³

Abstract

The initiative of developing a nation-wide strategy for parenting education in Romania belongs to the Holt Romania organisation, one of the national providers of such programmes, as well as to UNICEF, which in the past ten years has constantly supported and encouraged the establishment of pilot programmes in this domain. Moreover, the national authorities, directly or through intermediate structures, have repeatedly declared their interest in developing a national strategy for applying parenting education as a form of support and consolidation of the services designed for the prevention of child abuse, neglect and exploitation, of school abandonment etc., and for the promotion of children's rights. In these circumstances, our study analyses the main four national parenting education programmes carried out in Romania by various non-governmental organisations and their features in terms of contents/curriculum, form of organisation, methods used, and categories of participants. Our research highlights the need to build a national integrated and coherent system of parental education for parents in Romania. This requires the development of professional standards, developing a methodology for training, certification and parental supervision of educators and public financial resources for developing long-term parenting education

Keywords: parenting education; professionalisation of parenting; parental support; participation; training; vulnerable families.

¹ Alexandru Ioan Cuza University, Department of Sociology and Social Work, PhD, lecturer, Iasi, Blv. Carol I, no. 11, ROMANIA, 700506, Phone: 0040.745375125; e-mail: dananacu@gmail.com

² Alexandru Ioan Cuza University, Department of Sociology and Social Work, PhD, Associate Professor, Iasi, Blv. Carol I, no. 11, ROMANIA, 700506, Phone: 0040.744788779; e-mail: contact@stefancojocaru.ro

³ Ministry of Education, Research, Youth and Sports, Counsellor, Str. General Berthelot, nr. 28-30, sectorul 1, Bucuresti, ROMANIA. Lecturer, Petre Andrei University from Iasi. Phone: 0040.723483724, email: oanapsih@yahoo.com

The professionalisation of parenting and parenting competences

The boom in professional discourses aimed at the child and at childhood has resulted in an *accelerated professionalisation of parenting*, seeing this situation as a real job, with its own rules, and approaching it with language originating in the organisational domain (Sellenet, 2007: 110). Thus, starting in the first half of the 20th century, psychology research has been intensely concerned with evaluating the human experience in the child-parent interaction sphere, in terms of *parenting competence*. The assessment of parenting success or failure is constructed unanimously, both in the rhetoric of the institutions dealing with child welfare, as well as in the academic discourse in the areas of psychology and social work, around ‘identifying children’s needs, establishing whether they have been met, assessing the impact of any shortcoming on the child’s functioning and development, describing the nature and probable origins of the difficulties adults have in exercising their parenting roles, and assessing any possible changes’ aimed at optimising the satisfaction of children’s needs (Reder et al., 2003: 14).

Sellenet (2007: 117) even speaks about ‘an obsession for satisfying the child’s supposed needs’, imposed by specialists to parents, starting from the intrauterine stage (during pregnancy) and up to adolescence. An important number of parenting assessment studies point to some authors’ concern – sometimes considered excessive – for defining a ‘parenting optimum’, about which it is now known how well it operates in practice, and an *appropriate minimum of parenting standard*, which would describe the minimum acceptable level of parenting skills (Reder et al., 2003: 14); however, the general opinion of several authors (Greene and Killi, apud. Reder et al., 2003: 15) about parenting evaluation studies is that ‘there are no operational definitions, no quantitative criteria, no standardised tests or established evaluation strategies that would determine to what extent parenting skills comply with, approximate or exceed the parenting minimum’. Among the strategies for approaching parenting in professional terms that Romanian social policies in the domain of family and child protection have promoted in the past two decades we find *parent education programmes*, community-based rehabilitation programmes for children with disabilities, foster care programmes, personal assistance programmes, probation programmes etc. (Cojocaru, 2009).

Oftentimes the new ideologies being promoted come against conservative environments, against family value systems that need to be reformed, reorganised and reconfigured. Therefore, families in today’s society increasingly need *external support* in order to adapt to these requirements (Catarsi, 2010); the parents claim either an inability to manage the relationship with their own children, or an attachment to values that have been transmitted to them through tradition, which they consider to be the foundation for valid models of family relations. This latter attitude – which in the domain of parent education is also a form for the manifestation of parents’ reluctance to attending parenting classes – is sometimes also

present in the discourse of professionals, who idealise the traditional family and consider it the perfect form of organisation (Cojocaru & Cojocaru, 2011). We must underline here that we adhere to the theoretical approach according to which the traditional family does not exist per se, as an objective reality, being instead a cultural product, a social construct of the traditional rhetoric and imagery concerning families, ‘a constellation of ideas’ (Gubrium and Holstein, 1990). Therefore, both parenting and childhood are social constructs featuring a number of characteristics that become more prominent in different manners according to context. Jones (2001) suggests that the sphere of *parenting competence* should also include the activities and behaviours pertaining to the sphere of primary care, carried out with the purpose of giving children autonomy. A number of recent British works (Reder et al., 2003: 3) consider that the purpose of parenting activities is to facilitate the child’s optimal development in a safe environment, these activities having several dimensions: a) a caring dimension, b) a control dimension, c) a development dimension, and d) an advocacy dimension, and in order to achieve this purpose parents require a number of resources such as: *knowledge* (concerning the child’s needs and the ways in which they can be met, concerning ways of developing a child’s potential etc.), *motivation* to invest time, energy, material and non-material *resources* and *opportunities*.

In order to analyse the quality of care, we believe it is useful to carry out an analysis of parenting responsibilities, the manner in which they are constructed and assumed by family members. Alvy (quoted by Small and Eastman, 1991: 455-462) proposes four functions and responsibilities related to parenting: a) providing for the children’s basic needs (providing resources and looking after the domestic environment); b) protecting the children; c) supporting the children’s physical and mental development, and d) representing the children’s interests in the community. Starting from the classification of parenting responsibilities made by Alvy, Small and Eastman (1991: 455-462) analyse these functions and the variables that contribute to the outlining of parenting responsibilities.

Challenges of parent education programmes

The interest in parent education programmes is due to the fact that they contain a number of “promises” of solutions to various issues such as child abuse, social problems faced by teenagers, educational failure, youth violence; also, these programmes positively affect grown-ups in terms of parental identity construction and of parental dignity, in terms of social networks, which they dynamise, restructure and strengthen, and in terms of parental stress management and reduction (Goddard, Myers-Walls, Lee, 2004). An important feature of parent education in Romania is the fact that they are aimed primarily at parents belonging to vulnerable and disadvantaged categories of population (Cojocaru, 2011; Cojocaru et

al., 2011). The delivery of parent education programmes for parents with limited resources continues to be a challenge for providers, despite the fact that the presentation of parenting practices using exercises that conflict with the parents' values remains unsolved (Goddard, Myers-Walls, Lee, 2004). The recent import of parent education programmes, of models that have been tested in other cultures has not gone beyond the stage of acclimatisation to the social and cultural circumstances of the various categories of parents; additional efforts and resources are needed in order to adapt them to the Romanian reality, to the specificities of the various categories of population, to local and family cultures (Sandu & Ciuchi, 2010). Local programmes, developed at the initiative of various organisations, without being based on a tested and structured model, do not go far enough in adapting to the parents' specific needs. Such programmes rely on a poor theoretical foundation, oftentimes filled with contradictions, incoherent and lacking substance, merely providing recipes and ready-made solutions to the parents' problems.

The professionalisation of parenting

Parenting has become the object of advanced professionalisation and has turned into a public activity, open to the control of professionals and parents, subject to the demands generated by institutional rhetoric (Cojocaru, 2008). The empiricist approach of parenting (the trial and error model), so familiar until not long ago, is increasingly seen as amateurish, if not irresponsible (Golding, 2000). Thus, the parent is considered to be the person that needs to develop his or her parenting skills under the new ideologies, and to undergo various forms of learning these roles. Some parent education programmes explicitly express this, asserting that 'the profession of parent is one of the most demanding, but also one of the most rewarding'. The emergence of parenting as a profession implies important mutations in terms of approach: the parent must be trained, must learn the secrets of this profession, must adapt etc. Thus, the exercise of parents educating and caring for children has become the object of a 'new morality' (Beck Gernsheim, 2003), evaluated from the point of view of the agenda the society develops for the parents; the model of the "reasonably good parent" or of the "good enough parent" promoted by the parent education programmes reflects the different agendas that operate at political, professional and personal level. The parent is not what he/she is, but instead becomes what he/she should become.

Parent education versus parent support

The purpose of parent education is to develop the relations between parents and children by encouraging support behaviours from parents and by altering non-productive or harmful behaviours (Small, 1990). Parent education programmes aim on the one hand to develop new, positive, behaviours and to eliminate the behaviours that affect the child's development. Small (1990) operates with differences in terms of *parent education* and *parent support*. As a self-standing entity or in combination with other programmes, parent education helps parents develop and improve their parenting skills, understand human development, use alternate approaches in child rearing and learn techniques for alleviating the stress that undermines parental functioning (Small, 1990). Parent education classes stress both the improvement of parenting practice, as well as the therapeutic side, the reduction of tensions generated by the fulfilment of parenting roles. The purpose of *parent support* is to improve parents' capacity of using resources form outside the family for their own and their children's well-being. We believe that the differences highlighted by the author are useful for the clarification of the manner in which parent education meets certain needs and produces certain effects. Oftentimes in Romania there is confusion in defining parent education: for example, any intervention on parents (counselling, moral support, support groups, information provision etc.) is categorised under "parent education activities".

Characteristics of Romanian parent education programmes

Details concerning the methodology

In order to analyse the parent education programmes operating in Romania we have take into consideration a number of descriptors, which we shall present here. Based on these descriptors a questionnaire was made, to be filled in by the organisations providing parent education programmes. In order to identify the providers of parent education programmes we requested the support of the General Directorate for Social Assistance and Child Protection in each county, and we received information concerning the organisations that are active in this domain of social services. Based on the information gathered from these local institutions we invited all the organisations to fill in the online questionnaire. The data interpretation does not have special statistic relevance, being used chiefly in order to identify analysis categories, common and recurrent topics, to identify actually some general aspects that characterise Romanian parent education programmes: Holt Romania (2010), Fondation Step by Step (2008), Fondation Our Children

(2008), Save the Children (2008). There may be several organisations providing parent education programmes, but their activity is insufficiently well known at local level. In order to classify certain aspects regarding the contents delivered by these parent education programmes, the forms under which they are organised, the perspectives in approaching parenting, the course curricula of four such nationwide programmes were analysed.

Lack of data concerning providers of parent education programmes

Although in the rhetoric of many governmental and nongovernmental organisations the discourse concerning the importance of parent education and its benefits is increasingly present, reality shows that there are few organisations developing parent education programmes as independent and autonomous services, an important number of these programmes being in fact just another part of other social programmes. An analysis of the data in the Reunited Electronic Register of Social Services, managed by the Ministry of Labour, Family and Social Welfare, points out the weak identity of Romanian parent education programmes. Of the 2670 providers authorised in the domain of social services, only two organisations are authorised by the Ministry to deliver parent education programmes: Holt Romania, currently holding an authorisation for the parent education programmes run in the county of Ia^oi, and the “Copiii No^otri” Foundation, authorised for Bucharest. Other organisations provide parent education as a complementary programme or service, delivered in child and family counselling and support centres.

Moreover, those organisations that do deliver parent education programmes, both at local and country level, only present on their webpages general information with little relevance concerning their own parent education programmes, their topics, form of organisation, information materials etc. There seem to be several explanations for this situation:

some organisations – especially those which have developed their own programmes through researching, experimenting with and adapting international programmes –only provide this type of information in the confined circle of course participants;

some local parent education programmes, developed through the eclectic import and mix of various models dealing with topics that are considered important, still lack a coherent configuration, a homogenous and coherent background;

the presentation of parent education topics carried out by some local organisations takes the form of advice, prescriptions and recipes, promoted mainly during information sessions, rather than in a parent education programme format (for instance the sessions held in maternity hospitals, focussing on presenting

information, or the punctual meetings focussing on certain topics, such as disciplining children, etc.).

Difficulties in measuring the outcomes of parent education programmes

The attempt to measure accurately, using statistic methods, the changes in parent behaviour towards children as a result in the parent's participation in parent education programmes poses a number of difficulties, the most important being the distortion of parents' response due to the social desirability effect (an effect that is enhanced by their participation in the parent education class). Accurately quantifying the changes occurring as a result of the classes would probably require the consistent use of observational methods (live or recorded) in the same family environment for a significant period of time, before the parents attend the parent education classes – in order to identify behaviour patterns in the parent-child relationship –, as well as for a significant period of time after the classes end – in order to observe any essential changes.

There is a risk of reporting an invisibility or a volatility of effects, due to the family system's inertia to change (especially when just one of the parents attends the classes) and it is likely we won't capture straight away the changes in parent's reflection within his/her relationship with the children. This is happening more often in the situation where parent education classes are organised chiefly in the shape of information sessions, without giving the parents the opportunity to exercise in practical interaction contexts during the classes (exercises, role-play etc.) and of experimenting at home, as homework, with a number of practices analysed during the classes.

A number of changes may be detected during the parent education programmes that entail several consecutive meetings with the same parents, both in terms of language and in terms of resigified behaviours in interaction with the others. The interactions between parents developed during several consecutive meetings contribute to the emergence of changes in the participants' language (learning new phrases, refining the definition process for certain situations, experimenting with new reference frameworks activated in certain contexts etc.).

Some programmes rely on the idea that *improving parenting skills* and connecting the parents to the children's needs should bring about a number of measurable improvements in the child's development. The research carried out in order to establish the correlation between the outcomes of parent education programmes and the changes in child development has shown that the programmes that had short-term effects on parents have an almost undetectable impact on the child's development (Brown, 2005). Therefore, in order to ensure a sustainability of those skills developed during the participation in the classes, it is necessary to create conditions for maintaining interaction between parents; our study concludes that in the cases of support groups for the parents that have formerly attended

parent education programmes, the effects of the programmes are maintained for a longer term.

Family focus of parent education programmes

Family-centred approaches (developing and promoting of prescriptions exclusively focused on intra-family relations) succeed in alleviating the children's emotional problems and in developing communication and relationship skills in both parents and children, but do not result in a significant improvement in the children's behaviours and relationship skills outside the family environment (peer groups or individuals from outside the family) (Wyatt Kaminski et al, 2008). Romanian parent education programmes are chiefly family-centred, ignoring the aspects concerning children's representation in the relationship with various institutions. The main assumption these programmes start from is that parents require information, methods and techniques that would help them develop their parenting skills. Thus, the elements of parent support are ignored, precisely the support that aims to optimise the ways in which parents identify and use resources outside the family.

Places where parent education programmes are organised

In centres/neutral assembly places. These are the classes that take place in spaces outside social welfare, medial or education institutions. Part of the classes are run in rooms provided by town halls, part of them in spaces belonging to nongovernmental organisations. Of the 18 programmes analysed, half were being run in such spaces.

Home-based programmes are as a rule those programmes that have an educational component, focussing mainly on *information provision*. These are local programmes, aimed especially at families of children with disabilities (three such programmes were identified).

In care, medical and education institutions. For example, maternity hospitals /placement centres/ kindergartens/schools/day centres. This is the most widely-used location for running parent education classes. They take place mostly in kindergartens and schools, but also in day centres and in rehabilitation centres for children with disabilities. 12 of the 18 analysed programmes were run in education or care institutions.

Online parent education is not significantly developed in Romania. Leaving aside the logistics developed (internet, interactive online materials, instruments that are designed especially for online use etc.) the development of online parenting education programmes is not yet common practice. This is also explained by the fact that Romanian parent education is still in its early days, being focused

mainly on vulnerable and disadvantaged families that do have neither access to such services, nor the skills of using them.

Duration and frequency of parent education programmes

In terms of *duration* of parent education programmes and *frequency* of meetings there is little research exploring the optimal duration of an affective parent education programme, or the optimal frequency of meetings. Based on reflection on past experience, parent education providers accept the idea that the longer term programmes tend to be more effective, as they provide the opportunity of effecting change in terms of parent attitudes and competences, of practicing interactions within the parent group and reinforcing some participants' behaviours. The course length and frequency of meetings vary according to each programme, depending on the organisation's resources, on target groups and on the model developed by each organisation. There are programmes that entail weekly parent meetings for a duration of eight-nine weeks, monthly meetings for seven-nine months and even quarterly meetings. The heterogeneity of programmes is marked, and there are mixed opinions as to how the time factor contributes to their efficiency.

Training parent educators

The analysis of Romanian parent education programmes provides relevant information concerning the specialised training programmes offered to parent educators. Based on this information, we believe it is necessary to underline a few aspects we found in relation to these programmes: a) on the parent education market here are parent educators trained within various programmes, according to various models, especially models imported from the international market; b) the duration of theoretical and practical training of parent educators varies from one programme to another, an optimal number of training hours has not been established; c) there are local parent education programmes provided by specialists in various domains without any specialised training in parent education, their expertise in working with children being considered enough in order to provide parents with training programmes; d) there is a training deficit in the area of parent education, especially in the case of local programmes, where ad-hoc programmes were developed, most often lacking any coherence or thorough theoretical foundations. Moreover, very often these programmes rely on volunteers and para-professionals lacking specific training in parent education. At country level, parent education programmes suffer from inconsistent practice and training standards, a situation further complicated by the multidisciplinary character of the domain (for instance, even in the case of professional parent educators, those who have different backgrounds may filter the curriculum information through the lens of his/her own training/background).

Professional background

The analysis of parent education programmes draws attention to the emergent and eclectic character of parent education, on the one hand, and to the diversity of the original training of the professionals delivering parent education programmes. The analysis of these programmes shows several directions in parent education: a) there are parent education programmes aimed at the school and pre-school environment, programmes aimed at parents of children enrolled in the education system, and in this case the parent educators are qualified teachers; most of these programmes take place inside schools and kindergartens; b) programmes aimed at young children (up to three years of age), in which the parent educators are social workers, nurses and physicians, and the parents belong to vulnerable and disadvantaged categories; in this case, the programmes are run as a rule in neutral spaces (town halls or parent&child resource centres) or in medical facilities (maternity hospitals or paediatrics wards); c) programmes aimed at parents of children with disabilities, provided by staff with professions that play an important role in the rehabilitation of these children (psychologists, speech therapists, kinesiotherapists, physicians, psychotherapists etc.). In general it can be said that local parent education programmes have a predominantly psychologising orientation (inspired both by psychological theories and by child development theories), while nationwide programmes tend more to the social aspect (stressing the social aspects of parenting, childhood, family and parenting roles). The prevalence of one or the other of these orientations does not exclude the other, instead it uses it in this eclectic universe of prescriptions aimed at parents. Even though the readings of parenting and childhood are different, each of the analysed programmes highlights certain aspects which it considers, explicitly or implicitly, as having greater importance for parents.

Accreditation system for parent educators

The accreditation of parent educators is a topic that has not been approached as a generalised practice in the area of parent education programmes. The absence of an accreditation programme is partly due to the lack of a national/regional infrastructure of parent education and to the lack of a supervision process in the case of many providers of such programmes. Most parent education programmes do not employ accredited parent educators; the organisations consider that the mere basic training in a certain domain is enough for delivering training programmes. The participation of professionals in various training courses in parent education is considered a form of long-term accreditation. Only the nationwide programmes have experimented, to a small extent, with accrediting parent education for their own models, developing a system of periodic re-accreditation of parent educators.

Intensity of parent education programmes

This descriptor attempts to identify the level the programme is aimed at. Depending on this descriptor, there are several types of programmes:

Information provision programmes. These programmes aim chiefly to provide (through various channels) parents with information concerning children's rights, parental responsibilities, children's needs, notions of child development, hygiene, diseases, breastfeeding, vaccinations, child care etc. As a rule, the most frequently provided pieces of information (as part of information campaigns) are those related to medical aspects, being accompanied permanently by the advice to see a doctor. This category also includes the information provision programmes run in maternity hospitals or paediatrics wards, stressing the care, nutrition and monitoring of infants. The information concerning education, children's rights, and other issues (especially the critical ones) are sporadic and depend of external funding. Of the 18 parent education programmes analysed, eight have a component of information provision.

Workshops are considered to be 'the first real level of parent education' (Carter, 1996: 10), because the asymmetry of power between the specialists and those who merely attend the course is reduced due to the intense interactions within the group. It is the form that most of the providers of parent education in the research (ten out of 18) consider as most appropriate for a specialised group intervention, while preserving the role of specialist/expert of the parent educator.

Discussion or support groups. These are considered forms of parent education that stress the reflexive aspect and the parent educator's role as a facilitator. This form enhances the cultural specificity of the environment in which the parent education programme takes place, drawing on the parent's experience and supporting the responsive character of the programme. Of the 18 organisations analysed, eight also use this form of course organisation in various contexts.

Systematic evaluation and planned intervention. These forms entail home visits and the organisation of workgroups that are intensively specialised for the various aspects of parenting practice in the presence of a specific problem. This form of parent education organisation was identified in the practice of two organisations, which provide parent education services to parents of children with disabilities.

Clinical intervention. A type of intervention aimed at parents facing various problems that create major dysfunctions in the family and affect their relationship with the children, causing major crises in the family environment. In the case of the analysed programmes, clinical interventions are planned as part of smaller programmes (with a reduced number of clients) focussing on categories of parents facing specific problems (juvenile delinquents, teenagers with disabilities etc.). This type of education setup was mentioned in the questionnaire response by five out of the 18 organisations included in the research.

Cultural diversity

The parent education programmes included in the research are not entirely sensitive to local cultures, being poorly adapted to cultural diversity (only two of the 18 organisations take into account cultural diversity when delivering parent education programmes). Parent education programmes are adapted to features such as children's age and children's problems, rather than to the social and cultural traits of the population (Frunzã & Frunzã, 2009). The parent education programmes in the research are adapted to the local culture of the various groups of clients selected according to the children's characteristics and the family's social and economic status, but they give little consideration to the cultural differences present in various groups (e.g. families with numerous children, Roma families, single-parent families). Parent education programmes are not very open in terms of involving parents in designing, managing or delivering the actual programmes, providing instead, as a rule, prescriptions, recipes and ready-made solutions for the parents' problems.

Funding for parent education programmes

Funding for parent education programmes remains an unsolved problem, although the institutional rhetoric at both country and local level states the importance of these methods in preventing certain problems (child abuse, separation of children from their families, school failure, neglect, child labour etc.). The data provided by the organisations running parent education programmes in Romania show that the main financial resources supporting this type of services are the organisations' own (11 organisations out of 18) and private funding (seven organisations). Only four parent education providers receive public funds, and three of them provide the services using the participants' contributions. The lack of a nation-wide or a local system for funding such programmes, especially considering the lack of a coherent system of parent education services, results in a vulnerability and volatility of such social services.

Conclusions

Despite the parent education providers' intention to attract as many parents as possible into such programmes, a number of obstacles have been identified, obstacles pertaining both to the parents themselves and to the level of support coming from the local authorities.

The parents' willingness to join/absence of motivation. Apart from having difficulties in organising their time (often invoked as an explanation for the parent's inability to take part in parent education classes), parents tend to consider

themselves as being good parents, not needing any specialised classes in order to exercise their parenting.

Difficulties in identifying parents with shared characteristics. Service providers oftentimes have difficulties in identifying parents with shared traits. The most often used selection criterion is the children's age; consequently, due to their focus on areas of expertise, many service providers maintain this criterion when defining and reinforcing the identity of the programme (programmes aimed at parents of infants, of toddlers, of school-age children etc.).

Quality and competence of educators. Taking place in a very dynamic universe, parent education programmes are forced to produce refinements of institutional prescriptions and to train professionals that are capable of adequately conveying the contents of the programmes. In the absence of a coherent system of professional training that would develop a common core of competencies for various professionals with different backgrounds, parent education programmes have little visibility and prestige.

Absence of support policies on the part of authorities. Parent education has near to no support from the part of central and local authorities. Only small local parent education programmes initiated or supported by the authorities have been identified. Local authorities have not developed mechanisms for supporting their own parent education programmes or for offering financial support to the private providers' programmes.

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