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THE NEED FOR AFTER SCHOOL PROGRAMS IN RURAL COMMUNITIES

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Abstract

After school programs has been widely studied over the past 30 years. Providing opportunities to spend leisure time in a productive way is a constant concern of both school and parents. Under the current conditions, the time spent by parents at work is much longer than in the past, as well as the frequency of changes in family structures is greater. Thus, issues related to child education outside the school are becoming extremely important. After school programs is not a novelty in the urban environment in Romania, covering stringent needs like unsupervised time experienced by children, preventing school failure, as well as promoting school performance. But in Romanian rural environment, such programs are still in their infancy. This study aims to investigate the needs of rural communities for out-of-school or after school programs. Research has a nonexperimental, qualitative design. Research methods are interview and study of documents. The group of participants consists of 40 teachers and 20 parents from rural area. The results shows that the school failure rate for children in the rural environment is increased. The level of knowledge acquired, reflected in the marks obtained at the national exams, is low. There is also a need for educational and vocational counselling, personal development for both pupils and parents. Also there is a need for programs that promote a healthy lifestyle by acquiring hygiene skills, practicing sports, and eating properly.

1. Introduction

After school programs appeared in the nineteenth century in American society, as an alternative to spending the free time of children aged 5 to 16. Initially they had the characteristics of clubs without too many educational valences, but they were an effect of changes in formal education and a symbol of the fight against the use of children as labour (Halpern, 2002). Towards the end of the nineteenth century, the need and willingness of American children to participate as a work force declined. At the same time, educational expectations for children have increased, legislative regulations, such as compulsory education laws, supporting the new perspective.

Halpern (2002) described this socio-cultural phenomenon as a "distinct culture of childhood", determining the prolongation of the period between childhood and adolescence. To take care of this time when children were deprived of any organized activity, in the late 1800s, the `drop-in` centres appeared. Later on, after-school programs also had a purpose other than childcare: to help families in which its members worked by providing children's supervision, community and cultural identification, social competence development, and academic training (Cosden, Morrison, Albanese, & Macias, 2001).

1.1. Relevance of after-school programs

We define after-school programs as being „an array of safe, structured programs that provide children and youth ages, kindergarten through high school, with a range of supervised activities intentionally designed to encourage learning and development outside of the typical school day" (Little, Wimer, & Weiss, 2008). Specialty literature shows that at an international level, after-school programs have different temporal forms: before and after school, on weekends or during school holidays. In Romania, the most frequent ones are those after the school courses end. Locations also have a great diversity, from specially built buildings (school, museum, educational centres, and social agencies) to improvised spaces.

After-school programs are differentiated according to the purpose and nature of the activities. Thus, the main categories are: academic and recreational programs. After-school programs of the academic type provide children with support for homework, facilitating learning through interactive games, using new technologies, developing various abilities that children use in school and beyond (Kane, 2004; Shernoff, 2010). These programs are of great help to children who have learning difficulties and need additional help to understand some notions (Durlak, Weissberg, & Pachan, 2010) as well as those at risk (Halpern, 1999; Gottfredson, Gerstenblith, Soulé, Womer, & Lu, 2004).

Game activities make learning more enjoyable, more effective, and provide students with a lot of learning resources. Thoroughgoing study and consolidation of learned notions can be done using the computer, a tool inaccessible to children from families with low socio-economic status. In these programs, students are encouraged to socialize with their colleagues, collaborate with colleagues, work together to solve tasks, know themselves and their peers (Durlak, & Weissberg, 2007; Durlak , Mahoney, Bohnert, & Parente, 2010).

Law no. 1/2011 of National Education refers to the School after School program. It specifies the possibility of the school board's decision to set up such a program to provide "educational, recreational, leisure time activities to enhance acquired or accelerating learning as well as remedial learning activities" (Law no. 1, 2011, Section 15, Article 58). This program can be funded by the state for children and pupils

from disadvantaged groups or in partnership with local public authorities, parent associations, and non-governmental organizations with competencies in the field.

1.2. The importance of after-school programs in rural areas

Education in the Romanian rural environment is still a problematic issue. Research shows that absenteeism, dropout rates are higher in rural areas than in urban areas (Bădescu, & Petre, 2012). The quality of human and material resources in rural school units is inferior to that in urban areas and the results obtained by rural students are lower compared to the reference group (Novak, & Iosifescu, 2017). Rural students are therefore labelled as being at risk or a disadvantaged group. There is a strong need to develop programs to support, remedy and improve school attendance for rural students, and after-school programs may be some of them. The importance of post-school programs has been extensively studied over the last 40 years (Vandell, Reisner, & Pierce, 2007), but the vast majority of research focuses on pupils from urban and sub-urban areas (Letiecq, Bailey, & Keller, 2007).

Research on these programs in rural areas highlights the need for the authorities to see them as "an investment in the community's future" (Cross, & Lauzon, 2015), diminishing the migration phenomenon of young people from rural areas in the urban ones, as well as thus, increasing the quality of their life. Also, other benefits of after-school programs in rural areas, highlighted by research, are: diminishing educational isolation and school dropout, increasing the level of resilience, improving social capital, developing a sense of belonging (Weisman, & Gottfredson, 2001; Feinstein, 2003; Diversi, & Mecham, 2005; McDaniel, Yarbrough, & Besnoy, 2015; Kahne, Nagaoka, Brown, O'Brien, Quinn, & Thiede, 2001). As far as the after-school program is concerned, there is a continuing concern in Romania to ensure the school attendance of all children, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds whose parents have a low level of education. In Romania, the after-school program has recently appeared in the last decade. Parents are extremely interested in the services provided by this program, due to the need to supervise children after the classes and the educational services offered, especially by doing the homework under the supervision of qualified staff. The program was first introduced by the International Federation of Educational Communities (FICE) in Romania and aimed at attracting children from disadvantaged backgrounds to school.

After school program entered timidly in rural areas, most often supported by non-governmental associations or by accessing European funds. Research on the impact of these programs on children's development and on the community, it is just at its beginning.

2. Problem Statement

After school program is a success in urban areas in Romania, but we cannot make the same statement about the countryside. In the rural area there are 1139 thousand children aged between 5 and 14 years, accounting for 5.66% of the total population of Romania (Păunică, & Anica-Popa, 2014). Considering that it represents a significant percentage of the school population already in the category of people at risk, we ask whether the protection measures offered by the authorities to reduce disparities are effective. The main disputed point is large numbers of at-risk students, struggle to succeed in school. The high percentage of early school dropout, disinterest towards the rural school institution, lack of attractiveness for well-trained

teachers, lack of active involvement of the local community. The problem is the gap in the literature between the benefits of this educational program and the caregivers and teachers' attitudes toward after-school program.

3.   Research Questions

What is the perception of caregivers and teachers about the benefits that a post-school program could bring in a rural school?

Specific questions: Student participation in the program after school would improve their school results? Could the child's personality be positively influenced by the degree of socialization, interaction and relationship with others, the degree of tolerance by attending the after-school program? Can an after-school program improve the act of teaching? Does the student's after-school enrolment benefit child-parent relationships within the family?

4.   Purpose of the Study

The present research aims to assess the extent to which it is necessary to implement the program in the rural environment by analysing the perception of the target population in the research on the possible benefits to pupils, their dependents, teachers and the community. The objectives of this paper are: 1. Identify the target population's knowledge of what an after-school program requires at school level; 2. Identify the degree of necessity of after-school programme implementation in rural areas; 3. Evaluating the perception of the potential benefits of the after-school program for the target population.

5.   Research Methods

Research has a nonexperimental, qualitative design. Research methods are semi-structured interviews and study of documents. The period of collecting the data from interviews was April - June 2018. The pre-testing period was March 2018. The study of documents analysis was finalized in June 2018. The analyzed document were: Law no. 1/2011 of the National Education, Methodology for organizing the School after School Program, Order of the minister of education, research, youth and sport no. 5349 / 07.09.2011, Law no. 272/2004 on the protection and promotion of children's rights, The strategy for reducing the early school leaving in Romania, 2015-2010, the National Strategy for Social Inclusion of Roma Romanians, 2012-2020, models of school-family partnership contracts within School after school program.

5.1. Description of participants.

The participants' selection was done with deliberately chosen. The group of participants consists of 40 teachers and 20 parents from 7 rural area from Brasov county and 3 villages and communes from Covasna County. In each of the 10 rural areas, 4 teachers and 2 parents / relatives were interviewed. From the group of participants, only 4 are male (2%), two teachers and two caregivers (one father and one grandfather), and the remaining 56 (94%) are female. This is explained by the fact that the teaching profession is predominantly preferred by women. Also, mothers and grandmothers were more likely to answer questions than possible male family members.

The group of participants is aged between 20 and 57 years. More than half of the total, 55% of them are between 20 and 29 years of age, both teachers and carers. 14 mothers, one father and 4 grandmothers and one grandfather were interviewed. A total of 30 teachers, representing 75% of the total, have higher education, undergraduate level, 2 teachers (5%) have master's degree studies, and 8 (20%) are substitute teachers without higher education. A total of 29 teachers (73%) do not live in the same village where they teach.

5.2. Description of research tools.

The time necessary for the interviewing lasted, on average, 20 minutes for each participant. Informed consent took place before the interview began. To each participant was explained the purpose of the research and its rights as a participant in the research. Every meeting was held in the school area. The interview was designed with open ended questions. All the questions were addressed in the same way to all the respondents with the opportunity to rephrase some items.

The interview guide for teachers provided 12 questions grouped seven themes: socio-demographic data, main problems encountered in the classroom, requests from beneficiaries to organize educational activities after the completion of the regular program, knowledge of the organization of a after-school program, the benefits of the program for pupils and their caregivers, the benefits of the teaching staff and the school, advantages and/or the disadvantages that an after-school program would bring.

The interview guide addressed to parents and carers included 20 questions grouped seven themes: socio-demographic data, time spent with the child, level of support provided in preparation for learning, type of activities performed by the child outside the classes, quality and amount of free time of the child, knowledge related with the conducting an after-school program, program benefits for pupils and carers, the advantages and / or disadvantages that the child's participation in an after-school program would bring.

6. Findings

6.1. Document Analysis:

The analysed document were: Law no. 1/2011 of the National Education, Methodology for organizing the School after School Program, Order of the minister of education, research, youth and sport no. 5349 / 07.09.2011, Law no. 272/2004 on the protection and promotion of children's rights, The strategy for reducing the early school dropout in Romania, 2015-2010, the National Strategy for Social Inclusion of Roma Romanians, 2012-2020, managerial plans, models of partnerships school- family in the School after School Program.

Following the analysis of the documents, positive and multiple intentions of preventing and diminishing the phenomenon of school dropout were found, the educational integration of disadvantaged groups, encouraging school units to initiate extracurricular programs, the continuous training of teachers in this field, the provision of financial aid in the form of scholarships, implementing programs with external funding, involving the social partners (municipalities, local councils, religious communities) in carrying out educational programs to remediate school results and leisure, disseminating examples of good practice, involving parents as educational partners.

We note that the analyzed documents show that in the rural area the school failure rate is increased. The level of knowledge acquired, reflected in the marks obtained at the national exams, is lower compared with the urban area. There is also a need for educational and vocational counselling, personal development for both pupils and parents.

6.2. Identifying the target population's knowledge of what an after-school program requires at school level

As can be seen in *Table 01 The participants' knowledge of the after-school program*, the vast majority of teachers, know some of the legislation in force that refers to the organization of after-school programs. The other participants in the research declare that they are unaware of such regulations. The latter consider that the State is responsible for creating such a program. Also, although the defendants do not know the managerial implications, a large proportion of the group (65%) claim that the school and the city hall offer these services free of charge, accompanied by food supplements and clothing.

If teachers, although they haven't had contact with such a program, sense the need to reorganize the space to respond to requests as diverse as: offering a hot meal, resting place, playground, parents consider that the procurement of teaching materials is sufficient for carrying out an after-school program. As far as the human resources involved are concerned, the vast majority of teachers believe that they can do it alone, but with little effort in planning new educational and recreational activities. Only 4 teachers have highlighted the need to complete human resources with qualified staff. Parents interviewed believe that teachers are the human resources needed and sufficient for the program to run smoothly.

Table 01. The participants' knowledge of the after-school program

Topics	Professors	Caregivers
Legislative knowledge	Law no. 1/2011 of the National Education, Methodology for organizing the School After School Program (30)	-
Managerial aspects	Obtaining the necessary approvals, drawing up the program	-
Material aspects	Organization of space, offering a warm meal, resting place, playground	Teaching materials, worksheets
The human resource	Teachers in the classroom, organizing extra activities	Teachers

6.3. Identifying the degree of necessity of post-school implementation in rural areas;

Table 02. The need to implement the after-school program in rural environment

Topics	Professors	Caregivers
The main problems encountered in the classroom	Child and Parental Involvement for Study (37) Frequent quarrels between children (16) Discrimination, stereotypes (7) Low level of training (28), Abseentism (18) Insufficient teaching materials (39) Insufficient computers (32)	Children do not understand each other (6) High requirements from teachers (9) Lack of Teacher Interest (4) Lack of teaching materials (3)
Requests from beneficiaries to organize after school	75% of teachers stated that they were not required to organize educational activities after the completion of the regular program	30% of surveyed parents want help with their children's homework after school
Type of activities performed by the child outside the classroom	Domestic activities, Recreational activities	
The quality and amount of free time of the child	Time insufficiently well-structured from an educational point of view	Qualitatively acceptable level

Table 02 The need to implement the after-school program in the rural environment synthesizes the main reasons that the interviewed subjects noticed in the form of needs to be covered. It is noted the poor endowment, insufficient didactic means, low educational level. Parents tend to justify the results of their children through the high expectations of teachers. They were interested in enrolling their children in after-school programs. Parents' requirements for this program synthesize the need for students to finish their homework at afterschool and not take more than 1-2 hours. Teachers, however, believe that the after-school education program should enrich and diversify the level reached in classrooms. Teachers see as necessary a 3-4 hours program, including hot meals, recreation, sports, intellectual activities.

6.4. Assessing perceptions about the possible benefits of the after-school program for the target population

We note in *Table 03. Benefits of the post-school program* what there are differences between the opinions of teachers and those of their caregivers. If the vast majority of parents consider that the main objective of the after-school is solving homework, teachers highlight the possibility for students to develop skills that are less practiced at school, the beneficial effect that such a program could have on the cohesion of the classroom and the offering of an alternative to avoid excessive internet and media consumption. Teachers are aware the development of this type of program could help prevent student's dropout, and also maintain the collective of teachers. In addition to the financial benefits that teachers can get, they note the possibility of building deeper relationships with students and developing a higher level of professional satisfaction.

Table 03. Benefits of the post-school program

Topics	Professors	Caregivers
Program Benefits for students and tutors	Improving school results (40); Proper diet (35); Training of intellectual work skills; Socializing and forming civic and pro-social behaviours; Preparing homework under the supervision of a teacher (2); Balanced program for children (6). Social and behavioural development, improving student behaviour, interaction and relationship between better students, children socialize (15); Troubleshooting Learners' Errors (8); Participating in various extracurricular activities (7); Improving student outcomes (3); A solution for busy parents (19); Avoid the tendency child to sit for hours on TV / computer / tablet / phone and see things harmful to development (13); Reducing absenteeism (28); Avoiding pupils' exploitation in domestic activities (22)	Specialized help for homework (17) Better school results (20) Proper diet (15) Lack of worries (14)
Benefits of the Teacher	Improving the financial situation of the teaching staff (34) Professional Satisfaction (15); In-depth knowledge of pupils, their interests, their concerns (31)	Revenue growth (17) Continuing coursework (8)
The benefits of the school	Effective organization of work (6) Preventing early school dropout (27) Keeping teaching staff (18)	Increases the prestige of the school
Disadvantages of the after-school program	Less time spent with family (13) Increasing parents' lack of interest in to the child's educational activity (24)	Cost involved (20) Reduced household assistance (15) Loss of time with unnecessary things (5)

The main concerns of parents are related to the possibility of involving an additional cost to bear and the loss of help in household affairs. We note the parents' suspicion of the usefulness of learning new competences within the program that cannot have direct and immediate finality in the specificity of the community they live in (for example, "And at what all this learning will be useful? He will not be able to live by himself. ").

7.   Conclusion

The data of this study provides relevant information about the perception of individuals participating in research (caregivers and teachers) about the need to implement an after-school program in rural areas. The results analysis shows that the school failure rate for children in the rural environment is increased. The level of knowledge acquired, reflected in the marks obtained at the national exams, is low. There is also a need for educational and vocational counselling, personal development for both pupils and parents. Also there is a need for programs that promote a healthy lifestyle by acquiring hygiene skills, practicing sports, and eating properly. The research has some limitation. The number of respondents is a modest one. Upcoming studies should take into consideration a mixed-method design.

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