



Early Childhood Education Management in Ante-Preschool and Preschool Education Units in Mureș County: Institutional Analysis of Educational Leadership Organization, Resources and Practices

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Abstract. This study examines the management of early childhood education in pre-kindergarten and kindergarten units in Mureș County, Romania, with a focus on organization, resources, educational quality, and leadership practices. Based on questionnaire data collected from 27 educational units, the analysis shows that early childhood education is generally recognized as a managerial priority and supported through positive institutional practices. However, the findings also reveal significant structural challenges, including insufficient staff, limited infrastructure, uneven access to resources, and disparities between urban and rural settings. The study concludes that the main difficulty lies not in the lack of managerial commitment, but in the gap between institutional engagement and the actual capacity to ensure consistent, equitable, and sustainable educational quality.

Keywords: early childhood education; educational management; institutional leadership; resource inequality; Mureș County

1 The mission of this study

According to Article 15 para. 1 of Law no. 198 of July 4, 2023 on pre-university education, „Pre-university education is carried out on the following levels: a) early education (3 months-6 years), consisting of ante-preschool education (3 months-3 years) and preschool education (3-6 years), both comprising the small group, the middle group and the large group;...”. The present study focuses on preschool education, from a managerial perspective, taking as a reference point one of the most relevant counties of Romania, namely Mureș County. The relevance of the county is mainly given by the

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tremely diverse „coloratura” of the people concerned, namely children in the early preschool education period, coming from a variety of ethnicities, Romanian, Hungarian, German, Roma etc. Data related to this variety are presented in the early part of the study. The general objective of the study is to evaluate the managerial dimensions of early childhood education in schools in Mureș County, in order to identify the level of organization, institutional needs and optimization directions. The main role of the study is to provide a real diagnosis of how early childhood education is managed at county level. The study aims to finally allow the substantiation of managerial, administrative and educational policy decisions; also, the possible existence of systemic bottlenecks due to lack of staff, spaces, facilities, training or funding. The study is useful for the management of schools in Romania, for the County School Inspectorates, for local authorities, for teachers and coordinators at preschool level, for parents and the community and for the academic environment.

The analysis maintains the idea that early childhood education is valued at the institutional level, but emphasizes that good managerial orientation does not eliminate structural pressures regarding personnel, infrastructure, equitable access and family involvement.

2 The relevance of the choice of the study on Mureș County

Mureș County represents a unique space for research on the management of preschool education, as it simultaneously brings together several significant characteristics such as a varied distribution of urban and rural localities, diverse ethnic communities and different organizational forms of early childhood education provision: kindergartens with legal personality, kindergartens assigned to schools and structures integrated into larger units. It is important to understand the direction to follow for the educational development applicable in counties with a varied and multicultural demographic profile [1]. This diversity forces educational management to operate flexibly, contextualized, and sensitive to differences in resources and community.

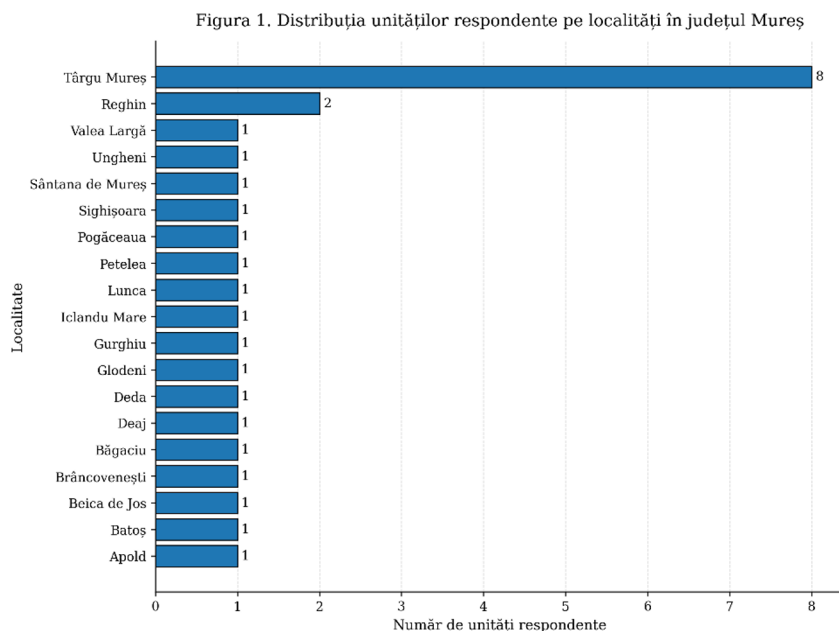
According to public documents [2], the official network of units with legal personality and structures with ante-preschool/preschool level in Mureș County, inventories a total of 159 positions, of which 146 include or are kindergartens, while 13 are nurseries. This landmark is important because it shows that early childhood education operates in a wide and heterogeneous network, and any managerial conclusion must be read in relation to this institutional complexity, and not only through the prism of isolated units.

According to official public data, Mureș County had a resident population of 518,193 inhabitants at the 2021 Census, and a more recent estimate indicates 519,344 inhabitants on January 1, 2023. The age structure highlights 16.8% young population (0–14 years), 63.5% adult population (15–64 years) and 19.7% elderly population (65 years and over), which confirms the presence of a demographic aging process at county level as well [3]. A more recent value, in the public document “Profile of Mureș County” published by ADR Centru, based on National Institute of Statistics data, appears that the resident population on January 1, 2023 was 519,344 people [4].

3 Research methodology

To approach the theme, we used three methodological plans: field research through applied questionnaires¹ from Mureş County; correlation of results with the official institutional context; analytical interpretation of closed and open-ended answers. The total number of respondents was 27 units in Mureş County. The figures(diagrams) are realized with AI support exclusive on our data from the field and the validation of translation is realized using English translation application.

¹ The questionnaire contains the following aspects: 1. Name of the institution: 2. Location: 3. Setting: 4. Type of institution: 5. Approximate number of children enrolled in preschool: 6. Do you consider early childhood education to be a priority in the institution's management? 7. Are there clear objectives regarding preschool development in the institution's management documents? 8. How would you rate communication between the institution's leadership and early childhood education staff? 9. To what extent does the institution's management support the quality of activities carried out at the preschool level? 10. Do you consider the current teaching staff sufficient for current needs? 11. Do early childhood educators participate in continuing professional development? 12. How would you rate the material resources allocated to early childhood education? 13. What is the institution's primary need regarding early childhood education? 14. Do you consider that educational activities meet the children's actual developmental needs? 15. Are modern and interactive methods used to work with children in the institution? 16. Is the child's transition from preschool to school adequately supported? 17. How do you assess the collaboration between the institution and parents in early childhood education? 18. Does the facility develop partnerships with local authorities, NGOs, or other community stakeholders to support early childhood education? 19. Does the facility's leadership encourage new initiatives, projects, or partnerships to advance early childhood education? 20. What do you consider to be the main challenge facing early childhood education in your county? 21. What measure should be prioritized to improve the management of early childhood education?

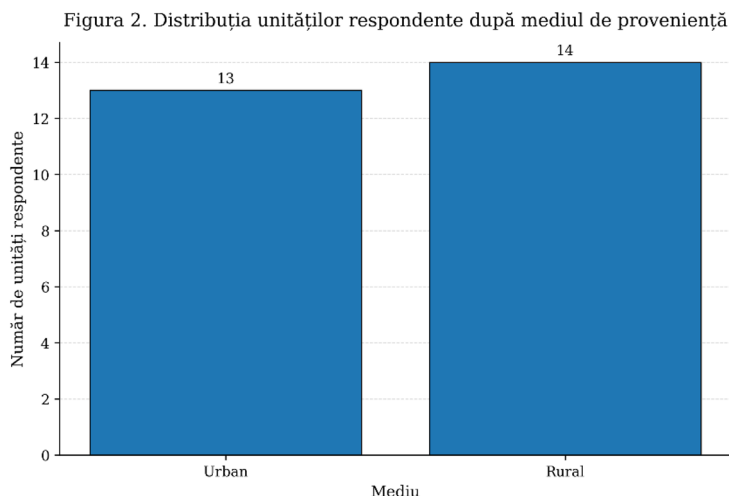


Sursa: prelucrare proprie pe baza chestionarelor aplicate unităților de învățământ din județul Mureș. N = 27 unități respondente, distribuite în 19 localități.

Fig. 1. Distribution of respondent units by localities in Mureș County.

The item regarding the name of the unit highlights a diverse institutional sample², made up of educational units with different organizational profiles, distributed both in urban and rural areas.

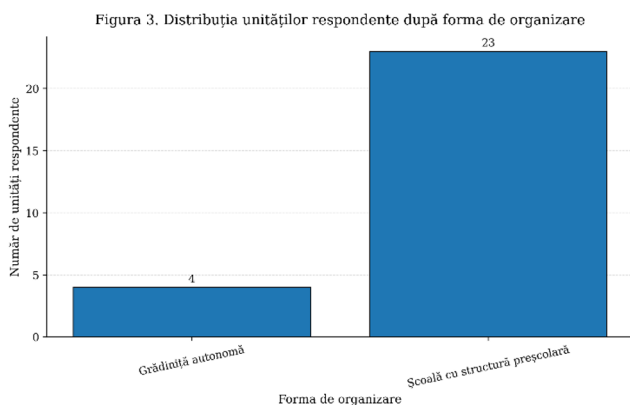
² Gymnasium School. "Mihai Viteazul" – "Dumbrava Minunată" Kindergarten with extended hours; Extended Kindergarten No. 6; "Adorjányi Károly" Secondary School – Glodeni; Kindergarten with Extended Program no. 10, structure of the Dacia Secondary School; "King Mihai I" Forestry High School Gurghiu / Kindergarten with P.N. and P.P. Gurghiu; "Victor Jinga" Secondary School – Sighișoara; Băgaciu Secondary School; "Vasile Netea" Technological High School – Deda; "George Coșbuc" Secondary School – structure of the PP "Co-drișor" Kindergarten; Valea Larga Secondary School; Pogăceaua Secondary School; Secondary School No. 7 Târgu Mureș – structure of the "Manpel" Extended Program Kindergarten; Petelea Secondary School; Lunca Secondary School; "Emil Drăgan" Secondary School – Ungheni; "Ion Chinezu" Secondary School – Sântana de Mureș; "Liviu Rebreanu" Secondary School / "Licurici" P.P. Kindergarten; "Kemeny Janos" Secondary School – Brâncovenești; Secondary School – Iclandu Mare; Kindergarten with Extended Program no. 5 – Reghin; Batoș Secondary School; "Europa" Secondary School – G.P.P. structure "The House from Stories"; Kindergarten with Extended Program no. 4 – Reghin; Apold Secondary School; "Liviu Rebreanu" Secondary School – Târgu Mureș; Beica de Jos Commune Secondary School; Deaj Village Secondary School



Sursa: prelucrare proprie pe baza chestionarelor aplicate unităților de învățământ din județul Mureș. N = 27 unități respondente.

Fig. 2. Distribution of the respondent units by environment of origin

The predominance of schools with a preschool structure, together with the presence of distinct kindergartens indicates that early childhood education in Mureș County is administered in a mixed organizational framework, which implies differentiated managerial approaches depending on the type of unit and the specificity of the local community.



Sursa: prelucrare proprie pe baza chestionarelor aplicate unităților de învățământ din județul Mureș. N = 27 unități respondente.

Fig. 3. Distribution of respondent units according to the form of organization

The study includes various units in type and location, which gives the research relevance and contextual representativeness. It is observed that early education is provided

not only through autonomous kindergartens, but also through preschool structures integrated into schools or high schools, an aspect that directly influences the managerial organization of this educational level.

The sample does not exhaustively cover the county network reported by ISJ Mureș, but it is diverse enough to outline clear trends: units predominate with few rural units(14); both pre-school schools(23) and distinct kindergartens are represented(4); units come from urban and rural localities with different institutional profiles, As a result, the study has diagnostic and comparative relevance.

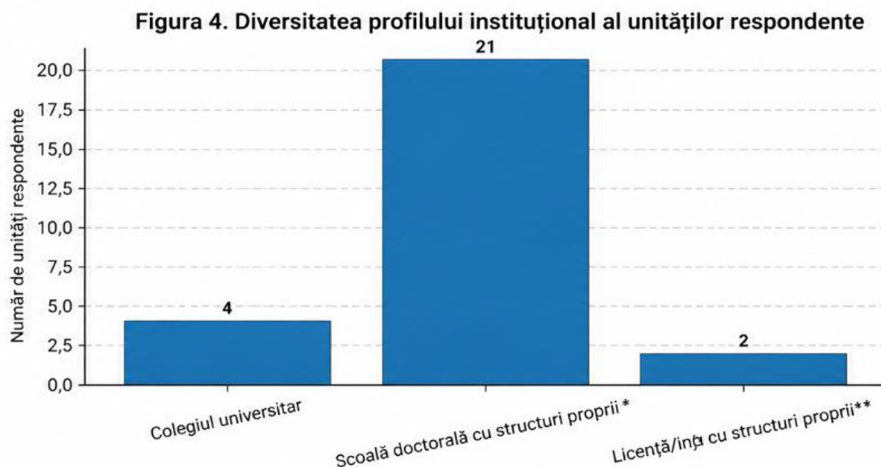


Fig. 4. Diversity of the institutional profile of the respondent units. Diversity of the institutional profile of the respondent units. Source: own processing based on questionnaires applied to schools in Mureș County. N = 27 respondent units. The figure highlights the predominance of secondary schools that include preschool structures in relation to autonomous kindergartens and high schools that include preschool level.

4 Management and organization

From the perspective of the „Management and organization” section (questions 6–9), the answers received from Mureș County outline a predominantly positive image of the way in which early education is positioned and supported at the institutional level. In the questionnaires completed for this section, the answer to the question regarding the priority given to early childhood education is constantly „Yes”, which suggests that, at the level of managerial perception, this educational segment is explicitly assumed as an important direction in the investigated units. The same uniformity also appears to the question of whether there are clear objectives in management documents, where the answers also consistently indicate „Yes”. A first scientific conclusion that can be formulated is that, in Mureș County, early education appears institutionally legitimized in the managerial discourse, being explicitly included in the priorities and objectives of

the respondent educational units. This result indicates the existence of a formal framework of managerial assumption of early childhood education and suggests that, at least at a declarative and strategic level, the units do not treat the preschool level as a marginal annex of the school organization, but as a relevant area in their management architecture.

On the other hand, the complete questionnaire base reflects that managerial assumption is not perfectly uniform in intensity. Although many units describe communication between management and teaching staff as very good and appreciate managerial support for the quality of activities as very high, there are also „Good” or „To a large extent” responses, suggesting differences in organizational maturity. In other words, the managerial orientation is generally favorable, but it is not identical everywhere.

As regards communication between management and teachers in early education, the overwhelming majority of responses rate it as „very good”, but there are also „Good” responses. This pattern suggests an organizational climate perceived as functional, based on collaborative relationships and an efficient circulation of information between the decision-making level and the teaching staff. From a managerial point of view, this is an important indicator, because in early childhood education the quality of the instructional-educational process depends to a large extent on the coherence of decisions, on internal feedback. On the other hand, it is certain that efforts can still be made in communication, since the „Very good” indicator is not present everywhere.

Figura 5. Evaluarea comunicării dintre conducere și personalul didactic

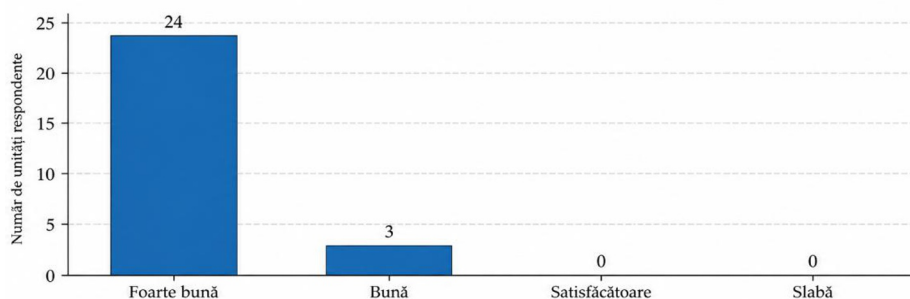


Fig. 5. Assessment of communication between management and teaching staff. The figure captures the distribution of the answers to the item on communication between the management of the unit and the teaching staff in early education.

Regarding the management support provided to the quality of activities carried out at preschool level, the responses focus on two favorable areas: „to a very large extent” and „to a large extent”. However, the first option is dominant, which shows that respondents perceive a high level of managerial involvement in supporting educational activities. However, there are also some situations in which the appreciation is moderated to a „large extent”, which introduces a useful nuance: although the overall picture is positive, the intensity of managerial support is not absolutely uniform across all units.

The data from the open responses reflect that there is a clear difference between the strategic ownership of early childhood education and the effective coherence of this

sector. In the open responses, tensions generated by the different status of the units explicitly appear. In some open answers, the existence of non-unitary administrative treatments in matters that directly influence the organization of early childhood education is explicitly pointed out. One respondent points out that kindergartens in the structure of schools are treated differently from kindergartens with legal personality in terms of methodical commissions, holiday schedule or other organizational aspects. For this reason, the general picture should not be described simplistically as „very good”, but rather as one in which managerial assumption exists, but the implementation framework is not always uniform. Therefore, one of the updated conclusions is that early childhood education benefits from institutional recognition, but it still needs managerial standardization and a firmer clarification of the coordination mechanisms between autonomous units and district structures.

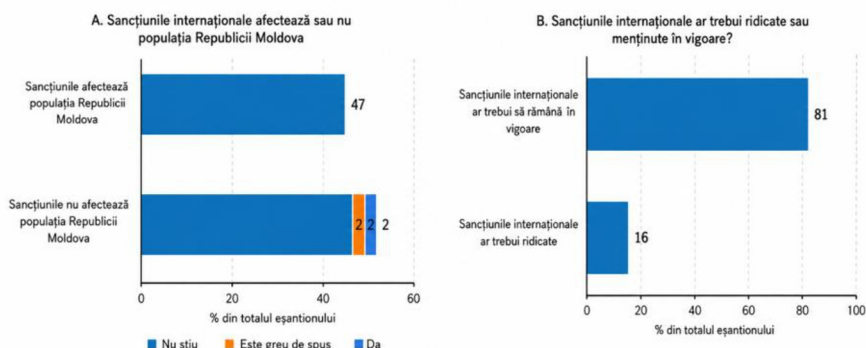


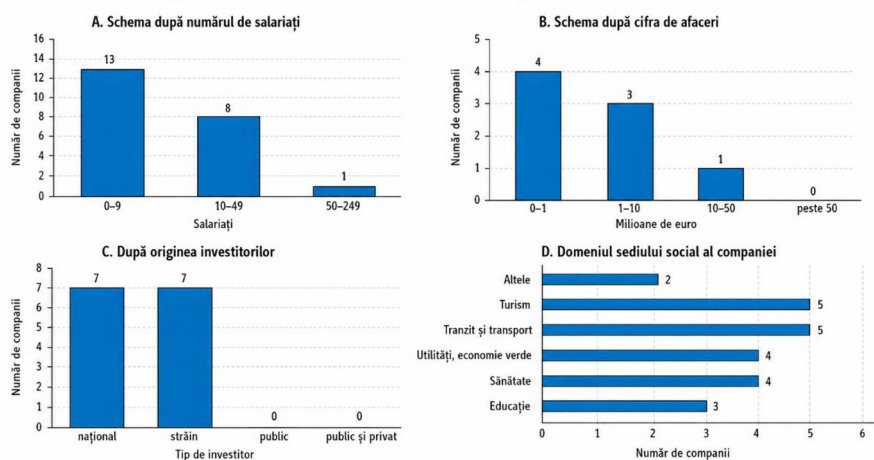
Fig. 6. Difference between strategic assumption and effective coherence of early childhood education management. Panel A summarizes the responses to the closed items on the priority given to early childhood education and the existence of clear objectives in the management documents. Panel B summarizes, through conservative thematic coding, the mentions in the open answers regarding the need for managerial professionalization and the differences in treatment between the preschool structures and the units with legal personality.

Therefore, the main conclusion for the „Management and Organization” section is that, in Mureș County, the analyzed answers indicate a management perceived as favorable to early education, strategically oriented, communicative and supportive of the quality of the educational act. In other words, the difficulties subsequently reported in the questionnaires do not seem to stem mainly from the absence of a managerial concern, but rather from structural limits of the system – insufficient human resources, spaces, facilities, funding or needs for specialized support. This distinction is scientifically important: it suggests that the central problem is not one of managerial disinterest, but one of institutional capacity and systemic support.

5 Human and material resources

This section is the one where the difference between the positive perception of management and the real limits of institutional capacity is most clearly seen. When asked about the sufficiency of teaching staff, only 9 units answer „Yes” without reservations, while 5 units choose the „Partial” option, and one unit explicitly indicates „No”. In other words, almost half of the readable responses signal total or relative staffing. In parallel, participation in continuing education is assessed as „frequent” in 9 cases, „occasional” in 5 cases and „rare” in one case, suggesting that there is interest in professional development but not a completely uniform distribution of access to training. The material base is positively evaluated in all legible questionnaires, but this positivity must be interpreted with caution: 7 units rate it as „very good” and 8 „good”, but the open-ended answers repeatedly speak of needs for space, facilities, financing and additional infrastructure.

Figura A1: Peste 50% din PPP au fost de dimensiuni microintreprinderi



Sursa: Culegere date de către experți, cu sprijinul colegilor specialiști din direcții (august–septembrie 2020). Notă: Date care reflectă evoluția proiectelor în perioada 2010–iunie 2020.

Fig. 7. on Human and material resources in the respondent units. The figure summarises the responses to items 10–13 in the "Human Resources and Material" section.

The aggregation of the main declared needs confirms this systemic pressure. The most frequently mentioned are funding (7 mentions), vocational training (6), facilities/materials (5), spaces (4) and staff (3). If these answers are correlated with the narrative items, the picture becomes even clearer: the units complain about the lack of adequate space for the increase in the number of children, the insufficiency of teaching and auxiliary staff, the too small number of psychologists, speech therapists and support teachers, difficulties in integrating children with SEN, underfunding, the lack of school minibuses in certain areas, unadapted buildings or infrastructures, as well as difficulties generated by waiting lists and higher demand than on offer in some urban environ-

ments. Therefore, the conclusion is that the main bottleneck of early childhood education in Mureş County does not seem to be the lack of managerial interest, but the insufficiency of resources in relation to the complexity of real needs. This deficiency is not expressed in the same way in all units, but it is repeated often enough to be treated as a systemic problem.

The section on human and material resources significantly changes the tone of the analysis. If at the level of general management, the perception is predominantly positive, at the level of institutional capacity there are much more visible limits. The full batch of questionnaires confirms that the problem is not a singular one, but a recurrent one: insufficient or only partially sufficient staff, needs for additional spaces, unequal facilities, funding requests and difficulties regarding the continuity of teachers, especially in certain rural areas.

Lack or insufficiency of staff is expressed in different forms. In some units, there is an explicit shortage of teaching staff or its overload, especially in contexts where the situations of children with SEN or children who need additional support without always benefiting from formal employment are increasing. In other cases, the problem is formulated as a lack of specialized personnel — speech therapists, psychologists, support teachers, non-teaching staff or support for activities with vulnerable preschoolers. From a managerial perspective, it shows that the mere existence of positions is not enough; Their functional structure matters.

Infrastructural pressure is also clearly emerging. Several questionnaires talk about the lack of adequate space, the need for expansion, the insufficiency of playgrounds or the imbalance between demand and available supply, especially in urban and peri-urban environments. In parallel, the responses in rural areas indicate needs related to transport, access, continuity of staff or the development of complementary services. This results in two distinct types of vulnerability: in urban areas, capacity and infrastructure pressure predominate; In rural areas, the vulnerability of access, personnel and stability prevails.

As regards the material basis, valuations are often good or very good, but open-ended responses show that this assessment does not exclude the need for investment. Many units require equipment, financing or modernization, which suggests that „good” means frequently functional, not necessarily optimal. The professional conclusion is that early education in Mureş County operates on a background of partially adequate, but often tense, resources, and the local management compensates through organization what the system fails to fully ensure.

6 Quality of early childhood education

From the perspective of the field „Quality of early education” (questions 14–16), the answers from the questionnaires completed for Mureş County outline a generally favorable image, but not completely uniform. Overall, respondents appreciate that the educational activities carried out at preschool level respond to a large or very large extent to the real development needs of children, that modern and interactive methods are used frequently or at least occasionally, and that the transition from kindergarten to

school is, in most cases, adequately supported. This profile suggests that, at the level of Mureș County, the quality of early childhood education is perceived as functional and oriented towards child development, but with differences in intensity between units.

The complete analysis confirms that educational activities are evaluated favorably in most units. The responses focus in particular on the „to a large extent” and „to a very large extent” area when assessing the adequacy of the activities to the real development needs of children. Also, the transition from kindergarten to school is, in most cases, appreciated as being properly supported, and the use of modern and interactive methods is frequent, although not uniform.

However, the complete squad makes an essential distinction more visible: quality is perceived as good, but should not be confused with uniformity. There are establishments where modern methods are frequently used and where the suitability of the activities is highly valued, but there are also establishments where the answers go down to „occasional”, „to a large extent” or „partially”. This difference is important because it indicates that the level of quality is dependent on resources, training and community context.

On the substance, a relevant conclusion can be drawn: in Mureș County, the quality of early childhood education seems to be supported by a real professional effort of teachers and management, even when the conditions are not ideal. This indicates institutional resilience and pedagogical commitment, but it also signals a risk: if resource pressures persist, quality may remain too dependent on the compensatory effort of staff and too little on systemic support.

7 The relationship between parents and the community

From the perspective of the field „Relationship with parents and the community” (questions 17–18), the questionnaires analyzed from Mureș County indicate, overall, a favorable perception of school-family collaboration, but also the existence of important nuances regarding the consistency of parental involvement and the degree of development of community partnerships. In other words, the relationship with parents is evaluated, in most units, as good or very good, and the collaboration with community actors exists in many cases, but not in a uniform and sufficiently consolidated form in all the contexts investigated. As for the collaboration between the unit and parents in early education, most of the answers focus on the „very good” and „good” area. This distribution shows that the partnership with the family is generally functional and valued, but does not reach the same level of intensity or efficiency everywhere.

As a professional interpretation, this result suggests that, in Mureș County, early education institutions manage, to a large extent, to maintain a stable channel of communication and cooperation with families, which is an important indicator of the quality of relational management. In early childhood education, the relationship with parents is not a secondary component, but a structural one, since the child’s development depends on the continuity of educational messages between the family and the institution. The fact that evaluations are generally positive shows the existence of an institutional culture that recognizes the role of the family as an educational partner.

However, the analysis must not stop at the level of closed answers. The open-ended answers to question 20 introduce an essential nuance: in several establishments, parental involvement is explicitly mentioned as a vulnerability. In Valea Larga, the low involvement of some parents in children's education is reported, in Ungheni the same idea appears, and in Petelea and Deaj the difficulties are related to families from disadvantaged groups, the low frequency of children's participation and the superficial involvement of some parents in early development. These responses show that the „good” or „very good” assessment of the institutional relationship with parents does not exclude the existence of vulnerable family segments, difficult to mobilize or insufficiently involved in the children's educational path.

This is, in fact, one of the most important analytical conclusions: the relationship with parents is positively perceived at the institutional level, but this aggregate perception hides significant differences between families and communities. Especially in rural areas or in disadvantaged communities, collaboration should not only be understood as the formal availability of the unit, but also as the result of social, economic and cultural conditions that influence the ability of families to participate actively in early childhood education. From this perspective, the relationship with parents appears not only as a pedagogical dimension, but also as a problem of educational equity and management adapted to the community context.

As far as partnerships with local authorities, NGOs or other community actors are concerned, the picture is again favorable, but more differentiated than in the case of the direct relationship with parents. Many units indicate the answer „Yes”, which shows the existence of already functioning Community cooperation relations. However, in some cases the answer „Partial” appears, as observed in Glodeni and Valea Largă, which suggests that partnerships exist but are not yet sufficiently developed, stable or effective to be assessed as fully strengthened. From the point of view of early education management, this is very relevant. He points out that, in Mureș County, the opening of units to the community is present, but it does not have the same degree of institutionalization everywhere. In some contexts, partnerships seem to be part of the normal dynamics of the unit; in others, they are punctual or incomplete. This difference matters because in early childhood education community support can compensate for the unit's resource limits and contribute to inclusion, parental support, complementary activities and early intervention for children in difficulty.

By correlating the two questions, a broader conclusion can be formulated: the relationship with parents and the community represents, in the investigated units in Mureș County, a relatively solid point of the functioning of early education, but one that requires differentiated consolidation depending on the specificity of the community. Where parents are more available and where local partnerships are well developed, the unit has a social capital useful for the educational process. Where social difficulties, disadvantaged families, discontinuous participation or reduced parental involvement arise, early childhood education management needs to adopt more active strategies for intervention and inter-institutional collaboration.

The relationship with parents and the community remains, at the level of closed answers, one of the dimensions positively evaluated. In many questionnaires, the collaboration with parents is assessed as good or very good, and the existence of partnerships

with local authorities or other community actors is confirmed. This shows that the early education units in the county generally have an organizational culture open to cooperation.

However, open-ended answers change the meaning of an exclusively optimistic interpretation. Several formulations indicate difficulties regarding the low involvement of some parents, the discontinuous participation of children from disadvantaged backgrounds, the superficial collaboration between the family and the institution or the lack of an integrated approach between the home and educational environments. These observations are of great analytical importance, as they show that the institutional relationship can be positively evaluated at a general level, but can hide serious vulnerabilities in certain family segments.

Therefore, the relationship with parents must be understood not only as an indicator of communication, but also as an indicator of educational equity. In stable and available communities, the school-family partnership works relatively well. In vulnerable communities, however, early childhood education management needs more active strategies: mediation, inter-institutional collaboration, parental support activities and interventions aimed at constant participation. From this point of view, the revised article must emphasize more than in the first version that social inequality directly influences the quality and efficiency of early childhood education management.

8 Leadership and development

The comprehensive data supports the idea that local leadership is generally open to initiatives, projects, and partnerships. Many establishments indicate that such initiatives are constantly encouraged, and others show occasional support. It does not result, therefore, a rigid managerial culture or refractory to development. Instead, there is a difference between the willingness to develop and the actual capacity to support development.

The responses on the priority measures proposed by the respondents converge towards several clear directions: continuous and mandatory training for managers and teachers, increased funding, real professionalization of management, unitary standards in the mixed network of units, support for specialized personnel, reduction of unnecessary bureaucracy and strengthening the partnership with the family. These answers are important because they move the discussion from the finding area to the solution area. In other words, the units not only describe the problems, but also indicate coherent directions of intervention.

9 Conclusions

Based on the complete batch of questionnaires, it is confirmed that early education in Mureş County generally benefits from managerial commitment, concern for the quality of activities and a positive orientation towards collaboration. This is an important result and must be maintained in interpretation. However, an objective analysis cannot remain at this level.

The complete data show that the main difficulties are structural and contextually differentiated: pressure on spaces and on the supply of places, the need for staff and specialists, the inequality between urban and rural, the need for continuous training, insufficient funding, the fragile stability of some teachers, the inconstant frequency of participation of children from vulnerable backgrounds and the unequal involvement of parents. In addition, the mixed organizing network sometimes produces non-unitary administrative approaches, which affects the coherence of early childhood education management at county level.

The final conclusion is that, in Mureș County, the problem of early childhood education is not, essentially, the lack of a managerial concern, but the difference between institutional commitment and the resources actually available to transform it into homogeneous results. The development direction must not only aim to maintain positive perceptions, but to strengthen the real capacity of the units to provide equitable access, specialized support, organizational stability and sustainable pedagogical quality.

The authors have no competing interests to declare that are relevant to the content of this article.

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