

PARENTING EDUCATION IN SLOVAKIA: A CONTENT ANALYSIS OF PARENTING EDUCATION COURSES

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Abstract

Training courses aimed at promoting responsible parenting and effective parenting education are considered a common part of the pro-social engagement of educational institutions [1], [2], [3], [4]. In Slovakia, they are implemented by accredited educational entities such as non-profit organisations that focus on awareness and education that lead to civically responsible behaviour and social utility (e.g., Union of Mother Centres, Inštitút duševného zdravia a pohody PSYCHIN [Institute of Mental Health and Well-being], Nádej deťom [Hope for Children], Škola rodičovstva [School of Parenting], etc.). The aim of the study is to identify and analyse accredited training possibilities for young people in the area of parenting support. We draw on previous findings of the grant project *Transformations of Family Education and Parent Education in Slovakia* (VEGA 1/0484/21), during which a questionnaire was distributed and semi-structured interviews through focus groups were carried out in the individual research phases. Through a qualitative research design, we intend to build on the previous findings by comparing selected training courses for parents, focusing in the content analysis process on a comparison of curriculum content, objectives, methods, gender aspects and other selected factors regarding the structure of the methodological materials.

Keywords: effective parenting education, parenting courses, individual and social utility, family education, content analysis of documents.

1 INTRODUCTION

Creating a family environment that positively contributes to shaping a fully-fledged personality and meets individual and social needs is a challenging aim. Past and present parenting developments show that relying on the natural awareness of parents or the intergenerational transmission of knowledge and experience of our ancestors is not enough [5]. Parenting is a lifelong process of “discovering the unknown” and learning through making mistakes and correcting them. Officially, it begins right when the child is born – however, ideally long before that. It begins when an adolescent begins to think about the possibility of starting a family and bringing a new member of the community into the world. What opportunities do young people in Slovakia have to access relevant professional information on the Internet, which offers a wide variety of information? The topic of responsible partnership and parenting receives very little attention in the curriculum, and there is no separate subject in secondary schools. The goal of supporting responsible parenting is substituted by sporadic activities of non-profit organisations (e.g., Sex and Relationship Education, etc.), but which are poorly socially supported because of their tendency to emphasise gender equality and tolerance of otherness.

2 PARENTING EDUCATION IN CONSIDERATION OF NEW CHALLENGES

Parents and family are the most important educational community for a child. Other educational institutions (after school clubs, family services, etc.) cannot fully replace them; they can only supplement them. Research confirms that family has a greater impact on average student achievement than the school [6]. Similarly, OECD (PISA) and IEA (PIRLS) surveys point to the significance of the social role of the family in pupils' academic performance. We are currently witnessing many fundamental differences in family education compared to the past. Until recently, children were brought up spontaneously in a multigenerational family environment in which an involuntary, tradition-based upbringing prevailed. This was gradually replaced by deliberate (intentional) upbringing, related to the greater diversity and complexity of current influences of the social environment [7], [8], [9]. The task of raising a child in a rapidly changing world so that individual and social needs, interests, and expectations are met is becoming increasingly difficult [10], [11], [12], [13]. Good intentions and love for children are not enough.

In pedagogical science, the issue of the family is understood from a twofold perspective. The first is family pedagogy as an applied subdiscipline of pedagogy, which integrates the general theoretical foundations of family science and transforms them into a system of pedagogical knowledge. These are used to explain the process of forming family relationships and family environments [6]. The second perspective is family life education, which provides knowledge about the rules in the process of raising children in the family. It offers parents an orientation in educational practices that should support the optimal development of one's personality in the family environment. Self-reflection and self-education of parents in the area of child upbringing are currently considered one of the priorities of successful family life education [14], [15], [16]. In Slovakia, research on the upbringing of a child (from birth to 3 years of a child's life) has been absent for a long time, and no systematic attention has been paid to the issues of parent education in child upbringing. Several empirical studies are devoted to this topic in other countries [17], [18], [19], [20], [21], [22].

The research project *Transformations of Family Education and Parent Education in Slovakia (2021-2023)* carried out quantitative (questionnaire) and qualitative (focus group) research regarding this area. Its aim was to obtain a content overview of family life education after 1989 in Slovakia, to identify and analyse current problematic areas of family life education and possible approaches to their solution, and to analyse current programs of informal education of parents. As part of the quantitative phase, the "Me as a mother" [23] self-evaluation questionnaire was used to determine whether the respondents had completed any training course or program for parents. The research sample consisted of 1320 mothers. The most frequently attended courses were antenatal courses (20.7%), childcare courses (12.7%), breastfeeding support courses (4.5%), paediatric first aid courses (7.9%), parenting courses (*Non-parenting, Respectful parenting, Effective parenting*; 15.8%), psychology courses (preparation for adoption, family psychology course, sessions with a psychologist; 4.8%), courses to support baby's sleep (2.8%), child development courses (swimming with babies, Montessori courses; 4.2%), MamaClass courses (broader online courses targeting different areas of mother support, e.g. child care, upbringing and child development; 6.8%) In the qualitative phase of the project, perceptions of parenting within the group dynamics of parents sharing similar experiences were explored through a focus group. The results showed, among other things, that informal education is one of conscious parents' preferred methods of learning [24]. According to certain sources [25], parents prefer informal resources due to the strengthening of self-efficacy and a sense of self-confidence. These even appear to be more significant in achieving effective parenting than the knowledge itself.

3 ANALYSIS OF ACTIVE PROGRAMS OF INFORMAL PARENT EDUCATION IN SLOVAKIA AND THE CZECH REPUBLIC

3.1 Research problem and research objective

Parenting is a complex phenomenon that characterises not only the legal relationship to a child, but also includes the expected roles and attitude towards a person's actions as a parent, and the conception of oneself as a parent. It implies the parent's attitudes, motives, beliefs, and competences (knowledge, skills and abilities that enable parenting to be exercised). In practical terms, it is the parent's action that includes not only a set of activities (care, protection, upbringing of the child), but also the parent's self-development – intentional and unintentional actions that lead to adequate action [23]. The issue of parent education is very wide-ranging [25], [26], [27]. While some parents prefer to use the Internet as a source of necessary information [28], others prefer to use print sources [29], audio-visual sources or seek out community centres and peer sources [25], or they trust professionals or take accredited parent training courses [29]. Training courses are one of the many opportunities for parent education as an established organised component of informal adult education [26] with preventive and informative potential [30]. According to the research findings, it is clear that parents' choice of educational opportunities is intuitive or emotional rather than rational. This choice is often influenced by whether the parents are sociable or more introverted, whether they are able to share confidential information, openly confront differing views and accept foreign advice etc. [26]. Considering the discovery mentioned above, we have determined the basic unit of our analysis: *parental needs in relation to informal education* (e.g. attractiveness, expertise, accessibility, usefulness and relevance of the course content, gender correctness, etc.). The aim of the research is to identify the similarities and particularities of the selected courses. We want to know what these courses have in common and how they differ. In partial steps, we first identify these attributes, then compare and evaluate their qualitative parameters in confrontation with the determined unit of analysis (parental needs).

3.2 Research Method and Research Questions

The methodological framework consists of a content analysis of selected text documents focusing on methodological approaches to parent education. These are finished materials that were created by means other than the action of the researcher. Content analysis has long been a standard method of pedagogical research aimed at evaluating and interpreting the content of texts [31], although it is not always clear whether it is a tool or a method [32]. For the purpose of the analysis, we have formulated research questions:

1. Which category of parents are they reaching, and how?
2. What is the appeal of the course?
3. How is the professional/educational content of the courses ensured?
4. How is compliance with parental needs viewed?
5. What are the strengths and weaknesses of the courses?
6. What is their originality?

3.3 Research sample

The research sample was created on the basis of deliberate selection (active, long-term, and successful parenting courses, Table 1). We viewed the success factor as two-dimensional: professional assessment/review/institutional accreditation (professional dimension) and recommendation of parents/those who have completed the course (non-professional dimension). The sample consisted of four active courses, two Slovak and two Czech ones, which have been active in the area of informal education for more than 5 years and whose success is measurable (they are professionally assessed/guaranteed/accredited, repeatedly implemented, and have a certain number of people who have successfully completed them).

Table 1. Overview of active parenting courses in the Slovak Republic and the Czech Republic.

course name	country	how long the course has been running	declared number of people who have completed the course	course duration	target group	form
Ako rozumieť svojim deťom a sebe samému (How to Understand Your Children and Yourself)	SK	15 years on and off since 2008	unknown	30 hours (8 sessions)	parents of children primarily aged 0-6, parents of older children, general public	in person in groups
Nevýchova (Non-parenting)	CZ	10 years continuously since 2013	more than 759 000 parents worldwide	5 weeks (new topic every week)	parents of children aged 0-18	online
Efektívne rodičovstvo (Effective Parenting)	SK	13 years continuously since 2010	more than 1 000 parents	12 hours (basic course)	parents of children aged 0-18	in person
To Respect and Be Respected/Žít s respektem (/Living with Respect)	CZ	20 years continuously	more than 40 000 parents and teachers in Slovakia, Bohemia and Moravia	24.5 hours (a 7-part course)	parents of children aged 0-18	in person

3.3.1 Brief description of the courses

The training course *How to Understand Your Children and Yourself* (Academy of Practical Parenthood) [33] is based on the thesis that the child should be best understood by their parent. The course wants to help parents find new ways in a group of people who have the same motive but different practical experiences. It is carried out by selected mother centres that are members of the Union of Mother Centres. The course is accredited by the Ministry of Education in Slovakia, its methodology was developed under the professional guarantee of a child psychologist and university teacher with a focus on developmental psychology, methodology and didactics of education in psychology.

Non-parenting is presented as a unique parenting approach for parents who do not want to raise their children in a strict, authoritarian way but neither in a liberal and rule-free way. The leitmotif is to understand the children and have a nice relationship with them. The course builds on the idea that every child is different and there are reasons for their behaviour, and the solution lies in communication. The aim of the online course, which lasts five weeks, is to approach the perception of the world from the child's point of view, so that the parent understands what the child is experiencing and from where the problems arise. It is the only course that is not accredited, has no proven professional background, and has no supplementary material in printed form, yet it seems to be the most popular.

Effective Parenting [34] is a system of practical approaches and techniques designed to address everyday parenting situations. Its intention is to build a relationship with the child in an understandable way based on respect and responsibility. The concept is based on the idea of creating a space for the parents to understand and find themselves, to understand the possibilities, and then to understand the child more easily. The motto is respect, joy, and trust in every step. The course is accredited by the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports of the Czech Republic.

The basic starting point of the concept of *To Respect and Be Respected* [35] is the belief that everything else – in the family, in school, in interpersonal relationships – derives from respect. Key term of the course is self-respect. The way we treat ourselves, other people, nature, and other things. The course offers communication tools up to the level of specific skills to help maintain a respectful attitude in everyday situations and to guide children from passive obedience to real responsibility and independence. The course is accredited by the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports of the Czech Republic.

3.4 Content analysis of parenting courses

When analysing the selected active parenting courses, we followed an inductive method with respect to the research questions and the unit of analysis (parental needs). In the first step, we proceeded to analyse the methodological material of one of the courses in order to obtain the basic categories, which were then modified and completed in the subsequent steps of the analysis of the other courses. The analysed material consisted of freely available information on the websites of all four courses. We recorded the results in Table 2.

Table 2. List of research categories.

Categories	<i>How to Understand Your Children and Yourself</i>	<i>Non-parenting</i>	<i>Effective Parenting</i>	<i>To Respect and Be Respected/Living with Respect</i>
Course Keywords	partnership, role model, open parenting, respect	respect, open communication, internal boundaries, role model	respect, joy, trust, understanding, responsibility	respect, esteem, boundaries
Course topics	Obedience or free will; Conflicts between siblings; Negative emotions in parenting; Punishments as a means of education?; Logical consequences and	Communication Trust Boundaries Siblings Parents	What kind of parent do I want to be?; How to better understand your children and yourself; Emotional intelligence and regulation; Understanding the child's inappropriate behaviour; Encouraging – building self-esteem;	Expressing reasoned demands; Emotions; Better alternatives to punishment; How to express recognition and appreciation;

	boundaries in parenting; Struggle for power or attention at all costs; Rewarding and encouraging children		Communication: Responsive listening, how to talk to children so that they listen to us; Conflict resolutions; Punishments and their effects; Boundaries; Sibling rivalry	Respectful communication for every day
Inspiration for the emergence and functioning of the courses	parents' experiences, interests, and needs	parents' experiences and expectations	parents' needs and experiences	parents' needs and experiences
Objectives	develop parenting skills; strengthen parents' self-confidence; strengthen the parent-child relationship; prevent undesirable parenting situations	understand your children; learn to communicate with them and solve problems	understand children's behaviour and actively influence it; manage and listen to own and children's emotions; encourage constructive behaviour; lead children to responsibility, independence and cooperation; develop children's self-confidence and a sense of self-worth;	convey a respectful view of parenting and relationships; offer effective alternatives and influence participants' attitudes
Starting points for curriculum development	the topics that most appealed to parents when confronted with the findings of several psychological approaches and schools	observing and examining parenting situations, testing of techniques	educational principles of parent communication proven and tested in practice with the intention of preventing problems	the negative impact of the use of power and force; morality based on internalised values
Methods	a facilitated discussion; experiential activities; skills training; role play	audio-visual, situational, and experiential instruction; storytelling: practical training of techniques in the home environment	model situations; interactive task solving; experiential activities; role-play; training of educational techniques and positive communication	working in a circle of other people; pair and group work; communication simulation; practical training
Nature of the course	<i>non-commercial</i> – focused on the pro-social needs of the community (climate issues; promoting tolerance of minorities, diversity and excluded communities)	<i>commercial</i> – focused exclusively on the individual needs of those interested (paid access to the parent discussion forum; consultations with the course advisory team)	<i>commercial</i> – focused on the individual needs of those interested (paid individual counselling; lectures, seminars, workshops; parenting clubs; practical exercises)	<i>commercial</i> – focused on the individual and community needs of those interested (paid training courses for parents, teachers, and the general public)
Consequences (individual and social)	raising female leaders; pressure for change towards a better civil society;	effective ways to help parents; financial support for SOS Children's Villages	support for solving specific parenting problems; help in finding one's own unique solutions and awakening	fair communication without manipulation; an insight into the broader context of respectful and

	domestic violence and gender-based violence detection; mirroring women's lives		one's natural parenting abilities	power-based notions of interpersonal relations and upbringing
The gender dimension and the principle of equality	declared active support and involvement of fathers; the website communicates in a gender-correct manner	involvement of fathers is not excluded, nor is it actively promoted; the website communicates in a gender-neutral manner (use of the generic masculine)	active support for fathers through the experience and recommendations of fathers/those who have completed the courses; the website communicates in a gender-correct manner	involvement of fathers is not excluded, nor is it actively promoted; the website communicates in a gender-neutral manner (use of the generic masculine)
Course Highlight	interactive parenting initiative; own professionally developed methodology for lecturers; quality guarantee promised by a team of experts; the largest coverage (all regions of Slovakia); use of subsidies and grants	years of observation and examination of parenting situations; online course in the form of instructional videos; worldwide coverage	own professional publication; popularising lectures and training workshops for parents and general public in person; guarantee of quality and supervision of lecturers through the Centre for Family and Social Care in Brno (CRSP Brno)	own professional publication; Czech and Slovak version of the course available in person in both countries; different content and time options of the course; additional training seminar; focus also on teachers, institutions, and companies
Pros	individual approach; volunteer community background; a freely available professional publication; available and free of charge without any restrictions; safe space for spontaneous discussions outside education; secured childcare during education	a possibility to proceed at one's own pace; watch lessons anywhere, anytime, and repeatedly; subtitles for deaf or English-speaking learners; a safe online space for spontaneous discussions outside education; expert advice; instalment payment option	individual approach; expert advice; safe space for spontaneous discussions within the educational group and outside education; mutual sharing of educational problems within a closed group; logical and understandable structure; quantity discount and instalment payment option; flexible in person attendance	individual approach; flexible forms of education (during the weekend, in the afternoon, weekly)
Cons	the implementation of the courses is not continuous; an informal and unstructured learning space that may not suit every parent	limited availability due to commercial nature; absence of spontaneous interactivity between course participants; less clear graphic design of the website	limited availability due to commercial nature; professional publication for an extra fee	limited availability due to commercial nature; professional publication for an extra fee; poor description of the courses on the website

4 INTERPRETATION OF THE FINDINGS

Considering the basic unit of analysis (parental needs in relation to informal education), it can be satisfactorily stated that the *inspiration for the emergence and functioning of the courses* in all cases are the immediate experiences, needs and expectations of parents, corresponding to normal family life

with children of different ages. Existing theories and research findings are used in an interactive discussion with collaborating experts and are confronted with parenting day-to-day life (*starting points for curriculum development*). The most preferred topics of parent education usually include *parenting practices* and the *health of the child* [26], but in the case of the courses we analysed, the curricula focus exclusively on the area of parenting. We also find agreement across the courses in *key concepts* (characterising the essence of the course, in particular respect, esteem, boundaries), *objectives* (understanding children, developing and strengthening parenting skills), curriculum *topics* and *methods* (interactive techniques, practical training). The particularities of each course stem from its commercial or non-commercial *nature*. This affects other *consequences* (inclination to community or individual utility) and, consequently, the strengths and weaknesses of the courses (*pros* and *cons*). The originality of the course is demonstrated by the so-called highlights – exclusive factors that make the course exceptional regardless of its commercial/non-commercial nature and can be a decisive factor when it comes to selection (e.g., own publication, multilingual mutations, strong professional background, cooperation with non-profit institutions, etc.). We consider this factor to be crucial when approaching interested parents. Some people are interested in the informal family space and the fact that the curriculum was created by people from the academic environment; others like the fact that they do not have to meet anyone on a regular basis but can watch the instructional videos anytime, anywhere and with anyone they want. The originality of the course is something that makes it more appealing compared to others, given the needs and expectations of a particular parent. Therefore, it is important for the authors of the course to know the current needs and expectations of the clients they want to attract with their offer. Since different clients have different needs and expectations, this is probably the answer to why four training courses with almost identical purposes and curricula can be successful. Because their specific offer addresses diverse groups of parents and their specific needs.

The appeal of the courses lies in several areas: accessibility (preference for in-person or online formats, flexibility of course dates, affordability); professional background (guarantors); personal recommendations of those who have completed the course on the website; design, usefulness and relevance of the content, communication language of the website; characteristics of the course implementers, their personal and work story; history of the course; benefits and discounts for those interested, previews of the course free of charge; extended option of additional literature, blogs and podcasts, peer consultations and expert advice, etc. A positive phenomenon is the effort to defeminise parenting and care for children and the family. Although not all courses declare open and active support for gender equality in the area of childcare, it can be stated that all of them present fatherhood as a naturally equal part of parenthood (e.g. they present the experiences and recommendations of fathers/those who have completed the course, they present fathers as legitimate candidates for the course, offer fathers a space to express their feelings and concerns, etc.).

5 CONCLUSIONS

The comparison of individual research categories showed what parents eager for education agree on when choosing courses and how their choice differs. We consider it natural that the nature of demand influences the nature of the supply. In the case of parenting, too, it is clear that demand does not always have to be balanced by expertise and demonstrable quality. Parents are clients who expect services, including education, to be 'tailor-made' for them. Therefore, they often prefer individual learning activities over group activities. The question of how to design an educational activity for parents that is specific enough yet attracts enough people to make it worthwhile to invest in it remains a key issue in family and parent education [26]. A further continuation of our research in this area will be focused on fathers and the concept of active fatherhood. In addition to the issues examined so far, we are interested in the gender aspects of parenting and the current transformations of parenting from a gender perspective. The findings so far have almost exclusively involved only women/mothers; therefore, we want to find out how fathers perceive these phenomena. Our aim will be to identify specific needs, complications, and expectations through the lens of fatherhood.

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