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DEVELOPING PARENT EDUCATOR SKILLS AT STUDENTS STUDYING PRESCHOOL AND PRIMARY EDUCATION

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Abstract

According to draft legislation in force, the interest for developing parent educator skills for students, who study Preschool and Primary education, represents a focus on the formation of positive parenting behaviors and attitudes. The practitioner in parenting is called, in international language, a parent educator. This is a professional with initial training in social or medical sciences (educator, teacher, doctor, nurse, social worker, psychologist), who obtained a certificate for a training program in the field of parental education. Parental activity (parenting) has become a topic currently discussed, but we can say that this activity has begun to exist with the appearance of parents. Each parent performs parenting activities personally, but parenting becomes a challenge when the solutions sought and adopted do not lead to the expected results. Taking into consideration the types and quality of parenting as optimal indicators, as well as the understanding the main factors that determine a good practice can become benchmarks for the development of the parent role. This study is the result of an empirical research focusing on the promotion of formal parental education programs for students who study at the specialization Preschool and Primary Education. The Educational Sciences Department of Babes-Bolyai University appreciated the importance of such a program in the current context and included it in the curriculum for this specialization as an optional subject. Within our study we present the results obtained from the participation of students at the course of parental education.

1. Introduction

Parental activity is a topic that is being approached more and more frequently both in literature and in various legislative initiatives and programs. De'Ath (1983) mentions that traditional child-raising methods passed on from one generation to the next are no longer adequate, the society being being characterized by many changes in structural, religious, ethical, professional and attitudinal patterns(see Ilovan, Jordan, Havadi-Nagy and Zametter, 2016, for the changes that the Romanian society underwent after 1989), and in this context, parental education has implicitly, become part of the work of various specialists interacting with parents. Most of these specialists are represented by teachers. Their activity is aimed directly at students, but indirectly also on their parents and families (Munteanu & Munteanu, 2009).

Teachers have the duty to maintain a collaborative relationship with the families of their students, as efficiently as possible, to enhance the information that parents have on children, in order to support togheter the harmonious development (Dulamă & Ilovan, 2015, 2017) and the well-being of children (Oltean, 2016). Teachers must also be open towards the increasing diversity existing at the level of family structure and to consider factors such as: international migration of families, active involvement of both parents in the labour market, the age at which marriage and children appear, the divorce rate (Pavel, 2016). Parental education has thus become a component part of the educational system, a dimension of the permanent education (Chis & Coste, 2018), although, parental activity has always been conducted, without a formal previous preparation.

Parental education includes all programs, services and resources offered to parents to support them in raising and educating their children, as well as to determine them to be aware of the importance of their role and to form and improve their parenting skills (Pavel, 2016). Another term used in this context is p*arenting*. Parenting refers to the activities conducted in order to ensure the survival and development of the child, thus being included in parental education (Pavel, 2016). In both Romanian and English literature, the two concepts are often used in a similar, even identical sense.

Pavel (2016, p. 80) argues that regardless of the way in which parenting takes place, it is necessary to consider the following: "parents are the first and best educators of their own children" and wish that their children "develop in a positive and healthy way"; the needs of both parents and child should be known; "parents wish to be helped in order to have *an easier job*"; the reciprocal relationship between parent and child is influenced by multiple systems; "parenting attitudes, knowledge, abilities and behaviours can be learned and improved through learning and experience", but parents' education is more effective when parents actively take part at this training; parenting programs should "take into account the diversity displayed by parents".

2. Problem Statement

Discussions between teachers and parents show that adults often feel overwhelmed by the challenges of parenting and feel the need for specialized guidance in order to identify optimal parenting practices and to improve their parenting skills. This state is determined by the fact that those who become parents do not always have sufficient knowledge of child development and act either in relation to their own instincts or in relation to their previous experiences. This can bring both positive and negative

effects. To support parents and to increase the level of professional competence of future teachers, the Educational Sciences Department of Babes-Bolyai University from Cluj-Napoca, Romania, has included in the curriculum for the specialization Preschool and Primary Education, for the bachelor level, in the third year of studies, the optional subject entitled *Parental education*.

The subject *Parental education* was designed from the perspective of developing the life and professional skills of students – a need and a goal of the contemporary society, reflected also by the European education policies (Chis & Grec, 2018). Placing this subject in the last year of the bachelor studies aimed, on one hand, ensuring a minimum of training for the family life and, on the other hand, creating the optimal premises for the future teaching profession, demanding from the perspective of the kindergarten - school -family relationship. The base premises were that better training for family life, parenting, and teaching career will lead to better social integration of graduates and to the building of a balanced family life.

The objectives to be achieved at this subject are: acquiring some concepts that are circumscribed to parental education; explaining and interpreting the roles and responsibilities of parents from different perspectives: historical, social and legislative; being aware and interpreting parental roles and their implications in everyday life.This research verifies the extent to which these objectives have been achieved, valuing the perspective of students participating in the courses of the *Parental education* subject.

3. Research Questions

The research questions that determined the need for performing the current study were: What are the students' knowledge regarding parenting? What are the training needs of the students in the field of parenting? To what extent does the parental education program proposed in this case respond to the training needs of the students?

4. Purpose of the Study

The purpose of our study was to investigate the knowledge and abilities needed for conducting parental education within the partnership between school – family – community activities, which was established and developed by the students that chose to study the subject *Parental education*. Two main objectives were followed: (1) Theoretical and methodological training of students from the specialization of Preschool and Primary Education in the field of parenting education; (2) Practicing and evaluating students' parenting skills based on the training program, within formal education contexts.

The hypothesis of the study was guided by the following premise: The academic program of parental education, focused on topics promoted in various formal and non-formal contexts, leads to the optimization of the students' training for parental education.

As a result, the research independent variable consisted in presenting the themes of parental education, quantified in an educational program based on valuing the educational contents found in the course manual and completed by resources from non-formal programs (used by parenting experts – for example – You can also be Supernanny – Petrea, 2007). The dependents variables of the research were:

(1) Attitudes and knowledge of parenting evaluated through the assessment test for abilities specific to the field of parental education; (2) The results (grades) obtained at the *Parental education* subject (global assessment of the portfolio; (3) Parenting styles identified in a specific portfolio sequence.

5. Research Methods

5.1. Research stages

The first step in conducting the research was to select the sample of participants. The sample of subjects was selected from groups of students who attended the *Parental education* course. The students voluntarily participated in the study, after the research procedure was presented to them. The data confidentiality criteria were also ensured. From the students' population, in the third year of study, with frequence and distance learning, studying at the Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences, a number of 146 students participated at the activities included in the subject *Parental education.*

Two groups of participants were formed: a group of participating students (N = 152 students) in the exploratory stage and a group of participants (N=20) in the final evaluation stage. In the post-experimental (final) phase, the sample of subjects was significantly reduced, the participation being voluntary. Students who participated in this stage of the research provided answers to the parental education assessment test used in the final stage of the research.

After establishing the sample of participants, a comprehensive analysis of the students' knowledge and skills in the field of parental education was carried out, an analysis that aimed to highlight the students' training needs. 152 students were involved in this analysis, who opted for the subject entitled *Parental education.* We emphasize the diversity of the participants that derives from the many qualities that the students have: 57,6% of the participants are students, 25,2% are both student and teacher, and the rest of 17.2% are student, teacher and also parent.

The analysis of the training needs of the participants and the level of knowledge regarding parental education were made through a test, which had 25 multi-choice items and the students had to select one option for each of them.

In accordance with the results of the needs analysis, the intervention (experimental) stage of the research was conducted. Within this stage activities were conducted during the first semester of the academic year 2017-2018, activities that involved all students, who chose to participate at the subject entitled Parental education (N=146). These activities were conducted within a formal education program destinated to students, emphasizing their theoretical and methodological training in the field of parental education, as well as exercising and evaluating the students' parental abilities based on the training program, in formal educational frameworks.

Through the themes approached during the formative phase, students were trained to acquire basic information on the four topics related to family pedagogy; family education and the role played by the harmonious development of the child, the development of parenting programs at the group / class level (see Table 01). Particular attention was paid to the activities carried out by parents and their children in the natural environment, a context in which parent-child relationships are optimized and contributes to environmental education and sustainable development (Dulamă, Ilovan, & Magdaş, 2017; Ilovan et al.,

2018). By addressing the selected topics we aimed to support students in raising their awareness of the role of future parent educators in child development. During the 14 weeks (2 hours / week), selected themes were approached according to the interests and needs of students. In presenting the themes modern teaching-learning strategies have been used, combining physical and virtual resources. Educational films were presented, as well as actual bibliographic resources, activities specific for parenting were organized by used role-play, portfolios that aimed gradually covering topics were created, resource persons, which promote the values of parenting and are well-known at national level were invited. During the activities the students benefited from feedforward offered by the teacher in order to prevent some mistakes and, after completing their duties, they received feed-back regarding the obtained results and the ways for improving them, as suggested by other studies described in the literature (Dulamă & Ilovan, 2016).

Table 01. Structure of the content sample

Week	Cathegories	Covered topics
W1-W6	Knowledge regarding parenting	Theoretical approaches of the concept *parental education*
		Status and roles of parents within the family
		Parent education programs and their role in the formation and development of parenting skills
W7-W9	Parental competence	Development of children - age-specific categories of activities
		Self-awareness. Social and emotional development of parents, teachers, children
		Assertive parenting. The world of WHY?
W10-W12	Educational parenting roles	Functions and responsibilities of the family
		Positive discipline. Positive thinking.
		Self control. Motivation. Social skills. Success of the child. Academic results.
		Environment - source of harmonious development.
W13-W14	Communication skills	Learning Styles - Fun Learning. Game, parents and friends.
		Diversity of emotions. How can we make school interesting? How do we involve parents in parental education activities?

After completing these contents, the final stage of this study highlighted the progress made by students by assessing products included in the 146 portfolios made during and at the end of each thematic module, presented at the final colloquium and by analyzing the answers from the applied test in the format.

The test in which the assessment of parental education specific abilities was pursued was applied to students who responded to the invitation to access the google docs link. The number of them was 20. The impact of the educational program based on the development of parental skills skills on the students was evaluated / observed.

The personal portfolio was the instrument that permitted the quantification of the information acquired during the studied topics. Performance criteria and descriptors used to evaluate products made by students were: "Consistency, accuracy, originality and relevance of the information in developing the essay; Analysis, synthesis and creativity in developing a parenting own taxonomy; respecting the theoretical demands imposed by the design of a parenting program" (Catalano, 2018, p.6).

5.2. Research methodology

The research methods through which we obtained information in the research stages described above were the psycho-pedagogical experiment, the quantitative and qualitative analysis of the products included in the evaluation portfolio, the test (Table 02). The psycho-pedagogical experiment was conducted within the formal curriculum, in the classroom, at the optional subject *Parental Education*.

The research tool used in this context was the assessment test of parental education specific skills, which was applied to the participants in order to assess their level of knowledge of information regarding parent education. The items of this tool were conceived by the Phd. Student Irina Petrea (2007), promoter of the national parenting program: *You can also be Supernanny.* The answers were collected through Google Docs (https://docs.google.com/forms/). The analysis of the products of the students activities was the method used during the experimental and post-experimental stage, method through which the progressive completion of the support materials was aimed. These materials were necessary for the portfolio development.

Table 02. Research methods used in each research stage

Stage	Research methods and instruments	Participants sample and research material
Pre-experimental phase	Testing– needs analysis	152 students 152 tests
Experimental phase	Academic program Selection of parenting program topics	146 students
Post-experimental phase	Analysis of products included in the assessment portfolio Testing	146 portfolios 20 questionairres/tests

6. Findings

### 6.1. Results obtained in the pre-experimental stage of the research

The analysis of the results highlighted the need to organize the themes of the intervention program in four categories: (1) Parental competence, (2) Knowledge regarding parental education, (3) Parenting style and (4) Communication skills.

We note that the answers given by students at this stage of the research are largely influenced by their previous experiences and not just the knowledge they hold, reflecting personal opinions, and the test items refer to aspects that students can find frequently in the daily life environment and can be compared to those present in an opinion questionnaire. Although no analysis was made very systematic in this regard, there is a need to develop a selective behaviour of students within the present intervention program so that they relate in a more objective and realistic manner to previous personal experiences of parenting.

We present below a selection of the responses given by students to highlight training needs structured by categories.

Based on the analysis of the answers given by the 152 respondents in the first stage of the research, we find that a significant percentage of students, 59.1%, selected the correct variant: variant 4 (all the

answers above are correct) (Figure 01). In the 149 respondents (three responses were not valid), it was observed that for the other options of answers (1. The set of programs, services and resources intended for parents and caregivers 2. Programs that help parents to develop and improve their parenting skills, 3. Any activity (seminar, conference, workshop etc.) within parents and caregivers optimise their parenting abilities) similar percentages were recorded (14%, 24%), and the lowest percentage was 2.6%. The quantification of the answers in the notes reveals the following data: 89 students (58.55%) obtained the maximum score for this item, 0.4 points and 64 students obtained 0 points. At the level of items category, the number of students that received the score 0,4 is 88 (57,89%), and 64 students (50,65%) obtained 0 points.
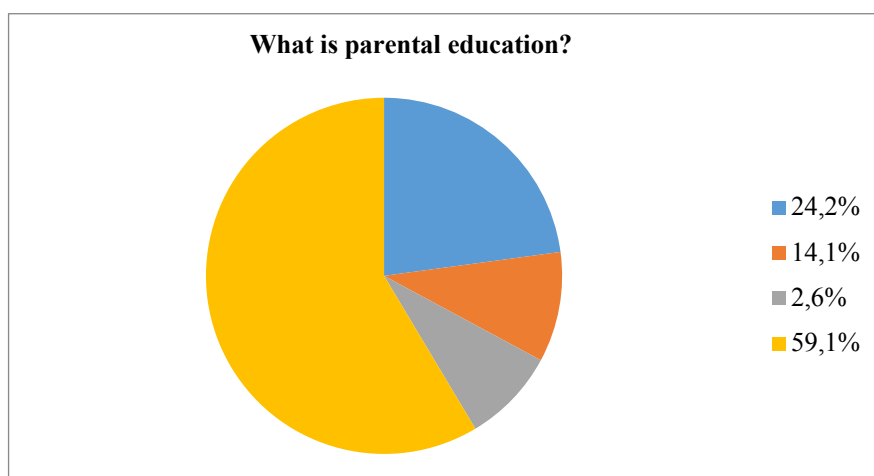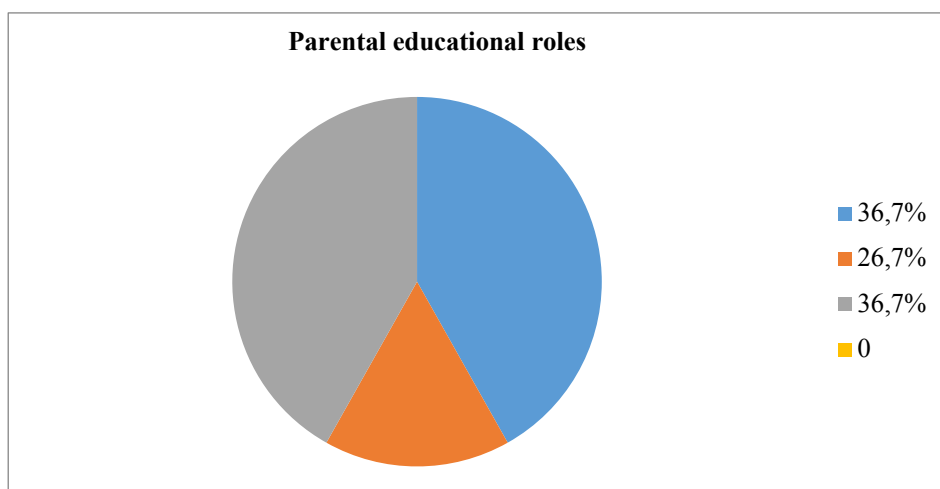

Figure 01. Knowledge of students about parenting, correct item – no. 4

To highlight the need for training, in terms of parental competence, we have selected one of the 6 items in the test, Item no. 5 (Figure 02, 152 valid answers), which contains the multiple answers given by the respondent students participating in the exploratory phase. The correct answer (no. 1) refers to the positive effect of parenting, which influences the development of tolerance to frustration of a child. The answer chosen by most respondents was 3, which represents 57% of them, the rest being divided between the answers 2 and 3. The possible answers to this item were: 1. a very important requirement for parenting, a positive effect on the child being the development of tolerance to frustration, 2. is a major mistake in parenting, hindering the development of the child's personality, 3. it is no requirement, no parental error, but only a personal choice of each parent and 4. An abusive action of the parent.
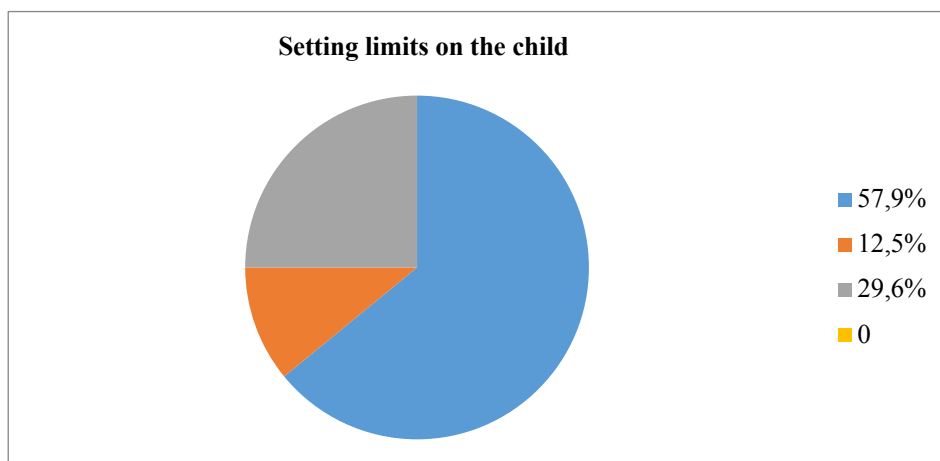
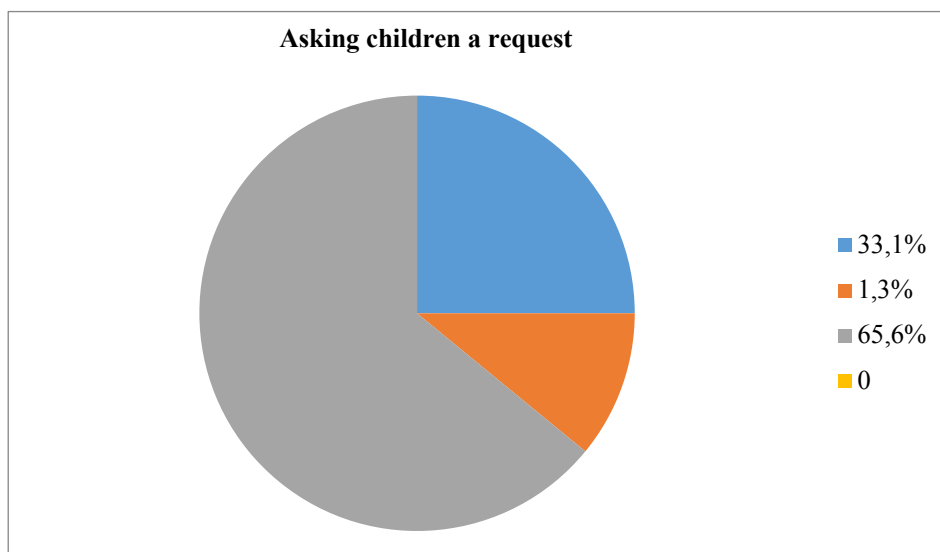**Figure 02.** Knowledge of students about parental competence - 6 items in total, correct item - no. 1

Educational parenting roles have been identified in 7 of the 25 items. The diversity of responses reflects the complexity of parenting skills (Figure 03, 150 valid answers). The possible answers in this case were: are: 1. direct regulation of child behaviour, communication, cooperation in joint activities 2. Communication, correcting the child when wrong, guidance in his activities 3. To directly regulate the behaviour of the child, to provide explanations (to the child's questions and perceptions) and to interpret the world for the child, 4. To hunt the mistakes and enforce the sanctions that are imposed.

Figure 03. Knowledge of students about educational parenting roles – correct item – no.1

Answers in the Communication Skills category (7 items out of 25) show that 65.6% of students know the communication skills required in parenting (Figure 04, 151 valid answers). The choices in this case were: 1. have to give explanations every time, 2. should provide explanations only when children refuse to carry out the request, 3. should provide explanations when children feel unfair, inappropriate or unpleasant, or when the child does not understand what is requested, 4. Never have to give any explanation.

Figure 04. Knowledge of students regarding Communication skills, correct item – no. 3

The conclusions regarding the results of the exploratory stage show a partial knowledge of the information regarding parental education. The average of the results is significantly above 50%. This is mainly due to the diversity of subjects, which meet combined features of parents, teachers and students, which is considered to be a positive aspect within our study. Although the answers provided by the majority of students are correct, the relatively high percentage of other respondents makes us believe that students need training in parenting, in order to clarify certain concepts, as well as to develop their abilities as future parent educators.
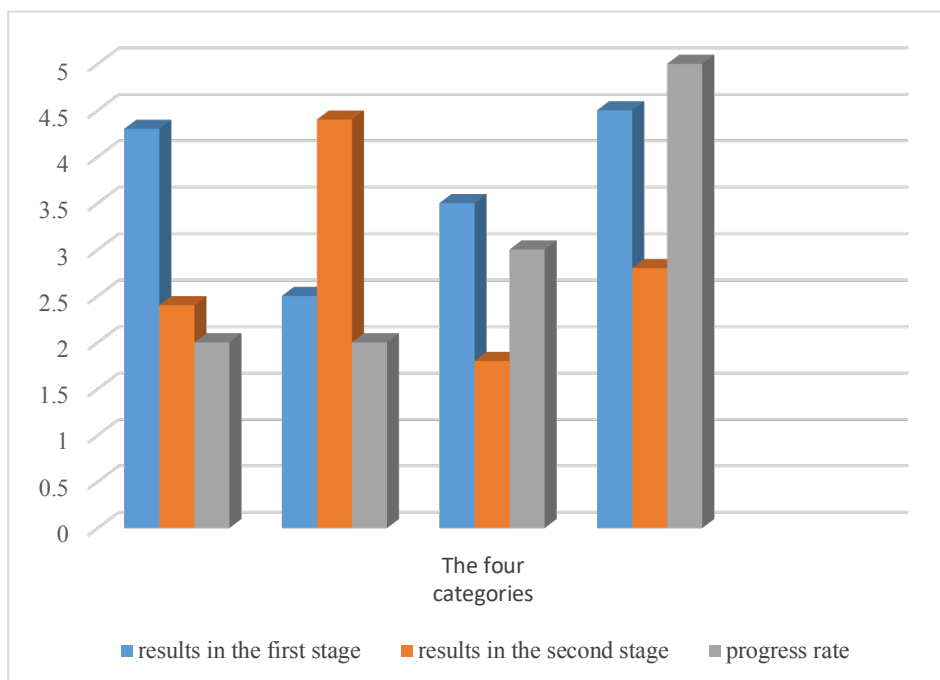
6.2. Results obtained in the post-experimental research stage. Comparison of results obtaine in the initial and final stage of the research

The results obtained by students show significant progress in terms of the acquisitions in the field of parenting. Out of the 146 students, the obtained results illustrate a significant improvement in student acquisitions both in individual items (20.6%) and also in the grouping of items in categories (32.46%) (Table 03).

Table 03. Comparison of results obtained in the initial and final stage of the research

Pre-experimental phase				Post-experimental phase			
Knowledge about parenting	Stud. No.	Score	%	Knowledge about parenting	Stud. No.	Score	%
	7	0,4	58.38		14	0,4	79
	2	0	41,62		6	0	21
Quantification of items by category	8	0,4	57,89	Quantification of items by category	18	0,4	90,35
	4	0	42.10		2	0	0,65

The data presented and analyzed refer to the results quantified in grades, obtained by the participant students. The percentage of acquisitions revealed by comparison of results by category of items in the two stages is 31% (Figure 04).

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Figure 05. Comparison of results pre-experimental and post-experimental research stage

Table 04. Comparison of results obtained in the initial and final research phase

	Results stage 1		Results stage 2	
	Score - 0,4 /item	Number of students	Score - 0,4 item	Number of students
Items 1-5				
Items 2-6	46,7%	30	77%	15
Items 3-7				
Items 4-7				

At the end of the experiment, students' portfolios were analyzed. The average of grades (8.83) obtained by students (146) in the subject *Parental education* is 8.83 (Table 05).

7. Conclusion

The parental education program has helped to facilitate understanding the role of parenting in the effective development of communication relationships within the school-family education partnership. Completing the selected contents in the training program offered the opportunity for constructive debates, encouraging the development of new contexts for addressing educational situations. The formative assessments made during the semester followed the quality of the students' intervention in the discussions, the sharing of learning experiences, the consistency of personal reflections, and the active involvement in solving the required tasks.

Students received feedback on tasks both through direct and on-line communication, were encouraged to develop new, personalized parenting programs, at the level of the groups / classes where they are teaching or they are conducting their pedagogical practice, by highlighting the positive aspects of the proposed programs. The experimental research has highlighted the usefulness of implementing

strategies for the development of the specific abilities of parental education in the context of initial teacher education for preschool and primary education.

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