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Understanding the perceived value of relational psychomotricity in Early Childhood Education: a mixed-methods study of parents' and teachers' perspectives

Comprender el valor percibido de la psicomotricidad relacional en la Educación Infantil: un estudio de métodos mixtos sobre las perspectivas de padres y docentes

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Abstract

Relational psychomotricity is useful during childhood because it aims to support children's overall development by integrating movement, emotions, and interpersonal relationships. Teachers' and parents' opinions and perceptions of psychomotricity are crucial for supporting its implementation and sustainability in school settings. The aim of the study was to assess the opinions of parents and teachers regarding the effects of psychomotor skills on children in the motor, affective, and relational domains. A sample of 72 teachers (49.47 ± 10.18 years) and 72 parents (39.32 ± 5.64 years) of children aged 3–7 who participated in school-based psychomotricity programs completed an online questionnaire including nine Likert-scale items and one open-ended question. Results indicated a very positive evaluation by participants, with higher ratings for general satisfaction and for perceived changes in socialization, attention, language, and motor skills. The parents reported significantly higher ratings in 4 out of 9 Likert-scale items. Furthermore, participants largely agreed that the relational psychomotor program should be proposed again at school next year for the children. Qualitative responses to the open-ended question were categorized into 10 thematic clusters: socialization (reported by 47.2% of the participants), emotional regulation (41%), and self-esteem (22.2%) were the most representative. Overall, this study describes teachers' and parents' perceived value of relational psychomotor across multiple domains. Future research could benefit from more objective longitudinal monitoring of children's progress, but the strong and nuanced support from caregivers reported in this study should be interpreted as an indicator of acceptability and perceived benefit, representing a crucial step toward broader recognition and integration of relational psychomotricity in educational systems.

Keywords: childhood; emotions; motor skills; attention; language

Resumen

La psicomotricidad relacional puede ser útil durante la infancia porque apoya el desarrollo global de los niños al integrar movimiento, emociones y relaciones interpersonales. Las opiniones y percepciones de docentes y familias sobre la psicomotricidad son cruciales para respaldar su implementación y sostenibilidad en los entornos escolares. El objetivo del estudio

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fue evaluar las opiniones de padres y maestros acerca de los efectos de la psicomotricidad en los niños en los ámbitos motriz, afectivo y relacional. Se trabajó con una muestra de 72 docentes ($49,47 \pm 10,18$ años) y 72 padres ($39,32 \pm 5,64$ años) de niños de 3 a 7 años que participaron en programas escolares de psicomotricidad. Los participantes completaron un cuestionario en línea compuesto por nueve ítems tipo Likert y una pregunta abierta. Los resultados mostraron una valoración muy positiva por parte de los participantes, con puntuaciones más altas en la satisfacción general y en los cambios percibidos en socialización, atención, lenguaje y habilidades motoras. Las familias reportaron puntuaciones significativamente más altas en 4 de los 9 ítems de la escala Likert. Además, la mayoría de los participantes estuvo de acuerdo en que el programa de psicomotricidad relacional debería proponerse nuevamente en la escuela el próximo año para los niños. Las respuestas cualitativas a la pregunta abierta se agruparon en 10 categorías temáticas, siendo las más representativas la socialización (47.2%), la regulación emocional (41%) y la autoestima (22.2%). En conjunto, este estudio describe el valor percibido de la psicomotricidad relacional por parte de docentes y familias en múltiples ámbitos. Investigaciones futuras podrían beneficiarse de un seguimiento longitudinal más objetivo del progreso de los niños; no obstante, el apoyo fuerte y matizado de los cuidadores observado en este estudio debe interpretarse como un indicador de aceptabilidad y beneficio percibido, lo que representa un paso crucial hacia un mayor reconocimiento e integración de la psicomotricidad relacional en los sistemas educativos.

Palabras clave: infancia; emociones; habilidades motoras; atención; lenguaje.

Introduction

Interest in the holistic development of children in early childhood education has increased considerably in recent years, with motor, emotional and social dimensions becoming increasingly important alongside cognitive and linguistic development (Cameron et al., 2012; Conway, 2024; Diamond, 2013; Nuraida et al., 2022; Reilly & Downer, 2019). In recent decades, relational psychomotricity (RP), an approach based on the integration of movement, affective expression and interpersonal relationships, has emerged as a useful educational and therapeutic method for supporting the overall development of individuals, particularly in childhood (Cekaite & Bergnehr, 2018; De Ajuriaguerra, 1974; Lapierre & Aucouturier, 1975;

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Venâncio et al., 2022). Drawing on psychodynamic theories and developmental psychology, this approach focuses on the body as a mediator of psychological experience and communication, particularly in the early years when verbal language is still developing (Coler et al., 2010; Shaw, 1996). At the same time, the empirical literature on RP remains relatively limited and methodologically heterogeneous, requiring caution in interpreting results and generalizing conclusions across different contexts. Some studies have shown that psychomotor or movement-based interventions may be associated with domains such as executive functions (e.g., inhibitory control, working memory, and cognitive flexibility; Best, 2010; Traverso et al., 2015) and with emotional regulation and social skills within supportive relational contexts that involve play and motor interaction (Bell & Calkins, 2000; Rojo-Ramos et al., 2022). These findings are consistent with the principles of embodied cognition, according to which sensorimotor experiences may contribute to the development of higher cognitive and affective functions (Glenberg, 2010; Wilson, 2002). However, the evidence in the literature is still scarce and often based on small samples, variable intervention formats, and limited use of standardized or objective measures, making it difficult to isolate the specific contribution of RP and reach solid causal conclusions (Amaireh et al., 2024; Coler et al., 2010; Spataro et al., 2024; Vila et al., 2025). Therefore, although interest in RP is growing, the literature on this topic is of poor quality, especially with regard to studies investigating how adults who care for children perceive its potential impact. However, understanding the perspective of caregivers is important, as they play a central role in children's development (Finegood & Blair, 2017; Garon-Bissonnette et al., 2025; Raviv et al., 2021). Indeed, it is often teachers and parents who decide whether to grant children access to psychomotor programmes or other types of programmes (Chung & Meadan, 2021), and encourage or restrict their participation, depending on the changes in behaviour and emotions they believe they observe in everyday settings. In addition, contextual differences may also influence how the benefits of RP are perceived. For example, while teachers focus on group dynamics and learning, parents may pay more attention to emotional changes, family behaviour or the social environment (Halse et al., 2024; Peth-Pierce, 2020; Sheridan et al., 2010). To our knowledge, no study to date has examined how teachers and parents judge the effectiveness of RP interventions in preschool children. The purpose of this study is exploratory and aims to raise awareness among parents and teachers

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about their perceptions of RP, as their opinions are relevant to the implementation and sustainability of psychomotor programs in schools. Using a quantitative-qualitative approach, we analyzed the responses of teachers and parents whose children participated in these programs during the 2023-2024 school year. By capturing perceived changes in motor, emotional, cognitive, and social dimensions, this study aims to inform early childhood education practice and provide a baseline for comparison.

Methods

Study design

This study was conducted as a cross-sectional study using quantitative-qualitative methods. Data was collected using an online questionnaire completed by teachers and parents of children participating in a school-based RP programme. Respondents were asked to share their views on the potential benefits of the programme.

Participants

The sample consisted of 144 participants: 72 teachers (49.47 ± 10.18 years) and 72 parents (39.32 ± 5.64 years). Participants were recruited through a voluntary random sample of teachers and parents of children attending 15 Italian preschools in which RP programs were actively implemented. To participate in the study, several criteria had to be met: i) the teachers or parents of children aged between 3 and 7 years, corresponding to children attending preschool or the first two years of primary school; ii) the teachers or parents of children who had successfully completed an RP programme in the previous school year; iii) the teachers who participated in the study were not involved in psychomotor programmes in any way. In cases where both parents were able to complete the survey, the parent primarily responsible for the child's care was asked to respond. To minimise potential bias in perceptions of benefit, parents who indicated that their child had serious health problems and/or was undergoing significant medical or psychological treatment during the period of the psychomotor sessions were excluded from the analysis. Finally, teachers were asked to give their opinion on the basis of the whole class in order to avoid focussing on the individual child. This study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki. All participants gave their electronic consent

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after receiving detailed information about the study. In addition, they were informed of their right to withdraw from the study or request the deletion of their data at any time. The study was also approved by the Ethics Committee of [anonymized] University (number: [anonymized]). The data were processed anonymously in compliance with the applicable Italian data protection laws.

Procedures and survey completion

Participants who expressed an interest in taking part in the study received a QR code and a link that took them to a Google form with the survey, which asked for their opinion on the potential benefits of psychomotor programmes in preschool or the first two years of school. Before accessing the survey, participants were presented with a consent form on an introductory screen. Those who ticked 'I agree' were directed to the survey instructions and then to the questionnaire. Participants who ticked 'I disagree' were taken to a completion screen and could not continue with the survey. Regarding the instructions for completing the questionnaire, teachers and parents were asked to give their opinion in relation to the benefits from the beginning to the end of the psychomotor programme and not in relation to the whole school year (this clarification was necessary as not all schools ran the psychomotor programme throughout the school year). If parents had more than one child participating in the psychomotor programme, they were also asked to give a general opinion based on all their children and not just focus on the benefits achieved by a single child. Teachers were given the same instruction, as mentioned in the "Participants" sub-section, with the instruction that they should base their opinion on the whole class and not just focus on outliers. The survey consisted of three parts:

- Part one – general information: The first part of the survey asked for general information about the participants (e.g., age and gender) and information about their students or children, such as age and possible evidence of medical diagnoses or other significant situations that could significantly affect the child's physical, motor, emotional, cognitive, and social well-being. The first part of the survey also asked for information on the duration, timing and frequency of the psychomotor programme followed by the children in order to check compliance with the inclusion and exclusion criteria of the study.

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- Second part – quantitative items: The second part consisted of 9 quantitative items. Each of these items contained a statement about the psychomotor therapy programme attended by the children. Participants were asked to indicate their level of agreement with each of the statements on a Likert scale from 0 (not at all) to 4 (extremely). The 9 statements were:

Item 1. “*My students have shown interest in the psychomotor project.*”

Item 2. “*I am satisfied with the activity carried out in the psychomotor project.*”

Item 3. “*I believe that psychomotor skills are important in the child’s development process.*”

Item 4. “*My students have improved in managing emotions.*”

Item 5. “*My students have improved in socialization skills.*”

Item 6. “*My students have improved in motor skills.*”

Item 7. “*My students have improved in language skills.*”

Item 8. “*My students have improved in attention skills.*”

Item 9. “*I would like my students to participate in these lessons again next school year.*”

- Part Three – Qualitative Section: The final section included a qualitative, open-ended item in which participants were asked to report any perceived changes or improvements they had observed in the children following their participation in the RP programmes. Participants were allowed to specify several aspects, with a maximum word count of 400. Item 10 specifically stated:

Item 10. “*What improvements or changes have you noticed in your students after participating in the psychomotor program?*”

These 10 statements refer to the version of the survey for teachers, while in the version for parents the terms “students” were replaced with “child/children”.

Statistical Analysis

The data obtained from the first part of the survey was analysed using descriptive statistics: In particular, the mean \pm standard deviation (SD) was used to summarise the age of the participants, split between parents and teachers, while the number was used to summarise the female and male participants, also in this case split between parents and teachers. The other

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information collected in the first part of the survey was used solely to assess whether the participants met the inclusion and exclusion criteria of the study. The data from the 9 items of the Likert scale, which form the second part of the survey, were also initially analysed using descriptive statistics. As the Shapiro-Wilk test revealed a non-normal distribution, the median and interquartile range (IQR) were used. Subsequently, the non-parametric Mann-Whitney U-test for independent samples was used to compare the ratings of teachers and parents for the 9 items and to determine whether there were significant differences between the opinions of these two groups of participants. In addition, the effect size was calculated as an eta-square (η^2). Finally, the third part of the survey, which was a single qualitative item, was analysed using a qualitative content analysis in which the responses were grouped into thematic clusters. The various thematic clusters were then summarised graphically using an upset plot. The alpha test level for statistical significance was set at 0.05. The statistical package SPSS (v.26; IBM, Chicago, IL, USA) was used for the statistical analysis.

Results

The results of the descriptive analysis of the data collected in the first part of the survey are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Characteristics of the sample and descriptive analysis of the first part of the survey.

	Both groups	Teachers	Parents	<i>p</i> -value
Age in years (means \pm SD)	44.40 \pm 9.65	49.47 \pm 10.18	39.32 \pm 5.64	<i>p</i> < 0.001
Gender (females/males)	137/7	71/1	66/6	<i>p</i> = 0.121
Number of lessons (means \pm SD)	14.92 \pm 10.45	14.59 \pm 9.43	15.62 \pm 12.42	<i>p</i> = 0.640

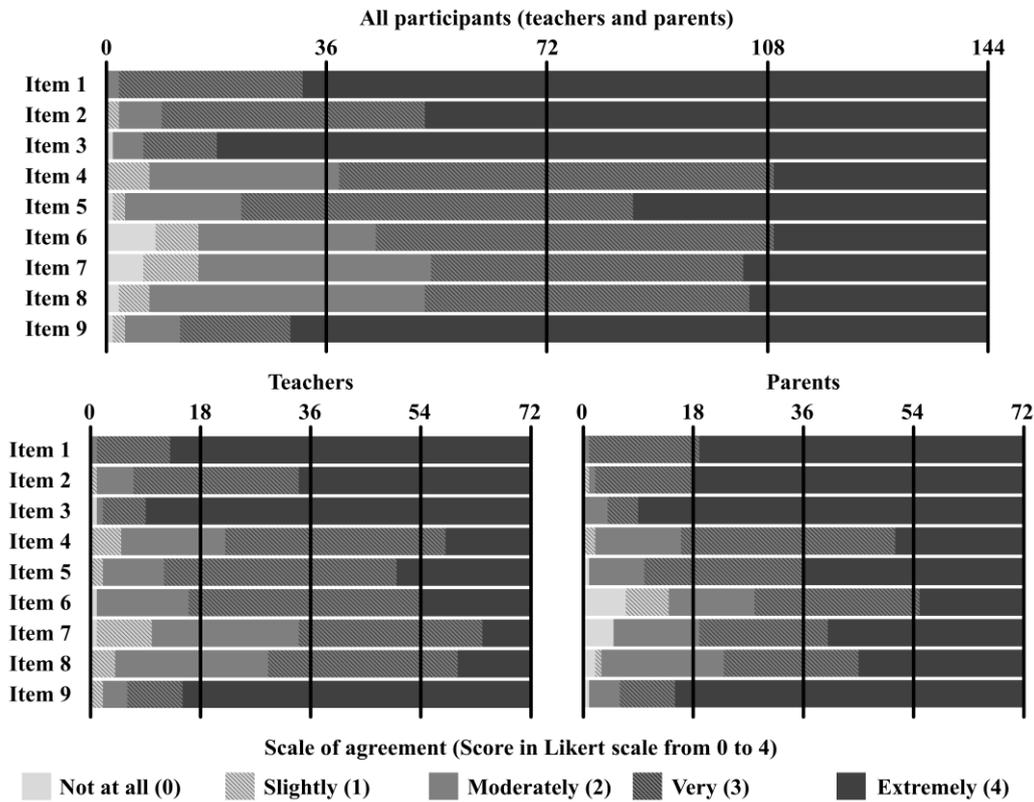
From this table it can be seen that both groups were predominantly female (98.6% of teachers and 91.7% of parents). In addition, the group of parents was significantly younger than the group of teachers (on average 10 years younger).

Regarding the results of the second part of the survey, the data showed a very good opinion of teachers and parents on the RP programmes for all proposed items. Regardless of whether they are considered together or separately, teachers and parents gave a median score of 4 out of 4 for items 1, 2, 3 and 9 and a median score of 3 out of 4 for items 4, 5, 6, 7 and 8. The comparative analysis of the opinions of teachers and parents, which was carried out using the Mann-Whitney U-test for the 9 items of the quantitative Likert scale, revealed significant

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differences for item 2 ($p=0.004$; $\eta^2=0.057$), item 5 ($p=0.040$; $\eta^2=0.030$), item 7 ($p<0.001$; $\eta^2=0.104$) and item 8 ($p=0.035$; $\eta^2=0.031$) with higher values for the group of parents. For item 1 ($p=0.238$; $\eta^2=0.010$), item 3 ($p=0.961$; $\eta^2<0.001$), item 4 ($p=0.113$; $\eta^2=0.018$), item 6 ($p=0.058$; $\eta^2=0.025$) and item 9 ($p=0.991$; $\eta^2<0.001$), no differences were found between the opinions of teachers and parents. The detailed results of these quantitative items are shown in Figure 1, in which the data are plotted using a divergent stacked bar graph, and in Table 2, in which the first IQR, the median (second IQR) and the third IQR are given.

Figure 1. Divergent stacked bar graph of the 9 quantitative items



Note. The results of the 9 quantitative items of the Likert scale, presented in a divergent stacked bar chart. Item 1: My students have shown interest in the psychomotor project; Item 2: I am satisfied with the activities in the psychomotor project; Item 3: I believe that psychomotor skills are important for a child's developmental process; Item 4: My students have improved in dealing with emotions; Item 5: My students have improved in their socialisation skills; Item 6: My students have improved in their motor skills; Item 7: My students have improved in their language skills; Item 8: My students have improved in their attention skills; Item 9: I would like my students to participate in this class again next school year.

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Table 2. Results of the Mann-Whitney U Test

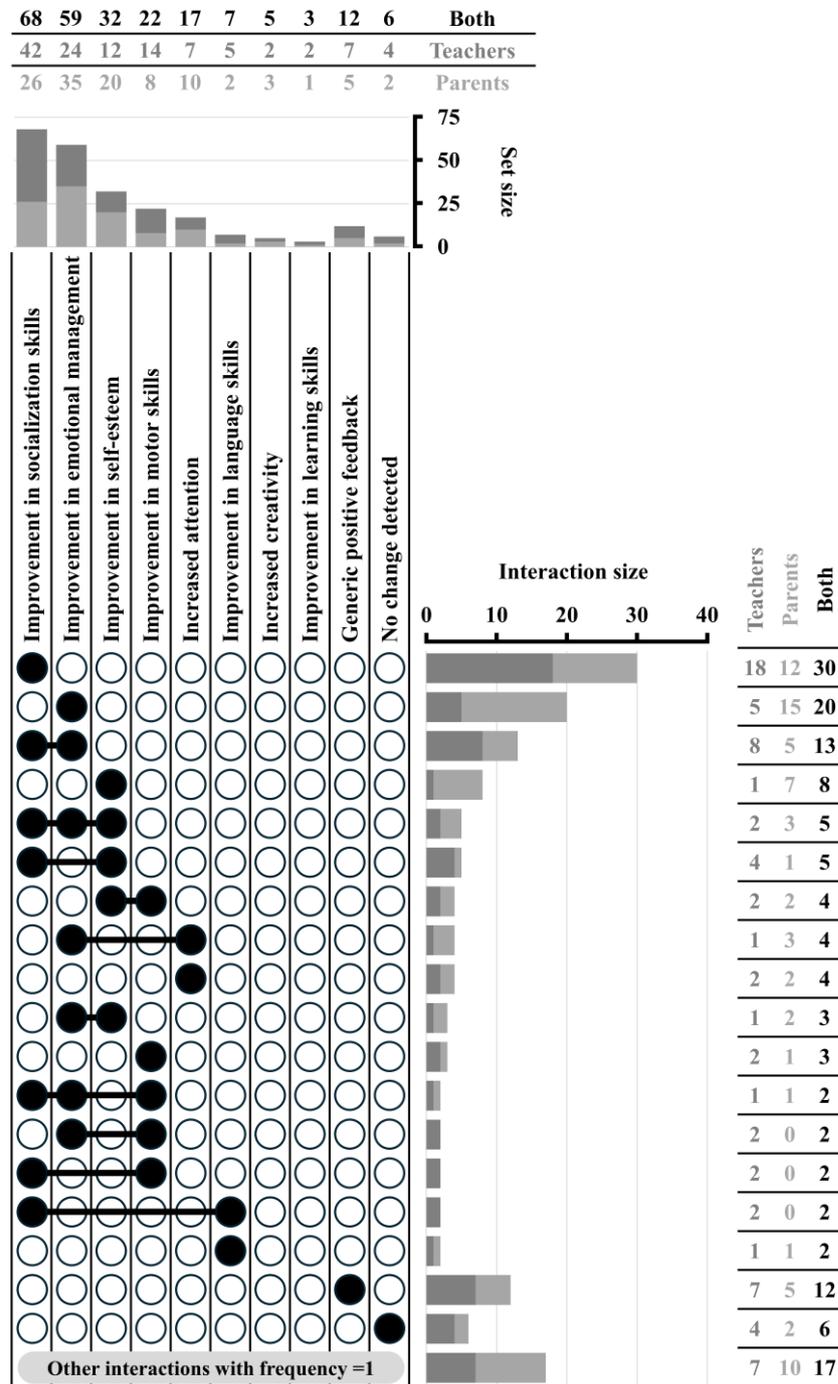
	Teacher (n=72)			Parents (n=72)			p-value	Higher score for
	1 st IQR	Median	3 rd IQR	1 st IQR	Median	3 rd IQR		
Item 1	4	4	4	3	4	4	0.238	-
Item 2	3	4	4	3.5	4	4	0.004*	Parents
Item 3	4	4	4	4	4	4	0.961	-
Item 4	2	3	3	3	3	4	0.113	-
Item 5	3	3	4	3	3.5	4	0.040*	Parents
Item 6	3	3	3.5	2	3	3	0.058	-
Item 7	2	3	3	2	3	4	<0.001*	Parents
Item 8	2	3	3	2	3	4	0.035*	Parents
Item 9	4	4	4	4	4	4	0.991	-

* = Statistically significant difference between teachers and parents scores.

In relation to item 10, which was also the qualitative item, it is important to emphasise that none of the responses contained negative opinions or comments. The responses were overwhelmingly positive, with only a few being neutral. The content analysis led to the identification of 10 thematic clusters, namely: (A) improvement in self-esteem (positive connotation; stated by 32 participants); (B) improvement in emotional management (positive connotation; 59 participants); (C) improvement in socialisation skills (positive connotation; 68 participants); (D) improvement in motor skills (positive connotation; 22 participants); (E) increased attention (positive connotation; 17 participants); (F) improvement in language skills (positive connotation; 7 participants); (G) increased creativity (positive connotation; 5 participants); (H) improvement in learning skills (positive connotation; 3 participants); (I) general positive feedback (positive connotation; 12 participants); and (J) no change noted (neutral connotation; 6 participants). Apart from clusters (I) and (J), which can be considered as stand-alone responses, the other 8 clusters each refer to a specific benefit observed by teachers or parents. However, it is important to emphasise that these clusters may or may not be present in the response at the same time, such as in item 10, where a parent may have mentioned both an improvement in socialisation (C) and motor skills (D). This is the reason why the total number of participants exceeds 144, i.e. the total sample size. For a better and easier understanding of the answers given by the participants to item 10, the data has been summarised in a diagram which is shown in Figure 2.

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Figure 2. Upset plots of the thematic clusters obtained by the qualitative item



Note. Upset plot of the thematic clusters extrapolated from the qualitative items of the survey. The top section (set size) of the graph shows the total number of teachers and parents who mentioned a particular thematic cluster for item 10 (e.g., 42 teachers and 26 parents reported “improving children's social skills,” for a total of 68 participants). In the right-hand section (interaction size), the chart shows the number of teachers and parents who, again for item 10, mentioned a particular combination of thematic clusters, represented by the black dots (e.g. 18 teachers and 12 parents reported only an “improvement in social skills” for the children, as shown in the first row of the chart,

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while 8 teachers and 5 parents reported both an “improvement in social skills” and an “improvement in emotional management”, but not the other thematic clusters, as shown in the third row of the chart).

Discussion

In this study, we found that both teachers and parents of preschool children have a positive perception of RP. The quantitative data show that the median score of all nine items of the Likert scale was 3 out of 4 or higher. Specifically, items 1, 2, 3, and 9, which measured general interest, satisfaction, perceived importance, and willingness to repeat the experience with their children, received the highest median score (4/4). These results suggest that the RP program and its integration into the school context are generally well received by adult caregivers. In contrast, items 4 to 8, which examined more specific outcomes such as emotional regulation, socialisation, motor skills, language and attention, received slightly lower mean scores (all = 3). This divergence suggests two possible interpretations. First, as previous studies have shown, caregivers often perceive general improvements in children's development but may not have the resources to analytically distinguish between domains that are developmentally linked (Glenberg, 2010; Nilfyr & Ewe, 2025; Sheridan et al., 2010; Silkenbeumer et al., 2024). Second, the variability may be due to actual individual differences between children in how they benefit from RP, as observed by Coler et al. (2010), who reported heterogeneous effects across developmental domains. These two explanations are not mutually exclusive and may well co-exist. It is plausible that both teachers and parents tended to express stronger agreement on global questions, while taking a more moderate position on questions that required assessment of specific domains. Our conclusion is supported by the narrative responses. In fact, 126 of the 144 participants reported at least one benefit. Socialisation (47.2%), emotion regulation (41%) and self-esteem (22.2%) were most frequently mentioned. These findings are consistent with previous literature linking both psychomotor skills in general and RP to socio-emotional functioning and self-concept in healthy young children (De Ajuriaguerra, 1974; Lapierre & Aucouturier, 1975; Rojo-Ramos et al., 2022; Thümmeler et al., 2022) and children with developmental disorders (de Barros & Coutinho, 2023) but they require caution in their interpretation, given that our data capture perceptions rather than objective developmental outcomes. The wide range of response patterns – i.e. 33 different combinations of thematic clusters – reflects the diversity of the observed results. This wide heterogeneity can

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either be attributed to real differences in the way children responded to RP based on their individual characteristics (Coler et al., 2010; Wang & Chen, 2022), or to the subjective and contextualised nature of teacher and parent observation. In either case, this suggests that RP may be perceived as supporting multiple developmental pathways, a conclusion that is consistent with the theoretical framework of embodied cognition, which emphasises the holistic integration of motor, emotional, and cognitive processes (Clark et al., 2024; Glenberg, 2010; Wathirunwong et al., 2025; Wilson, 2002).

A particularly interesting point concerns the apparent discrepancy between the qualitative and quantitative results on emotion regulation. Although 59 participants spontaneously mentioned improvements in this area in the open responses, the corresponding Likert item (item 4) did not receive the highest score. A plausible explanation is that the emotional changes, although significant, were subtle or gradual and therefore not perceived as “extremely” significant on a fixed scale. Furthermore, the Likert items force a quantification of perceived changes that may not fully capture the nuanced impressions that participants prefer to express in narrative form. This highlights the value of mixed methods, where open-ended questions complement and contextualise structured evaluations (Sheridan et al., 2010). Further findings emerge from the comparison between teachers and parents, with the latter reporting significantly higher scores than teachers, particularly for satisfaction (item 2), socialisation (item 5), language (item 7) and attention (item 8). It should be noted that teachers were asked to rate the impact of RP on the whole class, while parents rated the impact of RP on their own child. This broader perspective may have led teachers to moderate their ratings, particularly if the benefits to students were uneven. It is important to recognise that parents are observing their children in an intimate setting, whereas teachers are working in a group-based learning environment. In any case, previous research has documented improvements in executive functioning (Best, 2010; Traverso et al., 2015), emotional competence (Diamond, 2013) and social skills (Rojo-Ramos et al., 2022), following psychomotor interventions. However, this study complements these findings by focusing on caregivers' opinions rather than on verifying effectiveness, a topic that still requires attention in the literature, given that, as already mentioned, it is caregivers who decide whether children participate in such programs. (Thümmeler et al., 2022). Indeed, as discussed by Vila et al. (2025), parental and teacher consent

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is crucial for institutional support and long-term sustainability of psychomotor interventions. Finally, it is important to note that, given that this study is based on subjective reports, positive evaluations may also reflect contextual factors such as expectations, social desirability, or difficulties in attributing change to a single program rather than to maturation or other experiences. For future studies, therefore, these alternative explanations should be considered alongside the more favorable interpretations.

Conclusions

In summary, both the quantitative and qualitative data in this study highlight a positive evaluation and perceived value of RP practices with respect to children's development across multiple domains. Future research could benefit from more objective longitudinal monitoring of children's progress, but the support provided by caregivers that we have highlighted should be interpreted as indicator of acceptability and perceived benefits, representing a useful step towards wider recognition and possible integration of RP into education systems.

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