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IMPACT OF NON-FORMAL EDUCATION ON THE EFFICACY OF SCHOOL LEARNING

Cristina DUMITRU TABACARU

University of Pitesti, Romania

The paper is presenting an attempt to visualise how out-of-school learning could be dealt with in the *in-school* system and if it could enhance the content required by formal education. Study aims and hypothesis are to highlight the impact of non-formal activities on learning results as well as the importance of linking non-formal to formal education and cognitive, attitudinal and affective aspects of non-formal learning. The question the research is posing refers to how closely related to learning outcomes is the choice of reframing school activities in a non-formal approach. We run a psychosocial survey based on a questionnaire elaborated by us in compliance with validity and reliability criteria. The questionnaire aimed to identify teachers' opinion regarding the impact and the efficiency of non-formal activities on learning outcomes. The present study researches how one can effectively link in-school and out-of-school learning.

Keywords: *non-formal education, non-formal methodology, learning experience, learning outcomes, school performance.*

IMPACTUL EDUCAȚIEI NON-FORMALE ASUPRA EFICACITĂȚII ÎNVĂȚĂRII ȘCOLARE

În lucrare am încercat să vizualizăm modul în care învățarea în afara școlii ar putea fi abordată în sistemul școlar și dacă aceasta ar putea îmbunătăți conținutul cerut de educația formală. Scopurile și ipotezele studiului constau în evidențierea impactului activităților non-formale asupra rezultatelor învățării, precum și a importanței legăturii dintre educația formală și aspectele cognitive, atitudinale și afective ale învățării non-formale. Întrebarea pe care o prezintă cercetarea: Cât de strâns legată de rezultatele învățării este alegerea de a reface activitățile școlare într-o abordare non-formală? Efectuăm un sondaj psihosocial bazat pe un chestionar elaborat de noi în conformitate cu criteriile de validitate și fiabilitate. Chestionarul vizează identificarea opiniei profesorilor cu privire la impactul și eficiența activităților non-formale asupra rezultatelor învățării. Este studiat modul în care se poate conecta eficient învățarea în școală și în afara școlii.

Cuvinte-cheie: *educație non-formală, metodologie non-formală, experiență de învățare, rezultate de învățare, performanță școlară.*

Introduction

The current school reality is forcing us to rethink education and to move towards the revival of learning settings. Today we have endless tools and instruments for learning that are more advanced than ever, but we fail to engage our students in making their better version of themselves. Even though going to school nowadays is mandatory and easy-accessible at least in all European countries (except some remote villages or communities), children seem not to enjoy and the majority of them develop an attitude of disengagement. Although the lack of interest to formal instruction is more supported by national educational reports and studies, the non-formal education is growing and expanding as a "more powerful tool" of changing learning culture. This development, in accordance with the expanded use of Open Educational Resources (OERs), is creating a new perspective on expanding the dyad teacher -learner to facilitator – learner – content with different opportunities in wiring networks.

Change has become a core concept in today's working life. Lifetime employment becomes an exception, the majority of employees will, voluntarily or not, change job and career several times in their work lifespan [1]. School has to be able to form its students to be able to have success in nowadays fast-paced society. But, unfortunately, it's failing to do so. A. Roger [2] posits that formal education systems alone cannot respond to the challenges of modern societies and therefore welcomes its reinforcement by non-formal education practices. The term of *deschooling society* [3] is a critical discourse on education as practised in modern societies. "Most learning is not the result of instruction. It is rather the result of unhampered participation in a meaningful setting. Most people learn best by being "with it", yet school makes them identify their personal, cognitive growth with elaborate planning and manipulation".

Through personal observation and some studies [4] it seems that the non-formal education tends to get more credit with regard to its power to engage students in an efficient learning. Out of the school system could mean a more participatory and engaging learning. Although there has always been some attention placed on out-of school education and on acknowledging the importance of community resources for teaching and learning, the new term, "non-formal", helped to legitimate this attention [5]. The present study researches how one can effectively link in-school and out-of-school learning. The first part discusses the difficulty in defining out-of-school learning and offering a valid perspective in assessing learning outcomes as its impact it's not immediate. We will focus on distinguishing between three types of learning: formal, informal, and non-formal.

1. Theoretical framework: Formal, Non-formal and Informal Education

The present paper is grounded in the theory and practice of some of the great educational thinkers of our time including Paolo Freire, L.S. Vygotsky, J.Piaget, Howard Gardner, David Kolb, Malcolm Knowles and Bernice McCarthy. Even though their theories they don't refer directly to non-formal education, most of non-formal techniques comply with their views on education.

Formal education represents "the education conducted in an institution, hierarchically structured, chronologically graded, and centrally led (MERYYS), by tradition, becoming the centre of interest for school policies" of past, present, and future. Non-formal education envisages "any activity that is systematically organized, created outside the formal system, offering selected types of education to specific subgroups of the population (both adults, and pupils)", whereas informal education is "the process that takes a lifetime, through which each person acquires knowledge, skills, and understanding from daily experiences" [6]. At its best, formal education involves a government that manages and supports school systems with curricula designed to meet never ending changing societal needs. If it fails to keep up with students needs influenced by societal needs, formal education can become a "storage room" or a "banking education", term used by the Brazilian educator Paulo Freire. "Education ... becomes an act of depositing, in which the students are the depositories and the teacher is the depositor" [7]. Mostly his critics is referring to formal education which main outcome is depositing of knowledge into students' heads, making an analogy with depositing money into a bank.

Formal educational system is mostly perceived as an institutionalized training, and represents usually mandatory education, with a very specific outcome certifying the acquired competences and skills. Based on that one could understand that "non-formal" education and training are placed mostly outside the system. But why should that be the case? It could be a really efficient learning opportunity to have a holistic approach to education and merge at least non-formal methods and techniques to formal system.

N.Zepke, L.Leach [8] is identifying four non-formal learning contexts: community development; adult literacy; workplace learning; and personal interest learning and his study is suggesting that learner outcomes in formal education could also benefit from the inclusion of this critical dimension. O.Moldovana, V.Bocos Bintintan urges the formal education to accept the existence of the informal and non-formal education, to embrace it and to use it in everyday teaching with the goal to ensure a social active insertion of learners. "In order to achieve the correlation of the formal, non-formal and informal education efficiently, first of all a clear perspective of these is requested. Therefore, we want, in the present study, reconsideration and re-meaning of the non-formal education concept, that which, all over the years has been approached in different ways" O.Moldovana, V.Bocos Bintintan [9]. B.Brennan, 1997 reconceptualised the non-formal education term by bringing together three different types of it: non-formal education as complement, alternative and supplement to the formal education system. "The first type represents the role of NFE in providing a means of satisfying unfulfilled provision from the school system; the second type is equated with the use of traditional or indigenous learning; the third is related to the sorts of educational activities associated with development activities following the end of the Cold War" [10]. At the root of NFE is a participatory, grassroots approach to helping people to clarify and address their own needs. N.Zepke, L.Leach [11]. Far from being 'supplementary education' or 'extracurricular activities', NFE has developed into a worldwide educational industry. However, it has yet to be studied as an independent educational approach. Aimed at all ages and literacy levels, NFE challenges traditional concepts of education. It affects society as a whole and the life and conduct of individuals, and has influenced formal education, which has adopted many of its theoretical assumptions and pedagogical practices [12]. The positive impact of bridging all three types of education can be easily predicted and is also

stated by researches, done also in our Romanian context. "The approach in interaction and interdependence of the education forms ensures the increase of the pedagogic potential of the formation / development activities of the human personality, both from social and individual perspective, at didactic, formal level and extra-didactic, non-formal and informal level" as it is stated by A.M. Petrescu, G.Gorghiu [13].

2. Research design

The paper is presenting the attempt to visualise how out-of-school learning could be dealt with in the *in-school* system and if it could enhance the content required by formal education. A structured questionnaire was used to examine the above issue. A total of 67 respondents replied to the questionnaire. The voices of teachers and students who were involved in some kind of non-formal education in Arges county, Romania are heard to provide insights into the issue. We took into consideration that we experience informal learning anyway as well as considering the difficulties teachers are confronted with complying and keeping up with all formal requirements which prevent them from planning and carrying out other extracurricular or non-formal activities.

Study aims and hypothesis are to highlight the impact of non-formal activities on learning results as well as the importance of linking non-formal to formal education and cognitive, attitudinal and affective aspects of non-formal learning.

The question the research is posing refers to how closely related to learning outcomes is the choice of reframing school activities in a non-formal approach.

The research hypothesis

Participants:

Participants in the study were 55 female teachers, aged between 20 and 62, and 12 male teachers, aged between 32 and 49, teaching in primary schools from Arges county. The group of subjects was divided into two categories: 34 are participants having experiences or knowledge of non-formal education methods and techniques and 33 students with no experience in pedagogical education or knowledge of non-formal education methods and techniques.

Methods:

In order to answer our objectives and research question we run a psychosocial survey based on a questionnaire elaborated by us in compliance with validity and reliability criteria. The questionnaire aimed to identify teachers' opinion regarding the impact and the efficiency of non-formal activities on learning outcomes. These aspects were measured in relation to classrooms which have the respondents as teachers, at this moment. It was applied online. The questionnaire was designed in 4 section with a total of 16 questions with dichotomist answers (YES/NO) and items evaluated on a Lickert scale. The instrument was designed to measure the frequency and the type of non-formal methods and techniques were used by teachers and to evaluate the impact of those methods on students learning. Also for helping those teachers with little knowledge on non-formal format and activities, we designed some sessions and run some learning experiences in 4 classrooms (primary level) from educational institutions from Arges country. Those activities aimed at reframing the lesson content in a well-prepared, dynamic way, opened to active involvement of students and their productive input into the creation (searching on their own with the support of the teacher who weren't conducting the activity, but just facilitating it) of the lessons units according to objectives announced by the teacher. All proposed activities had a focus on personal development, on the exchange of experiences, ideas, visions with professional educational support provided by teachers and researcher. The non-formal methodology used by the teachers of the present study focused on identifying clear and concrete learning objectives. The teacher should have a very clear picture of what is to be taught and what should be learned. Those are the learning outcomes, identified as tangible results. But in addition to formal education strategy, non-formal methodology is not focusing only on cognitive outcomes expressed through behavioural terms, but also on attitudinal and more soft-skills. As modern research (Piaget, Bruner, Kohler, Lewin, Dewey, Montessori, Vygotsky etc.) shows human brain does not learn in precise, strict, robotic way, but using a very selective order, by gathering information and make personal meaningful connections.

3. Results and discussions

The analysis of data has been done through this reference to the content of the used instruments, participants embraced and they reckoned the importance of bringing the format of non-formal education into the formal

system. We have to mention that it means that the formal content which is compulsory to follow was designed and delivered by non-formal methods. The interest with regard to this issues proved to be quite high, noticing a great number in the percentage of teachers who pinpoint that the "new format" of educational activities had a great impact on learning outcomes, students demonstrated a more engaging attitude and motivation to the subjects taught. Teachers identified a number of extracurricular activities and recommended them and the result was encouraging. More than 50% of the kids showed interest in engaging and participating to proposed activities, contrarily to the 18% of students already participating in various non-formal activities prior to the study conducted. To identify current non-formal methods preferred by teachers during classes or during other extracurricular activities (like "*Scoala Altfel (Different School)*" week, we interviewed teachers on types of activities organised and the ones welcomed by their students:

Table

Non-formal activities Frequency

Type of non-formal method	Frequency	Percentage
<i>Teambuilding activities</i>	20	29,8
<i>Role play</i>	14	20.8
<i>Trust games</i>	10	14.9
<i>Collage</i>	7	10.4
<i>Lotus Blossom</i>	7	10.4
<i>Theatre games</i>	6	0.89
<i>Field visits</i>	3	0.04
<i>Total</i>	67	100

The learning outcomes identified mostly by the participants themselves during feedback groups were generally speaking on cognitive, social and personal levels. Therefore, this can be summed up as a holistic learning experience, which also results from approaching to learning from a different perspective where the learner is taking an active role in his learning experience. Findings show that a non-formal method by itself does not automatically provide good or efficient learning, hence is not necessarily equivalent to a good teaching. But without a shadow of a doubt it makes learning as well as teaching experience more interesting. Effective learning occurs when we have a good feedback from and about those we learn. The feedback is an essential element of a non-formal activity. Teachers expressed their desire and need to know what students do, how they do it, and why they do it. We also explored the motivation of students to choose a non-formal activity, and the reasons expressed are mostly because it's interesting, it's active, it allows exploration and discovery, it facilitate discovery of new information in a new perspective, not in a unidirectional way teacher-student etc. The learning outcomes confirmed by teachers are positive and there is a difference in the retention and retrieval of content transmitted, but most important on other soft skills that formal education system is failing to develop on a great extent like social skills, cooperation, assertive communication, positive attitudes towards others, empathy. Teachers and students involved in the study recognised that non-formal education provides different opportunities for discovering the physical world around us, but most importantly discovering the inner world which exists in any of us. All those learning experiences (especially the ones organised during "*Scoala Altfel/ Different School*" week) offers diversity in learning and should be taken into account when designing school lessons because it could optimize students' success and school performance. An item of the questionnaire we were interested in factors that teachers find important in deciding the methodology to be taken during activities. Teachers noted that the most important three factors in selecting the activity methodology are: students age, motivation and interests; objectives proposed: school performance (IQ, learning capacity). Our findings certify the value of questions formulated at the beginning of the study and helped us to explore the possibility of re-think a learning activity. The answers, however, remain open to arguments, as the study done was an attempt to redesign the lesson format, but lack a longitudinal study and the learning outcomes could not be measured accurate and the impact could not be effectively determined.

Although some recommendations could be done. Firstly, the urge to reconnect school education with other types of education and approach to learning in a more holistic way. The role of teaching could change from directing to facilitating learning. The act of teaching does not necessarily imply that learning is happening, to ensure that learning is actually happening in our classrooms and it is also efficient. The teacher should become the pillar that guide the learner to enter the unknown and discover knowledge by himself with the help of the teacher. The knowledge should be built in cooperation with peers as-well, like non-formal methodology is promoting. Is already known the impact of media and digitalization on learning and the information is more available than ever. It is not at all a problem nowadays to access a specific information, the difficulties are using them efficiently, finding and verifying them, the ability to grow and connect. Building lessons on a sound, research-based foundation of effective, creative, interactive methodologies, using appropriate technologies and considering the feedback from learners should optimize the student school performance and achievement.

Conclusion

The study finding supports and offers some recommendations of how to bridge in and out-of-school learning. Non-formal education and non-formal methodology could improve learning experiences and engage in a more efficient way learners and have an impact on students' achievements. It is proposed a holistic approach to education units and encourage teachers to be opened to non-formal methodology in order to be able to fully exploit the great potential of each learner, to support the learning process formally acquired.

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Date despre autor:

Cristina DUMITRU TABACARU, Phd, Lecturer, University of Pitesti, Romania.

E-mail: cristina.dumitru@upit.ro; cristinadummitru@gmail.com

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