

Emilee Moore / Claudia Vallejo / Melinda Dooly / Eulàlia Borràs

Out-of-school language learning and educational equity

Abstract This chapter explores existing scholarship on out-of-school learning at both a local (Catalan) and an international level. We particularly focus on research that documents foreign language learning and literacy development in both informal and nonformal education across diverse socioeconomic, linguistic and cultural contexts. Research shows that access to extracurricular initiatives and opportunities to engage in informal language learning can positively impact upon formal academic achievement and future professional trajectories, especially for economically under-resourced students, and thus can play a significant role in tackling socioeducational inequalities. These positive effects are enhanced when out-of-school initiatives focus on students' competences and build on their linguistic and cultural funds of knowledge to include their everyday communicative practices. However, while offer of and demand for out-of-school learning – and particularly of foreign language learning – have increased in recent years, so too have inequalities in participation between more and less affluent families, in part due to economic burdens such as access fees, and to public restraints on funding and scholarships.

Keywords: nonformal language learning, informal language learning, formal schooling, socioeconomic inequalities, children and youth

1. Introduction

The IEP! project was inspired by existing research on nonformal and informal foreign language learning, as well as by related research on community-based extracurricular programmes, particularly those focusing on literacy, in contexts of sociolinguistic and socioeconomic diversity. In this chapter, we present a review of the literature that informed our research. The review is organised as follows: in Section 2, we present an overview of what is known about out-of-school activities and socioeducational inequalities, with a particular focus on the geographical context of our research (i.e. Catalonia). In the third section, we discuss relevant local and international research on nonformal language education, including nonformal foreign language education, for children and youth. The fourth section focuses on research about children's and youths' informal language learning, and their informal foreign language learning in particular.

The final section discusses the implications of research on nonformal and informal language learning for mainstream education.

Before continuing, it is important to clarify the terminology used. Following authors including González Motos (2016) or Sundqvist (2009), we use the terms ‘nonformal’ or ‘extracurricular’ to refer to the broad range of organised activities with educational aims that young people take part in outside of formal education, with formal being considered that “which takes place in educational centres, with a defined organisational structure and schedules, and clear learning objectives with exams and tests to validate results” (González Motos, 2016, p. 4). Our work is also concerned with ‘informal’ learning, which we differentiate as non-organised activities that young people undertake mainly for leisure rather than for learning, but which have incidental educational value. We refer to ‘after-school’ or ‘out-of-school’ learning as umbrella terms for both these uses of non-school time, which may or may not involve the use of school spaces.

2. Out-of-school activities and socioeducational inequalities

In Catalonia, where our research was carried out, extracurricular activities are a common part of the daily lives of many school-aged children and youth. The Government of Catalonia’s Department of Health gathers data annually about the participation of under 15-year-olds in organised sporting and nonsporting activities, as well as other leisure time activities. These data are the main source of statistical information available to us. According to the most recent report published (Departament de Salut, 2015), 35 % of 3- to 14-year-olds (31.2 % of boys and 39.4 % of girls) take part in organised nonsporting activities (e.g. musical and artistic activities, language learning activities) outside of school hours, while 62 % (64.7 % of boys and 59.1 % of girls) participate in organised sports. Furthermore, 40.6 % (47.7 % of boys and 33.3 % of girls) of 3- to 14-year-olds partake in digitally-mediated leisure activities (e.g. watch television, play video or computer games, use the Internet) for more than two hours per day.

Regarding the influence of socioeconomic and socioeducational factors on the types of educational and noneducational after-school activities that young people do, sedentary spare time activities such as watching television and using computers are more prevalent in less affluent sectors of the population, and increase with age. Sedentary activities are especially prevalent among children and youth whose mothers have had the least schooling, and rates of sedentary activities increase with children’s and young people’s ages (Departament de Salut, 2014). Furthermore, as the Catalan ombudsmen highlights in a report reflecting on children’s and youths’ use of leisure time, participation in organised

extracurricular activities is conditioned by socioeconomic and socioeducational inequalities, with young people from less affluent and less schooled families being less likely to be involved in nonformal education (Sindic de Greuges, 2014). In a similar reflection on the Department of Health data, González Motos (2016) notes that “those who participate most [in nonformal education] are those with least educational needs, and on whom – according to the evidence reviewed – the impact of after-school activities is lowest” (p. 17). Indeed, as González Motos (2016) highlights, access to after-school educational opportunities is determined to a large extent by the need to pay fees, as well as by parents’ access to information about available programmes and their understanding of enrolment procedures.

In related research, Llopart et al. (2016) investigated the types of organised extracurricular activities that Catalan children and youth participate in, taking into account their families’ socioeconomic status, as well as who (e.g. their schools, their families) and what motivated their participation in the activities. These authors suggest – while also highlighting the need for more in-depth qualitative research before making any conclusions – that middle and upper-class families give greater importance to a broader range of activities and more actively promote their offsprings’ participation in them. Among families of lower socioeconomic status, according to Llopart et al.’s research, there exists less awareness about the after-school activities engaged in by their children. The after-school activities that are most prevalent among lower-class children and youth are practicing sport, music and spending time in libraries. Furthermore, the extracurricular activities that less affluent children and young people take part in tend to be organised by their schools or by community organisations, rather than being private initiatives.

González Motos (2016) also discusses the social and educational purposes that nonformal education fills, referring to an international research review by Lauer et al. (2004). These purposes include supporting families by increasing the amount of time that children and young people are supervised by adults outside of their homes; extending the time available for students’ learning beyond the hours of formal schooling; and compensating for educational disadvantages experienced by certain children and young people who are struggling academically at school, or in terms of social skills, values or attitudes. In this sense, González Motos (2016) warns that after-school activities have the potential to reduce social and educational inequalities, or to reproduce and even increase them if access is not equitable. Along similar lines, the 2020 Eurydice report (EACEA, 2020) found that there is considerable variation across the European Union regarding the “amount of free or subsidised additional activities in

schools outside the normal school day, despite the potential of such measures” (p. 199). This variation is worrisome considering that, as the report states, there are indicators that “additional activities in schools can make a significant contribution [...] and can compensate for the lack of resources in families from low socio-economic backgrounds” (EACEA, 2020, p. 199).

Similarly, Carbonell (2015) (see also Llopart et al., 2016) describes how both the supply and demand for nonformal learning activities has increased in recent times in Catalonia, especially in programmes focusing on music, languages (and English in particular) and sport, at the same time as there has been a rise in the socioeconomic inequalities that affect children’s and youths’ access to them. Carbonell (2016) writes:

Educational opportunities outside of school have grown. However, since the financial crisis, there has also been an increase in social inequalities that further hinder access to nonschool educational activities for young people and families with fewer economic, social and cultural resources, both during the school year and in summer vacations, despite efforts made by some local councils and nonprofit organisations. (p. 6, our translation).

Writing from the USA, Snellman et al., (2015) also claim that income-based differences in extracurricular participation are increasing and more worrisome, with these differences greatly affecting future outcomes for children and youth. It can be assumed that COVID-19, and the subsequent downward economic turn and financial vulnerability that many experts are predicting as a consequence, will only exacerbate these differences (Martin et al., 2020; Midões & Seré, 2021). This is already evident short-term; “Students from less advantaged backgrounds are likely to experience a larger decline in learning compared to their more advantaged counterparts” (Di Pietro et al., 2020, p. 28). Basing their conclusions on a report on the impact of a long-term teacher strike in Argentina, the authors of the same EU-commissioned report predict a detrimental impact on “later educational outcomes as well as future labour market performance” (Di Pietro et al., 2020, p. 29).

In an EU report that studied 14 countries’ policies and practices impacting on reducing social and educational inequality, with a particular focus on linguistic minority students, Dooly and Vallejo (2009) found sufficient examples of locally and nationally initiated out-of-school language and cultural programmes to conclude that supporting extracurricular learning is a promising approach worth exploring further. Examples included programmes that involved professional mentors for youth at risk, aimed at informing, orienting and providing training for young individuals showing interest (implemented in several EU

countries); other examples aimed to provide school support and leisure activities that included family members (e.g. *Kannersnacht* in Luxembourg; ‘Reading with parents’ or the ‘Time out project’ for older students in the Netherlands).

In the following section of this chapter we review research on nonformal language learning that has been influential to our IEP! work. We include research that is specific to foreign languages as well as research on extracurricular programmes targeting literacy, a field which has been studied much more extensively.

3. Young people’s nonformal language learning

Research from different traditions within the broad field of foreign language teaching and learning suggests that engaging with foreign languages outside of classrooms has a positive impact on learners’ emerging language competences. In his review of research on language learning beyond formal classroom instruction – i.e. through informal and nonformal exposure and opportunities to practice language – Benson (2011) writes that:

While the jury remains out on the effectiveness of language instruction, the wise language learner might be well advised to seek out a combination of instruction and exposure to language input [...] as well as opportunities to produce language output [...]. (p. 7)

Benson further emphasises that there is a lack of research on foreign language learning beyond formal instructional settings, with existing research producing inconclusive results about the effectiveness of different types of out-of-school (i.e. nonformal and informal) activities that learners engage in. While calling for more research to fill the gap, he concludes that:

While the jury also remains undecided on the effectiveness of out-of-class learning, the wise learner will, again, be well-advised to adopt the view that classroom and out-of-class learning are equally important. (2011, p. 7)

In one of the few studies on nonformal foreign language learning conducted in the Spanish context, Corpas Arellano (2014) examines teenagers’ participation in extracurricular activities for learning English, the frequency of this participation and the impact on students’ performance in the school English subject. The students participating in her study were in the fourth year of compulsory secondary schooling (15-years-old) at three middle-class public schools in Andalusia, Spain. Corpas Arellano’s research showed that a significant number (over 40 %) of the secondary school students in the schools studied were enrolled in some type of nonformal activity to support or enrich their school

English lessons, including attending private language colleges, private tutoring, or attending summer camps abroad, all of which the author claims had a positive impact on the teenagers' English learning at school. Furthermore, although it is not a focus of her research, Corpus Arellano hints at certain inequalities in terms of students' access to such nonformal learning opportunities, highlighting economic barriers to participation in them which have been exacerbated by the 2008 financial crisis in Spain and cuts to government scholarships supporting students' out-of-school foreign language learning.

In their study on English language learning by teenagers (mean age 15.6 years) in Madrid, Spain, Shepard and Ainsworth (2017) found that 30 % of students consulted reported studying English outside of school. Of these, 42.8 % reported attending group classes at an after-school English language college; 12.4 % attended private classes at an English language college; 27 % reported studying English with a one-to-one tutor; 11.4 % practiced English on their own using the internet; and 6.4 % reported learning on their own using print materials. Shepard and Ainsworth also report that students who study English outside of school spend between two to four hours a week doing so, with the largest proportion of them (41.1 %) indicating they studied English for two hours each week in addition to the time spent in English class as part of their formal schooling. These authors consider the impact of students' socioeconomic status on different aspects of their English language learning, finding that more affluent students were more motivated, which the authors link in part to access to private education, extra classes and language learning materials.

While research on nonformal foreign language learning specifically is quite scarce, there is a large and informative body of research on out-of-school literacy programmes supporting children's and youths' learning of their schools' main languages of instruction, from Catalonia, Spain and from abroad. This research suggests that while from a critical perspective nonformal education takes some of the onus of students' learning away from schools and may be seen as punishment by learners, certain out-of-school programmes are beneficial in that they offer an "unusually heterogeneous distribution of knowledge and skill" (Cole, 1996, p. 298) in comparison with mainstream classrooms (Cole & The Distributed Literacy Consortium, 2006). It has been argued, furthermore, that in nonformal education external pressures on learners are lower and adult agendas are more modest than in schools (Spielberger & Halpern, 2002). Some of the international research on nonformal education has explored aspects such as the organisation of programme sessions and the profile of the adult tutors involved, concluding that less structured initiatives and with less-trained tutors yield poorer results, especially when targeting learners facing socioeconomic

hardship (Allor & McCathren, 2004). Other research in community-based educational programmes has described the importance of the relational and identity aspects supported by them (Lee & Hawkins, 2008; Vallejo, 2020b). Several studies linked to the Fifth Dimension project in the USA (Cole, 1996; Cole & The Distributed Literacy Consortium, 2006) and the associated La Clase Mágica project conducted in the USA and Spain (Vázquez, 2003; Macías Gómez-Estern & Vázquez, 2015) have shown how collaborative interactional contexts built among children, youth and adult participants, as well as with broader communities, are beneficial to learning. In the context of Catalonia, the Casa de Shere Rom project (Crespo et al., 1999; Crespo et al., 2005), which was inspired by the Fifth Dimension and La Clase Mágica, built a learning community made up of researchers, Roma educators, children and adolescents on the marginalised outskirts of Barcelona. The project favoured the educational integration of the participating students, and in particular, their development of digital literacies.

In the following section, we focus on research on young people's informal language learning.

4. Young people's informal language learning

The results presented in Section 2 of this chapter from the Catalan Department of Health's survey on under 15-year-olds' use of their out-of-school time show that activities such as watching television and using computers are commonplace. The literature on children's and youths' informal language learning suggests that some of this digitally-mediated time might offer educational affordances. For example, in their survey on English language learning by teenagers in Madrid, Shepard and Ainsworth (2017) found that 43.9 % of their sample interacted with computer games in English (56.4 % of whom were boys and 43.6 % of whom were girls); 25.3 % used English on social media (56.9 % of whom were girls and 43.6 % of whom were boys); 22.8 % reported using English for surfing the internet (53 % of whom were girls and 47 % of whom were boys); and 21.2 % used English to watch films (66.2 % of whom were girls and 33.8 % of whom were boys). Fewer than 10 % of the consulted students reported using English for watching television or listening to the radio, and fewer than 5 % used English for reading print material.

In research with a similar focus, Muñoz (2020) documented the types of contact with English that learners in Catalonia have outside their school classrooms, exploring age and gender differences and examining the relationship between out-of-school contact with English and school English grades. In line with other international studies cited by the author, listening to songs is most prevalent

among the activities engaged in by the participants in English, followed by watching videos on YouTube, reading on the internet, writing on the internet, playing videogames and watching movies in English subtitled into Catalan or Spanish. In terms of age and gender differences, Muñoz (2020) writes:

In summary, the typical viewers of audiovisual input are female and their viewing frequency increases with age; gamers are male and adolescent; frequent readers are older than nonfrequent readers and female; listeners to music are adolescent and female; and talkers are female. As for the profile of those who engage in online activities, they are more generally older adolescents; and readers on the Internet are typically female. (p. 191)

Regarding the association between out-of-school exposure to English and students' school English grades, Muñoz found that all activities except for gaming had a positive impact on learners' school performance, leading her to conclude that less academically-oriented students engaged more frequently in gaming than their peers.

Sundqvist (2009) studied the effects of what she calls extramural English – i.e. informal language activities using English that learners participate in beyond classrooms, in their spare time – on the development of oral proficiency and vocabulary knowledge amongst teenagers in Sweden. Her results show that engagement in informal activities in English beyond classrooms has a positive impact on learners' foreign language competences, although she concludes that the type of activity engaged in needs to be taken into consideration. Activities requiring learners to be more linguistically active (e.g. video gaming, searching the internet, reading) have a greater impact, according to Sundqvist, on their language learning, than those in which they remain more passive (e.g. listening to music, or watching TV or films). Olsson (2011) conducted an analogous study to Sundqvist's, also with Swedish teenagers, and reached similar conclusions, claiming that extramural activities in English also promote learners' competences as writers in that language. Sundqvist's (2009) research also accounts for different background variables of learners and concludes that taking into account learners' extramural uses of English is of particular relevance when considering the development of language competences by learners from different socio-economic backgrounds.

Similar to Sundqvist's and Olsson's findings, Dooly (2017, para. 18) also highlights the growing importance of young people's informal use of social media and other digital resources for their English language learning, with a particular focus on learners' identity construction. Dooly (2017) argues that youthful users of technology must be understood as agentive social actors

and fully acknowledges “the inherent complexity of participants, context and the numerous other human and social factors involved in the learning process” that includes nonformal use of technology (para. 5). Not all young people access and use technology in the same way and their learning ecology bridges home, school, work and community, in both on and offline activities, having a subsequent impact on their construction of self-identity. Children and youth learn to perform appropriately both on and offline relative to different audiences (Dooley, 2017) and as the world becomes more technologised, unequal access to this technology implies that these groups will be less prepared to manage the technological demands of society. Referring to this digital gap, Katz et al. (2017) indicate that it can have a significant negative impact on the educational attainment of socioeconomically disadvantaged children and youth. This may be even more so with children and youth whose predominant languages are less prevalently available on the internet and in digital support platforms (Ortega, 2017).

Finally, bridging nonformal and informal language learning, Garrido and Moore (2016) report on English language workshops they ran as part of a summer holiday programme for secondary school students at a Catalan university. The workshops aimed to develop learners’ plurilingual repertoires through writing and performing raps on the theme of the teenagers’ language biographies. The authors analyse the audiovisual output of the sessions: raps in the learners’ English, which also include other linguistic resources from their developing repertoires. They show how the rap activity allows the students to produce critical and reflexive accounts of their language use and language learning experiences, at the same time as the language of Hip Hop, which is part of the repertoire of many of the students and which has been learned informally, supports their productions in English.

In the following section of the chapter, we consider research exploring discontinuities and connections between school and nonschool learning.

5. Implications for educational action

Disconnections between students’ out-of-school and in-school learning have been well documented in the literature, which also offers ways forward for educational action. Sundqvist and Olin-Scheller (2013), for example, claim that in mainstream secondary school classrooms in Sweden, learners’ extramural knowledge of English is not well understood nor acknowledged, nor is it generally used as a teaching and learning resource, contributing to students’ demotivation for learning English at school. These researchers’ experience,

however, suggests that teacher development initiatives can be implemented to help to bridge this gap. The persistent need to promote not only equitable access to out-of-school learning opportunities but also to establish meaningful connections between formal and nonformal education is also at the basis of the 'Educació360: Educació a temps complet' (Education360: Full time education) initiative in Catalonia (Fundació Jaume Bofill, n.d.), which supports schools and other educational agents in developing synergies across learning spaces and times. Llopart et al. (2016) argue that political action is still needed in Catalonia to allow children's and youths' inclusive access to an expansive number of out-of-school learning resources, contexts and experiences and value the significant role of schools in contributing to making such inclusive opportunities available and meaningful. Carbonell (2015) argues that participation in nonformal education should be recommended for all students in Catalonia to support and enrich their school learning in ways that build bridges with mainstream schooling.

In their seminal reviews of international research on nonformal literacy programmes, Hull and Schultz (2001, 2002) conclude that: "There is much we can learn about successful pedagogies and curricula by foregrounding the relationship between formal education and ordinary life" (2002, p. 3). While recognising the descriptive usefulness of the in- and out-of-school bionomy, Hall and Schultz also argue for considering nonformal education as being non-oppositional to mainstream schooling, and for seeking opportunities to bridge learning times and spaces. In this regard, Subero et al. (2017) comment on a variety of projects internationally that have sought to incorporate students' funds of knowledge (Moll, et al., 1992), and what they describe as students' funds of identity, into educational practices which link up formal and nonformal educational spaces, as well as the informal learning that happens in families and communities. These include the aforementioned Fifth Dimension, La Clase Mágica and La Casa de Shere Rom projects (see Section 3).

Related research showing the educational value of students' funds of knowledge, in particular in regard to youth culture and nonstandard linguistic varieties, and about the need for youths' informal language knowledge to be included in formal education, are put forward by Aliagas et al. (2016), who research a project promoting Catalan teenagers' rapping in Catalan in a secondary school music classroom. Similar research linking teenagers' out-of-school language practices and their language learning at school was also at the core of the project 'Multilingual competences of secondary school students: continuities and discontinuities between educational and noneducational practices'. In this project, students became researchers of their own sociolinguistic surroundings and nonschool language practices, within the framework of a classroom

project developed collaboratively between high school teachers and university researchers (Masats & Unamuno, 2011; Unamuno & Patiño, 2017). A similar approach to bringing students' reflection on their everyday language practices into their school language classrooms was taken by Llompart-Esbert and Nussbaum (2020).

Finally, similar to the Fifth Dimension, La Clase Mágica and La Casa de Shere Rom projects (see Section 3), research by Moore and Vallejo (2018) and Vallejo (2020a), and by other authors such as Allor and McCathren (2004), shows how university students, and student teachers in particular, can also take on active roles in creating links between nonformal and formal education, through initiatives such as service-learning (Kinloch & Smagorinsky, 2014). These projects create mutual benefits and learning for all the actors involved and extend in-school and out-of-school learning communities to involve universities. For example, Vallejo and Moore's contributions describe a service-learning project that involved university students in the task of creating pedagogical materials for children in an after-school reading programme in Barcelona, which in turn emerged from the authors' volunteerism and ethnographic research within the out-of-school initiative.

6. Summing up

In this chapter we presented a review of the literature that informed our work within the IEP! project. We started by introducing an overview of research on out-of-school activities and educational inequalities, with a specific focus on Catalonia. The literature reviewed shows the influence of socioeconomic factors on the types of after-school activities that young people participate in, with less affluent children less likely to be involved in nonformal education. Influencing this tendency are the need to pay fees for extracurricular programmes and the extent to which parents are aware of the programmes on offer.

We then explored literature that considers the social and educational purposes of nonformal education and how it might support educational equity for young people who struggle academically or in terms of social skills, values, or attitudes. In this sense, extracurricular education has the potential to reduce social and educational inequalities, or to reproduce and even increase them when access is denied.

In the next section, we focused specifically on literature dealing with nonformal foreign language education that suggests that engaging with foreign languages outside of classrooms has a positive impact on learners' emerging language competencies. However, again, research findings show the impact of socioeconomic

status on different aspects of foreign language learning, highlighting that more affluent students are more motivated for nonformal language learning, which is at least partly linked to access to private education, extra instruction, and language learning materials. This has only been aggravated by recent financial and health crises.

We also examined research about children's and youths' informal foreign language learning. The literature shows that digitally-mediated time, including watching television and using computers, listening to songs, consuming YouTube videos, reading on the internet, writing on the internet, and watching subtitled movies in English, might have a positive effect on students' school performance.

The final section of the chapter discussed the implications of research on non-formal and informal language learning for educational action. We presented several initiatives that aim to promote not only equitable access to out-of-school learning opportunities, but also to establish meaningful connections between formal and nonformal education, including the 'Educació360: Educació a temps complet' (Education360: Full time education) initiative in Catalonia.

Also considered are other projects that seek to incorporate students' funds of knowledge and funds of identity, linking formal educational policy and actions with nonformal and informal learning. Literature exploring several initiatives in which students became researchers or took active roles in creating bridges between school and nonschool language and learning practices have also been described.

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