

ANALYZING THE NEED FOR USING DIDACTIC STRATEGIES SPECIFIC TO NON-FORMAL EDUCATION IN THE CONTINUED PROFESSIONAL TRAINING OF TEACHERS: A CASE STUDY FROM BIHOR COUNTY, ROMANIA

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Abstract

Non-formal education (NFE) is one of the most important forms of the education process and refers to those activities that professional training institutions offer to their students besides the mandatory instructive-educational programmes. The importance of NFE resides in the fact that it strengthens the theoretical knowledge received during formal education by giving this knowledge a practical character as it is applied in different life situations. The main aim of this study was to identify the teachers' degree of openness towards NFE, as well as the existing need for continued training through didactic strategies specific to this form of education. The sample consisted of 155 teachers, mostly from pre-primary, secondary and tertiary educational institutions from Bihor County, Romania. The instrument used was a questionnaire with 18 multiple-choice items. The results of the research show that most of the respondents are interested in participating in professional training courses based on didactic strategies specific to NFE. The main themes of interest include health education, managing students' behaviour problems, social and emotional learning, and so on.

Key words: *continued professional training, didactic strategies, non-formal education.*

Introduction

The problems faced by the contemporary society require solutions that can be identified only by highly educated and trained society members. It is obvious that in such conditions school itself, through its curriculum, is unable to equip students with all the competences that are required on the labour market. As a result, there is a need for alternative educational solutions which, together with formal education, can better meet the personal and professional needs of people. On the other hand, there are many people who have already benefited, more or less consciously, from NFE, either as subjects or as trainers. It is true that the education received by people in this way was not always acknowledged with a certificate, but the competences acquired could stand them in good stead in various life situations. This may explain why NFE has become the focus of educationists in recent years. It has also been underlined that school, as principal formative institution, has a significant role in promoting NFE (Bradea, 2012).

Problem of Research

Etymologically, the term *non-formal education* comes from the Latin *non-formalis* – without form, that is, outside the officially organised form for a certain activity. According to Ph. Coombs (apud. Orțan, 2003, p. 39), NFE refers to those systematically organised activities which are implemented outside the framework of formal education in order to complete and facilitate the training of those who want to specialise in a certain field. NFE has developed in fact as a reaction to the bookishness of teaching promoted within the framework of formal school activities (Blândul, 2008).

The interest in this issue is shown by the high number of European policies and programmes that promote NFE. The core concept that governs them is *lifelong learning*, with a view to building in Europe the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy (please see, for instance, the goals of the *Lisbon Strategy*, devised in March 2000 and reviewed later). In the same year, the *Memorandum on Lifelong Learning* put forward 6 key messages with clear objectives aimed to encourage lifelong learning by stimulating innovation in teaching and learning, as well as by using results acquired in non-formal and informal learning contexts. The issue of permanent learning, that of student mobility on the continent, as well as the quality and effectiveness of education and training, is also examined both in the *Strategic Framework for European Cooperation in Education and Training* and in the *Copenhagen Strategy* (Bäumer, 2011, pp. 91-97). In Romania too, the *Law on National Education no. 1/2011* in article 328 refers to the possibility of developing professional competences by drawing on knowledge acquired in formal, non-formal and informal learning contexts. It can be concluded that at the level of European public policies the role of NFE is to facilitate the development of the personal and professional competences young people need for a successful integration into society and the labour market (Cucoș, 2006).

The interest in NFE does not stop at the level of macrosystem policies, but can also be found in studies conducted by various researchers. Thus, Cabral and de Sousa (2013, pp. 193-213) examined how high school students' involvement in NFE programmes could influence their career progression. The sample consisted of 34 high school students, who attended various extracurricular activities over a period of a few years. The results showed that, after graduating from high school, these young people were capable of choosing responsibly the school and vocational pathways they wanted to follow, of active involvement in school, professional and social activities, of developing long lasting interpersonal relationships, etc. Thus, being aware of the benefits NFE brings to people of all ages, a number of organisations work on implementing projects/programmes that encourage people to participate in other forms of education besides those mandatory. Difficulties may, however, arise when such projects are implemented. U. Hugkuntod and W. Tips (1987, pp. 51-53) pointed to some of these difficulties: delays in receiving the funds requested from funders, the project team do not fulfil their responsibilities properly, the organisation lacks a clear vision on its mission, etc. Although such difficulties are frequently faced, they should not be seen as limiting factors in NFE, but rather like procedural flaws in implementation. As a result, NFE remains one of the most important forms of education, which is to be promoted with the highest sense of responsibility among potential beneficiaries.

Research Focus

Though the factors that contribute to NFE are more and more diverse, school, and its teachers, play a key role in this respect. If we accept the axiom that a country's power lies in its economic power, and that, in turn, in the power of the education system, then, by inference, it can be concluded that initial and continued training of teachers should become a principle direc-

tion of the Romanian higher education. As far as the teachers' continued training is concerned, this should fulfil the functions of regulating/self-regulating educational-instructive activities, of personalised professional development, as well as of innovating current school practices, of stimulating teachers and students' creativity, etc. The most common forms of continued training consist of regular training every 5 years, as well as that done in order to obtain the full-time professional degree and the teacher certifications level 2 and level 1 (Blândul, 2007, p. 105). On the other hand, T. Peffer and A. Bodzin (2010, pp. 268-271) observe that in the teacher training curriculum the elements specific to NFE cannot be found. So, despite the fact that its importance is acknowledged, a great number of teachers might be less prepared in the field of NFE and, therefore, less interested in promoting it among their students. This research aimed at identifying the pluses and minuses in the continued training of teachers when teaching/learning strategies specific to NFE were used, which, in turn, was a good starting point for finding solutions to improve the situation (Kuenzi, .2006).

Methodology of Research

Research Objectives

The research focused on analyzing the need for using strategies specific to NFE in the continued professional training of teachers. The specific objectives of the research were the following: (1) identifying the motivation needed to participate in continued training programmes based on strategies specific to NFE; (2) identifying the possible differences in the opinions of teachers concerning the usefulness of continued training based on strategies specific to NFE, and how much are these differences influenced by the professional certification levels obtained and (3) determining the level of statistical significance of the relationship between the professional certification level obtained and the teachers' willingness to participate in continued training programmes that are based on didactic strategies specific to NFE.

The Sample of Research

The sample of the research consisted of 153 people (N = 153), all of them teachers from preschool to higher education institutions from Oradea, Bihor county, Romania. The people included in the sample were chosen using the simple random sampling procedure, and they belonged to the following categories: according to gender: 68.1% females and 31.9% males; according to the school stage: preschool – 19.19% / primary school – 32.72% / secondary school – 29.1% / high school and post-secondary – 14.54% / higher education – 1.81%; according to years of teaching: less than 5 years – 12.72% / between 6 and 10 years – 10.9% / between 11 and 15 years – 14.34% / between 16 and 20 years – 12.72% / between 21 and 25 years – 9.1% / above 26 years – 40.2%; and the last category according to the certifications obtained: beginner teachers and those with full-time professional degree – 20.17% / teacher certification level 2 – 14.54% / teacher certification level 1 – 67.27%.

Instrument and Procedures

The instrument used in this research a questionnaire that consisted of 18 multiple-choice items, which belonged to the following categories of indicators: stages of continued training already covered, capacity to define appropriately the concepts in NFE area, willingness and motivation for participating in a continued professional training programme based on didactic strategies specific to NFE, themes of interest that might be included in the curriculum of such a programme, organisational aspects concerning the implementation of such a programme.

The questionnaire was filled in online by each respondent and the answers were imported into a database that was accessed by the person conducting the research. The study was carried out from November 2012 to May 2013.

Data Analyses

The quantitative interpretation of the results was performed by calculating the statistical frequency of the answers given by the respondents. In addition, the answers given by the respondents belonging to different subcategories of the sample were comparatively analysed according to the professional certification level obtained: beginner, full-time professional degree, teacher certification level 2 or 1. The statistical processing of the values obtained was performed using the SPSS program. The relationship between the professional certification levels obtained and the teachers' willingness to participate in a continued professional training programme based on strategies specific to NFE was established by calculating the chi-square criterion.

Results of Research

The results obtained can be seen in the following tables.

Table 1. Respondents' motivation to attend a continued professional training programme based on strategies specific to NFE.

Indicators	Frequency of answers (%)	Teachers		
		Certification level 1 (%)	Certification level 2 (%)	Beginners / full-time professional degree (%)
Receiving professional credits	5.45	5.4	12.5	-
Acquiring new knowledge	12.72	8.1	37.5	10
Need for personal development	36.36	45.94	-	30
Need for professional advancement	16.16	18.91	-	30
Passion for teaching	14.54	13.51	-	20
Experience exchange	7.27	8.1	12.5	-
Promotion	7.27	-	37.5	10

Table 1 shows that the main reasons that could make teachers to attend various continued training programmes based on strategies specific to NFE are those of personal nature and only then come those of professional nature, with the need for advancement in the teaching career on the first place, followed by passion for the career chosen and acquiring new knowledge. The results obtained demonstrate that the majority of the interviewed teachers consider NFE as an opportunity to develop skills they need in their personal lives and less as a chance to progress in their professional field. The same order of preferences can be noticed in the case of teachers who have obtained certification level 1, which is the highest Romanian level of certification in the teaching career. Thus, 45.94% of these respondents are interested primarily in their personal development and less in the professional one, where they think they have reached the highest level, a fact that makes them have a more relaxed approach to their professional training. The situation is completely different in the case of those teachers who have obtained certification level 2 (an intermediate level of the teaching career in Romania). These respondents are moti-

vated by both intrinsic professional factors (acquiring specialized knowledge, changing experience with other colleagues, etc.) and extrinsic ones (career progression, receiving professional credits). Finally, regarding the beginner teachers and those who have obtained the full time professional degree (first steps of the teaching career in Romania), they seem to be motivated by both the desire for personal and professional development, and the passion for the career they have chosen. This enthusiasm is typical of young people with little work experiences.

Table 2. Themes that might be included in a continued professional training programme based on strategies specific to NFE.

Indicators	Frequency of answers (%)	Teachers		
		Certification level 1 (%)	Certification level 2 (%)	Beginners / full-time professional degree (%)
Applying inclusive teaching practices that are appropriate for students with SEN	7.27	5.4	25	-
Counselling and guidance	5.45	5.4	-	10
Socio-emotional education	14.54	18.9	12.5	-
First aid training	16.36	21.62	-	10
Managing deviant behaviour	9.1	10.87	12.5	20
Management of cooperation/conflicts	9.1	8.1	12.5	10
Project management	12.72	8.1	25	-
Preventing risky behaviours	14.54	13.51	-	-
Devising extracurricular activities	1.81	2.7	12.5	20
Stimulating students' creativity	3.63	2.7	-	10
Effective communication skills	5.45	2.7	-	20

The teachers' options for the content of a continued professional training programme based on NFE convergence towards giving first aid in emergency medical situations, socio-emotional education, preventing and correcting risky behaviours (alcohol / drug abuse, deviant sexual behaviour, etc.), as well as the management of international projects (Table 2). At the other end the less popular themes can be found: devising extracurricular activities, stimulating students' creativity, effective communication skills in the school environment or applying teaching practices that help inclusion of students with SEN. These answers confirm the options analysed in the previous paragraph, that is, a preference for personal development rather than for the professional one. Just like in the previous item, the general trend in the frequency of answers is given by the teachers who have obtained certification level 1. These teachers prefer to participate in training courses that help them develop skills they need in their personal lives. On the other hand, teachers who have obtained certification level 2, those full time professional degree or those who are at the beginning of their teaching career focus their preferences on topics that might help their professional advancement: inclusion of students with SEN, proposal writing and project management, devising extracurricular activities, communication in the school environment, etc. It is once again confirmed that professional enthusiasm plays a key role for the teachers who are at the beginning of their career.

Table 3. The relationship between the professional certification level obtained and the teachers' willingness to take part in continued professional training programmes that are based on strategies specific to NFE.

Indicators	Teachers		
	Certification level 1	Certification level 2	Beginners / full-time professional degree
The teachers' willingness to participate in continued training programmes based on NFE	$\chi^2 = 12.29$ $p < 0.01$	$\chi^2 = 14.42$ $p < 0.01$	$\chi^2 = 1.29$ $p > 0.05$

The specific hypothesis of the study was that there is a strong interdependence between the teachers' professional certification level and their willingness to participate in continued training programmes based on strategies specific to NFE. The results confirm this specific hypothesis in the sense that there is an interdependence between the variables mentioned at a high significance level. It can be noticed, however, that those teachers who are at the beginning of their career and those who have obtained the full-time professional degree are more open to continued training than those who have reached the highest level of certification. This is shown by the significance level 0.05 reached by the former ones and the level 0.01 by the latter ones. This extremely interesting question is discussed in the following paragraphs.

Discussion

A first aspect that should be discussed is the need for continued training of teachers in Romania. The legislation in effect stipulates that teachers' continued training is implemented by postgraduate courses (master's and PhD), those done in order to obtain the full-time professional degree and the teacher certifications level 2 and level 1, regular training every 5 years, other continued training courses accredited by the Ministry of National Education. Regardless which form of professional training they choose, teachers have to earn a total of 90 transferable professional credits every 5 years (Blândul, 2007, pp. 101-102). Thus, this obligatory aspect of the professional training could be in itself a strong argument for teachers' attendance of various continued training programmes. However, the results of this study show that teachers can be divided into two categories. On the one hand, there are the beginners and those who have obtained the full-time professional degree and the teacher certification level 2, that is, those with less work experience, which is, however, counterbalanced by a desire for both professional and personal development. This statement is also supported by the themes they would like to discuss within continued training programmes. On the other hand, there are the teachers who have obtained the certification level 1 (the highest in their career) and who consider the 90 credits they have to earn more or less a formal obligation. This explains why these teachers are interested primarily in aspects connected to their personal development, leaving the academic contents on the second place and showing in this way a certain professional *sufficiency*. It is, however, extremely important for a teacher to always be concerned with their professional training, given the fact that all generations of students should benefit from the same quality of education, regardless the age or experience of the teacher.

A second aspect that deserves discussion is that of the status and role of NFE in the education process. Although the majority of experts acknowledge its importance in shaping students with balanced personalities, in some of their studies (Evagorou, 2001, Peffer and Bodzin, 2010, Gratton, 2009 and others), they accept the idea that NFE would have a second role

when compared with formal education. This opinion is often shared by the general public as well. The authors mentioned above claim that formal education transmits to students a number of educational contents that are more or less finite, but extremely useful to them, while NFE would have more of a complementary role, offering students applied information in real life situations. This can explain why teachers, in the same way as their students, consider of secondary importance the messages coming from NFE, including those that refer to their participation in continued professional training programmes subsumed to such a field. Both motivation and the themes they choose when joining such programmes will address the participants' personal development, which is of secondary importance for their teaching career. Moreover, the teaching strategies they expected to meet within such a programme are, in turn, those specific for NFE and include optional courses, workshops, public debates, etc., all held in unconventional environments. More time will probably be needed until all agents involved in education will understand that NFE can also be used to transmit contents that are extremely relevant for the teaching activity.

Conclusions

In order to ensure the quality of the education system teachers must benefit from continued training. This can take various forms, such as postgraduate courses, training to obtain certification levels, regular professional training every 5 years, other training courses in psychopedagogy or in methodology. The majority of these courses have a formal nature and they must be completed in order to earn the 90 transferable professional credits.

When they were invited to choose a continued professional training programme based on strategies specific to NFE, the majority of teachers included in this research made a choice starting from their years of teaching and work experience. Thus, the beginners, those who have obtained the full-time professional degree or the certification level 2 were primarily motivated in their choices of such courses by meeting their professional needs, while those who have already obtained the certification level 1, and who feel professionally fulfilled, were motivated mainly by personal reasons. These teachers seem to have reached a balance between their professional and personal lives, which creates a feeling of psychological comfort and of fulfilment in all respects. It can be stated that NFE has the big advantage of providing useful information to those interested both for their professional and personal life, and meets in this way a wide range of needs.

Starting from those presented so far, the main recommendation of this study is that work should be continued to implement in the teachers' continued training educational programmes that are based on didactic strategies carried out in non-formal contexts. In this way the foundation of experiential learning is laid, that is, of the form of learning in which the learner acquires information in real life situations and is immediately capable of understanding its usefulness. The main advantage of this approach is given by the formative effect on the individual, as they are offered not only the chance of acquiring information, but also that of developing in the cognitive, affective and psychosocial fields. These are in fact defining features of NFE, as well as arguments for its promotion in all educational contexts.

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Advised by Mariana Marinescu, University of Oradea, Oradea, Romania

Received: September 18, 2013

Accepted: November 12, 2013

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