

TOWARDS A POSSIBLE GOOD-PRACTICE MODEL IN NON-FORMAL EDUCATION: A CASE OF ROMANIA

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Abstract

By its nature, education has 3 forms that are in a strong interdependence: formal, non-formal and informal. Non-formal education can be defined as a form of education implemented by schools in partnership with different educational institutions, using extracurricular activities, to help students deepen knowledge acquired in schools. A good example of this definition is the program "To know more, to be better!" implemented by the Romanian Ministry of Education since 2012. The main aim of this research was to analyze the impact of the above mentioned program upon students and teachers from Bihor County, Romania. The instrument used was a questionnaire with 18 questions. The sample consisted of 125 teachers from pre-primary, primary, secondary and high schools from Bihor County, Romania. The study was conducted in April 2014. The results of the research show that the majority of respondents have been pleased with this program, which has been popular among students as well. The latter ones were helped to better understand the theoretical knowledge they acquired during classes. The most frequent extracurricular activities of the program included visits, trips, workshops etc.

Key words: *extracurricular activities, non-formal education, school results.*

Introduction

Non-formal education (NFE) includes a combination of structured, organized and institutionalized activities implemented outside the classroom or offered as optional educational activities. NFE completes the formal one and it consists of an extremely large range of flexible activities, which are better adjusted to the needs and interests of individuals. Certain radio and TV programs that focus strictly on training a certain segment of the population can also be included in the category of NFE. As a result, the target group of NFE is extremely large and can include pupils, students, adults, people facing difficulties etc., while the providers of NFE can be educational institutions, parents' associations, children and youth organizations, non-governmental organizations and so on. The risks involved by this form of education consist of the possible unprofessional implementation of specific activities, as well as in the difficulties that may arise in the objective evaluation of the results. These aspects will be detailed in the following chapters (Blândul, 2008m p. 21).

Problem of Research

The issue of NFE has been largely discussed in the specialized literature. A first aspect is that of the variables that influence students' choices of extracurricular activities. Starting from the premise of student-centered learning, a first variable could be the students' interest in the topics suggested by NFE. A.F. Camliguney et. al. (2012, pp. 4710-4711) notice that a great number of students associate extracurricular activities with sport, which they consider first of all as a form of relaxation and only then as a way to develop physical qualities and character

traits. While it is true that students' interests should be taken into account, it is also true that there are situations when they should be counseled about choosing their favorite activities so that they do not look only at immediate satisfactions, but also at the long term effects on their personal development. A second variable that should be looked at when choosing extracurricular activities is that of the school's educational offer. Thus, according to some studies conducted by E. Stearns and E.J. Glennie (2010, pp. 301-308) at several educational institutions in North Carolina, USA, the schools' NFE offer is significantly influenced by school's size and organization level (in the big, well-structured institutions, with strong students' organizations, the number of extracurricular activities is higher and more diverse, which is also reflected in higher participation rates), by the human, educational and financial resources involved, by the quality of the teaching-educational process (the students' school results are directly proportional with their involvement in extracurricular activities) etc. Doing further research, Feldman and Matjiasko (2007, pp. 314-324) identified the following more frequent extracurricular activity fields in schools: sports activities, optional study fields, the art of entertainment (music, drama, dance, exhibitions etc.), environment protection, interdisciplinary activities and so on. Within these main fields there is a wide range of activities that schools can offer to their students using NFE.

Last but not least, a third important aspect refers to the impact NFE has upon the students' personality development. The opinions vary from considering NFE extremely efficient in achieving a genuine and fulfilling learning experience to blaming the lack of methodological rigor in implementing extracurricular activities (Shulruf, Tummen and Tolley, 2008, pp. 425-427). On the other hand, studies have shown a greater involvement in extracurricular activities in the case of students with better school results and in that of those with an **extroverted character** (Okamoto, Herda and Hartzog, 2013, p. 163), who are willing to get involved in school organizations (Gerrard and Bilington, 2013, p. 402), but at the same time they show various forms of deviant behaviour (Farineau and McWey, 2011, p. 165). It is also true that NFE has beneficial effects upon all the indicators mentioned above, since it contributes to better school results, to a greater involvement in students' school organizations or in non-governmental organizations, and it also decreases deviant behavior both in school and outside it (Farb and Matjiasko, 2012, p. 23). This will lead to a „vicious circle” in which students with good results who get involved in extracurricular activities will become even better trained in all respects.

Research Focus

Being aware of the importance of NFE for the development of students' personality, since 2012 the Romanian Ministry of Education has been implementing the program “To know more, to be better!”. The program means that **in the second semester of each school year students have for a week a different time table, made up mainly of NFE activities**. The program aims to involve both students and teachers in extracurricular activities which valorize talents, competences and preoccupations in various fields of interest. The main benefits of the program consist of developing the professional and transversal competences of the educational factors involved, as well as the degree of cohesion, of team spirit, and last but not least, the good mood of all participants. The main partners of the Ministry of Education in the implementation of this program are the Students' National Council, local authorities, as well as other agencies and non-governmental organizations that are usually involved in the life of schools (Bradea, 2012). For all the above reasons, a great number of students and teachers consider this program extremely important for thoroughly understanding the knowledge acquired during classes, as well as for bringing schools closer to local communities.

Methodology of Research

General Background of Research

The aim of the research was to analyze the impact of the program “To know more, to be better!” within the teaching community of Bihor county, Romania, after its third year of implementation. The objectives of the study were: (1) identifying the advantages / limitations of this program as seen by the teachers involved; (2) analyzing the main extracurricular activities carried out within the program and (3) suggesting concrete ways for optimizing the program. In addition, it was assumed that the most objective indicator of the impact of the program within the teaching community was the students’ participation rate in the non-formal activities offered to them. Therefore, the specific hypothesis of the study was that the students’ participation rate in the “To know more, to be better!” Program’s extracurricular activities correlate positively with the psycho-pedagogical experience of the teachers who implement them.

The Sample of Research

The sample of the research consisted of 125 people (N = 125), all of them teachers from early childhood to secondary educational institutions in Bihor county, Romania. This sample represents 4.83% of the total number of educational staff in Bihor county, and the teachers were chosen so that the entire area of the county be covered. The people included in the sample belonged to the following categories: according to gender 70.8% females and 29.2% males; according to the school stage: preschool – 16.9% / primary school – 31.2% / secondary school – 43.8% / high school – 8.3%; according to years of teaching: less than five years – 62.5% / more than five years of teaching experience – 37.5%; according to urban-rural classification: from urban area – 41.7% / from rural area – 58.3%. The simple random sampling procedure was used for choosing the people of the sample.

Instrument and Procedures

The instrument used in this research was a questionnaire that consisted of 18 questions, with 12 close-ended questions and 6 open-ended ones. The questions referred to the following indicators: defining the concepts specific to NFE, assessing the usefulness of the “To know more, to be better!” program, establishing the main advantages / limitations of the program, identifying the most interesting activities offered within this program and the students’ participation rate in them, as well as suggesting ways to optimize the program. The questionnaire was updated to the Internet and it was filled out in April 2014, after the week dedicated to the program.

Data Analyses

The quantitative interpretation of the results was performed by calculating the frequency of the answers given to each close-ended question, while the answers given to the open-ended questions were grouped into different categories according to their contents. In addition, the answers given by the respondents belonging to different subcategories of the sample were comparatively analysed according to the teaching experience, that is, less than five and more than five years of teaching experience. The statistical processing of the values obtained was performed by calculating the χ^2 (chi square) criterion for the differences between the teachers’ teaching experience and the students’ participation rate in the NFE program.

Results of Research

The results obtained can be seen in the following table.

Table 1. The main advantages of the “To know more, to be better!” program.

Indicators	Frequency of answers (%)	Frequency of teachers' answers (%)	
		< 5 years' experience	> 5 years' experience
Consolidating the knowledge acquired in the classroom	16	32	15
Developing interpersonal relationships	24	15	26
Developing the school-community partnership	4	2	2
Applying knowledge acquired in the classroom in real life situations	20	25	21
Forming a unified vision on life and the world	12	4	10
Professional training for integration in the labor market	16	21	18
Freedom of speech	4	1	3
All of the above indicators	4	-	5

Table 2. The main limitations of the “To know more, to be better!” program.

Indicators	Frequency of answers (%)	Frequency of teachers' answers (%)	
		< 5 years' experience	> 5 years' experience
Students' insufficient involvement	4.2	6.5	3.5
Teachers' insufficient involvement	8.3	7.1	9.7
Community's insufficient involvement	16.2	18.3	14.8
The season of implementation	29.2	29	24.1
The poor economic situation	29.2	32.2	27.5
“Wasted time”	12.5	6.9	20.4

The results in Table 1 and 2 show that, according to the respondents' general opinions, the main advantages of the “To know more, to be better!” program are: developing interpersonal relationships between the educational factors involved, consolidating knowledge acquired in the classroom, as well as applying this knowledge in real life situations and professional training for integration in the labor market. On the other side, the main limitations of the program include those of economic nature, choosing a season in which the weather conditions are inappropriate for outdoor activities, as well as the modest support given by communities for schools. It was surprising to see that 12.5% of the respondents consider this program a “waste of time”, which suggests that these people do not understand the importance of NFE in the development of students. The distribution of answers is approximately the same for both the teachers who are at the beginning of their career (with less than five years' teaching experience) and the experienced ones (with more than five years' teaching activity). The former ones consider that the main advantages of the program are given by consolidating the knowledge acquired in the

classroom and the possibility of applying it in real life situations, while the limitations are those of economic nature and season scheduling. The experienced teachers emphasize the interpersonal relationships that can be established during these extracurricular activities, as well as the practical usefulness of the knowledge acquired, while the limitations they see are the same as those of their beginner colleagues. Looking at these results, it can be said that the approach of beginner teachers is more rigorous, as they see extracurricular activities as a way to consolidate things learned in the classroom, while teachers with more experience look beneath the surface and consider NFE as an excellent opportunity for the students' personal development.

Table 3. The main activities carried out within the "To know more, to be better!" program.

Indicators	Frequency of answers (%)	Frequency of teachers' answers (%)	
		< 5 years' experience	> 5 years' experience
Visits	20.8	23.7	18.2
Theatre	4.2	5.1	3.1
Trips	20.8	18.9	12.9
Musical activities	20.8	21.4	14.6
Competitions	8.3	7.9	13
Games	4.2	3.8	6.7
Traffic safety education	8.3	11.1	6.7
Art	12.5	8.1	24.8

Table 3 shows that the activities carried out by the teachers within the "To know more, to be better!" program center around visits to various places of interest, trips, as well as musical activities. These are the preferences of beginner teachers too, most of them opting for visits, but an increased interest can also be seen in the new dimensions of education offered by traffic safety education. On the other hand, the activities put forward by teachers with more than five years' teaching experience follow the same pattern, but they carry more nuances, as shown by their preferences for art or competitions of all kinds. This can be explained by the psychopedagogical experience of the teachers in the second category, which, regardless the social-economic conditions, provides them with a much larger range of options when they choose activities specific to NFE. In addition, it seems that creativity in this field associates positively with the teaching experience acquired over the years and overcomes the routine that might be expected to set in as years go by.

Table 4. Suggestions to optimize the "To know more, to be better!" program.

Indicators	Frequency of answers (%)	Frequency of teachers' answers (%)	
		< 5 years' experience	> 5 years' experience
Financial support given to schools	58.3	56	60.9
Diversifying the offers for and from the community	29.2	30	27.4
More implementation periods	8.3	7	5.6
Changing the implementation dates	4.2	7	6.1

The results in Table 4 show without any doubt that the majority of respondents, regardless of their teaching experience, ask for financial support so that the program can be implemented in as good conditions as possible. Another interesting suggestion refers to diversifying the activities specific to NFE that are addressed to the community, and also of those coming from the community, so that the teachers who are interested, regardless of their teaching experience, have a larger range to choose from when they think of extracurricular activities they want to carry out with their students. Last but not least, most of the respondents state that they are pleased with the program implementation period, and less than 10% consider that the program should be repeated, or changed during the school year.

Table 5. The statistical correlation between the students' participation rate in the "To know more, to be better!" program and the teachers' psycho-pedagogical experience.

Indicator	Teachers	
	< 5 years' experience	> 5 years' experience
Students' participation rate in the "To know more, to be better!" program	$\chi^2 = 1.23$	$\chi^2 = 12.32$
	$p < 0.05$	$p < 0.01$

The results obtained after interpreting the responses show an increased interest among students in the participation in the extracurricular activities offered by the program. Starting from the specific hypothesis of the research, the results in Table 5 show significant correlations between the students' participation rate in non-formal activities and the teaching experience of those who suggest them, though the significance thresholds are different ($p < 0.05$ for teachers with not more than five years' teaching experience, and $p < 0.01$ for those with at least five years' teaching experience). This means that the students' participation rate in activities suggested by the second category of teachers is higher. This fact can be explained by the richer educational offer and the more efficient management of such activities. In contrast with this, the beginner teachers' offer focuses on some extracurricular activities that can be called "traditional", which results in a lower student participation.

Discussion

A first aspect that should be discussed is the psycho-pedagogical profile of the teacher willing to get involved in activities specific to NFE. In the specialized literature (Orțan, 2003) a successful teacher is characterized as someone who, beyond professional and methodological competences, also possesses a number of psycho-pedagogical qualities, such as: openness towards new ideas and practices, enthusiasm, good communication skills, sociability, creativity in finding solutions to the problems facing them, accepting diversity of opinions etc. Based on those said above, four teaching styles can be identified, out of which the most widespread in practice is the reproductive-creative one, which characterizes teachers who carry out their teaching duties correctly and completely, but who only rarely add to their work novel teaching elements that go beyond the usual daily routine. The qualitative interpretation of the results shows that most of the teachers included in the current study belong to the reproductive-creative teaching style. Most of them are willing to join NFE programs, which they consider useful for the development of quality social networks between the educational factors, as well as for achieving genuine learning. The lack of resources influences the offer specific to NFE and as a result, most of the teachers turn to well-established extracurricular activities, which can be

implemented with little costs. Nevertheless, teaching experience manifests itself. This means that teachers who have spent more years in the classroom have a larger perspective on the phenomenon and are capable of identifying various resources to manage extracurricular activities. This experience offers itself, but it is also developed through participation in continued professional training programs in the field of NFE.

A second aspect that deserves discussion is that of the factors that can influence the students' participation rate in extracurricular activities. The specialized literature mentions some of them, such as: the results obtained by students in the compulsory courses, the school's size, level of organization and position within the educational network, the students' background, their character traits etc. (Marinescu, 2009). The students' participation rate in NFE is high when they benefit from family support, have good school results, are open to new challenges, study in a well-known and well-organized school, are involved in various community associations etc. The current study has added one more factor to those already mentioned: the psycho-pedagogical experience of teachers, which is strongly connected to the level of their professional training. Thus, the teachers with a long teaching experience possess a much larger range of resources to properly organize and manage NFE extracurricular activities. Being offered a rich educational offer, students can get involved much more responsibly than in the case when the activities offered consist of only a few options. On the other hand, teachers acquire this kind of experience both through their everyday activity in the classroom and through continued professional training. Unfortunately, quite often these training courses address superficially the issue of NFE, which results in poor psycho-pedagogical training in this respect. Therefore, developing a continued professional training program in the field of NFE is utmost needed in order to optimize the quality of this form of education, which, in turn, will significantly impact the development of the students' personality.

Conclusions and Recommendation

After having interpreted the results of this study, it can be concluded that most of the teachers associate NFE with education done outside the school using extracurricular activities that combine theory and practice. In Romania the best known program dedicated to NFE is "To know more, to be better!" implemented by the Ministry of Education since 2012. One of the major advantages of the program resides in the opportunity given to participants to extend their social network both in the school and outside it, while it's most important limitation is of financial nature.

By proving the fact that there is a strong link between the students' participation rate in NFE activities and their teachers' level of professional training and teaching experience, this study has managed to add a new factor to those already discussed in the specialized literature. This conclusion is supported by the fact that teachers with extensive teaching experience are much better at organizing extracurricular activities which motivate students to get involved than their colleagues who are at the beginning of their career.

NFE experience is gained both by every day activity in the classroom and through continued professional training in the field. In addition to that, in order to optimize the program mentioned, the teachers also need models of good practice which provide them with ideas, as well as a better cooperation between schools, and school and community. Any investments in these areas are welcome as long as they benefit the students and contribute to their holistic development so that they can successfully integrate in the society they live in.

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