Some general aspects regarding the theory and methodology of non-formal education

Valentin Cosmin Blândul*

University of Oradea, 1 University street, Oradea, 410087, Romania

Abstract

One of the most important components of education is represented by non-formal experiences. According to pedagogical literature, it is that part of education organized by schools or other educational agents through different extracurricular activities. The main difference between formal and non-formal education is the more relaxed characteristics of the latter, which means that non-formal education can be created in different “non-conventional” spaces, in a more leisurely atmosphere and using different specific strategies such as games, competitions, group-working, workshops etc. But there are many similarities between these two forms of education, especially regarding their methodology. Therefore, in the present theoretical study, we analyze the specific methodology of non-formal education, focusing on its educational objectives, principles, content, strategies, and forms of organization.

Key-concepts: extracurricular activities, non-formal education, transferable competencies.

1. The context and concept of non-formal education

Students are faced with a variety of strategies and experiences as they journey through their educational lives. One of the most important features of any educational experience is the level of organization of the process. A second important aspect of any educational experience is the intent of the activity. Cucos (2006) and Gutu (2013) have developed the following forms of education:

Formal education - refers to the sum of deliberate, systematic, and organized curriculum developed and implemented in an institution of learning.

Non-formal education - refers to any educationally related activities that are structured and institutionally influenced implemented outside of the formal classroom structure including organized as extracurricular activities.

Informal education - includes all unintentional, diffuse, and heterogeneous influences experienced and/or learned by individuals that are not selected, organized, and processed on pedagogical criteria.

According to these three forms of education (formal, non-formal and informal) a part of the pedagogical literature uses the term "parallel education". However, there is no exclusivity among these features of learning, on the contrary, they complement and reinforce each other. In the context of a holistic vision of education, the integration of the formal learning system (organized and institutionalized), the non-formal learning system (organized by the same educational agents, but outside of formal academic framework), and the informal learning system (spontaneous and, often unplanned) is essential to formulate an effective educational system. Thus, there are numerous situations in which the knowledge gained in the way of formal education are supported and amplified by those taken up by non-formal and informal experiences. There are also examples of some reverse situations in which the education received in school, family, or church is "broken" by friends or media. So, one of the important

* Corresponding author. Tel.: 0040-745-267047
E-mail address: bvali73@yahoo.com
goals of education is to facilitate communication among all three modes and all factors involved in educational activities in order to develop students to reach their potentials (Blandul, 2014, pp. 51-52).

In recent years the European Union has increasingly focused on non-formal education (NFE), considering it the most suitable form of education to enable individuals to apply learning to real life. The issue of non-formal education is extremely complex and many researchers have attempted to create a suitable definition for it. According to Marinescu (2009, p. 29), the concept of "non-formalis" refers to an activity which is outside of formally organized educational experiences. The author points that these non-formal activities are characterised by their voluntary nature. In circumstances in which such activities are not included in any regulation that is mandatory by the institution, they can be called "extra-curricular activities". Additionally, some non-formal educational activities can be organized by other institutions whose primary purpose is not necessarily education (e.g. church, media, non-governmental associations, etc.).

According to Gutu (2013, p. 101) non-formal education designates an educational reality that is less systematically connected to academia but it can have a particularly formative effect. In addition, the proposed activities by non-formal education are characterized by diversity and flexibility, focusing on the interests of students and giving students choices about their experiences. As we mentioned in the first part of this paper, the main forms of education (formal, non-formal and informal) are strongly interdependent. Moreover, NFE is achieved by different strategies proposed outside of the classroom (games, competitions, Olympiads, and other artistic, cultural, or sports events) or outside of school (visits, trips, camps, exhibitions, etc.). There is a wide variety of these kinds of educationally connected activities for the choosing depending on the interests of individuals and groups of students, teachers, and the community members.

Therefore, non-formal education (or extracurricular activities) benefits students by complementing and augmenting the school’s course of studies. This allows for deepening of knowledge and skill development in the areas of interest of students. The extracurricular activities help to cultivate interests, inclinations, and talents in certain areas. Non-formal education allows for the efficient and pleasant use of free time, development of associative life skills, enhances cooperation in solving complex tasks, and allows for the formation of positive personality traits. Also, non-formal education allows pupils to be involved in optional activities much deeper than would be allowed alone by curricular activities (Blandul, 2015, pp. 10-11).

2. Non-formal education from perspective of John Dewey’s pedagogy

Non-formal education was conceptualized recently, but like psychology, has a much longer history. Although much of the research around the concepts of non-formal education is recent, we believe that a significant body of work was accomplished during the early twentieth century. One of the most important representatives of this educational current was John Dewey, whose conception about education was based on the interaction between knowledge and action, namely philosophy and pragmatism. Dewey believed that one of the major goals of education was to develop knowledge and skills to use in the real world outside of school. In terms of teaching and learning, the essential principle of John Dewey's pedagogy is that of intuition. Dewey believed students gathered information through their senses during real experiences. Students could make sense of their learning through actively engaged experiences (Nicola, 2000). He also believed that integrating this learning into the real gave meaning to the learning and thus motivated learners to want to learn more.

Of course, John Dewey cannot be considered the "parent of non-formal education". However, there are some elements of similarity between progressive and NFE pedagogical approaches. First, we can say that both approaches are designed to engage students in developmentally ways to better meet the needs of the child. Second, both approaches value life experiences and transforms those experiences in
specific learning situations. Third, both approaches apply theory to practice, which makes them easier to understand and assimilate by students. Fourth, both give the possibility for the student to make decisions based on their needs and interests. These two pedagogical approaches aim for active participation by students in their learning. They also believe students should be able to develop some of their ideas as part of their learning. These similarities between Dewey’s ideas and NFE give practitioners solid philosophical and pedagogical concepts and practices upon which to base their learning experiences.

3. Outcomes of non-formal education – training of transferable competencies

Even if it is highly debated and controversial, education oriented toward the training and development of competencies remains one of the main priorities of the Romanian and European educational systems. The vision of this system is to prepare high school graduates to be academically, successful professionally and personally to meet the challenges of contemporary life. Under this philosophy of competency based education schools attempt to develop in youth a series of "key-competencies" that will prepare them for life after graduation. Paradoxically, the reality has shown that, very often, researchers have not been able to establish a direct relationship among the competencies acquired by students in school and their academic, professional or social success. It is common for people with the same level of competencies within a discipline to experience totally different results some interpreted as successful, some as failure for that field. A preliminary conclusion might be that, beyond the accumulation of competencies students also may need to acquire other knowledge and skills to be successful. These "non-professional" but extremely important skills appear to make a huge difference in the success of people at the university and in careers. For example, many CEOs now tell us they need people who understand how to problem solve, work in teams, and communicate with colleagues and customers. It means that the school should be concerned about including those transdisciplinary competencies to provide "added value" to graduates to give them those life skills so they are more likely to succeed in career and in life (Marinescu, 2009).

In the psycho-pedagogic literature Ortan (2015) calls these skills that prepare students for life after graduation “transversal competencies”. These competencies allow students to effectively adapt to the complex dynamics of the contemporary world and the diversity of contexts which they might face throughout their academic, social, professional, and personal lives. These competencies are called transversal because they transcend other specific competencies or disciplines, being present in each of them, but not specific to any one set of competencies or disciplines. According to Ortan (2015), transversal competencies consist of the following characteristics:

- transdisciplinary - transversal competencies are formed by all disciplines and are interrelated and constitute a whole;
- portability – all transversal competencies are used in all disciplines;
- extension - a transversal competence covers the widest possible range of knowledge.

Numerous attempts have been made to develop a classification system for transversal competencies. The Government of the Province of Quebec in Canada developed the School's Training Program of Transversal Competencies for students in secondary education. According to this system, there are nine transversal competencies, grouped into four large categories (Ortan, 2015):

- Intellectual competencies – efficiently gather and analyze information, to use in problem solving and critical thinking;
- Methodological competencies - use of efficient working methods, integration of new information and communication technologies (NTIC);
- Personal and societal competencies – ability to collaborate, negotiate, and work in teams;
- Communication competencies – ability to communicate verbally, in writing, in negotiations, etc.
In the European Union, Gutu (2013, pp. 80-82) identifies a number of "high grade" key-competencies which, together with their descriptors, can be assimilated with transversal competencies:

- Lifelong learning - building their own activities and learning environments, high-level literacy, use of information, sensitivity towards the problems of the contemporary world, etc.;
- Complex and critical thinking - use diverse forms of thinking, integrating new information with previously acquired experiences, the appropriate thinking competencies;
- Effective communication - the use of appropriate techniques for transmission / reception of the message, evaluating the effectiveness of communication;
- Collaboration/teamwork - assuming roles, conduct group activities, resource efficiency, creating and managing a complex social’ networks;
- Responsible citizenship - assuming individual responsibilities, practicing a healthy lifestyle, promotion of democratic principles;
- Employability - choice and adequate training for a successful career, proper management of chosen career.

Returning to those presented in previous paragraphs, possession by a person of such highly complex competencies is a strong enough reason to enable success in various areas of personal and professional life. Effective communication, cooperation, the ability to "learn how to learn", critical thinking, conflict management, use of NTIC, etc. are just a few samples of transdisciplinary skills necessary to succeed in the modern world, no matter the field. However, since these skills are not taught in most schools as part of the compulsory school curriculum, it would be desirable for schools to begin the explicit training of transversal competencies. One place this could be and often is achieved is in non-formal education. Of course, these transferable competencies can be integrated in informal education, but places the training away from educational control, so this must be approached with forethought and care. Schools and other educational agents must take responsibility for this so-called "soft skill" training to students, both in formal and non-formal ways. In the next section we describe some strategies for implementing these competencies in non-formal education.

4. The main methodological options of non-formal education

According to Cucos (2006) there are 4 methodological options for carrying out non-formal education:

- Centered on content - health, family planning, training in various fields;
- Centered on problems of daily life;
- Centered on awareness to knowledge and respect for fundamental human rights;
- Centered on humanistic education issues - self-esteem, confidence in their own capabilities, initiative, integration, decision-making, etc.

Analyses of these features and methodological options identify non-formal education as a flexible and creative achievement in education, complementary to that produced in the official school curriculum. Non-formal education supports the formal program by helping students who are interested to develop transversal knowledge and skills. This affords opportunities for students to apply their new skills in real life situations enabling students to improve in an area in which they are already familiar. Students also can discover skills in a new field still unexplored. Moreover, through non-formal education, students have greater discretion over the scope of action and work strategies, thus generating better personal interests and intrinsic motivation. In many cases students are more interested in and work harder in their non-formal education than they do in their formal one (Blandul, 2015, p. 13).

Strategies implementing content through NFE have been largely discussed in the specialized literature. A first aspect is that of the variables that influence students' choices of extracurricular activities. Since most NFE programs are student-centered, a first variable could be student interest in the topics offered by NFE. Camliguney et. al (2012, pp. 4710-4711) noticed that a great number of students associate
extracurricular activities with sports. Many students consider sports to be a hobby or form of relaxation. Other students love the competition offered by sports. For many students the thought of sports as a way to develop physical qualities and character traits is a secondary issue or side effect of their experiences. While it is true that students' interests should be taken into account, it is also true that there are situations when they should be counselled 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 what kind of activities are offered by the school. 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 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 available, and by the quality of the teaching-educational process (the students' school results are directly proportional with their involvement in extracurricular activities). 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.), environmental sustainability, and interdisciplinary activities. Within these main fields there is a wide range of activities that schools can offer to their students using NFE.

A third important of NFE is its impact upon the students' personal development. The opinions vary from considering NFE extremely efficient in achieving a genuine and fulfilling learning experience to a view which indicates there is a 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). Some research has shown various forms of deviant behavior on the part of students (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 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 can lead to a “vicious circle” in which students with poor results do not participate while students with good results who get involved in extracurricular activities will become even better trained and more successful.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, non-formal education plays a crucial role in shaping a student’s harmonious and balanced development. NFE’s mission is thus to provide a strong complementary support to formal education. Outcomes of non-formal education are the training of transferable competencies to enable students to use them with success, regardless of the context in which they are located. These transferable competencies include: self-knowledge, personal development, cooperation, effective communication, developing creativity, research skills, effective learning, decision making, a healthy lifestyle, and emotional development. The main methodological options include extracurricular activities, such as visits, excursions, games, competitions, and workshops. The effects of non-formal education activities on student psychological development depend on how well the individual programs manage to help students meet their needs of each person. Since the nature of non-formal education is based on student interest these programs tend to be extremely flexible and adaptable making them more likely to be able to meet the needs of their students (Marinescu, 2009).
References