

Are Non-formal Activities a Strategy to Improve Students' Academic Performance?

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Abstract

At the academic level, teaching and learning are mainly focused on formal curriculum, structured on courses, seminars and speciality practice, all of them finalizing with exams. Students have to treat very seriously this formal curriculum if they want to achieve good results and, at the end of the licence cycle, to occupy a good job for which they prepared.

The research aims to analyze if, by organizing non-formal activities with students from all three years of study, their academic performances are improving. This is also our research hypothesis – if students are involved in extracurricular activities, their perception about learning is enriched and their performances will improve.

Research is mixed: qualitative and quantitative. The students investigated are matriculated in all three years of license study. The hypothesis is confirmed, after analyzing and interpreting the findings.

Research findings: even if, at the beginning, from various reasons, students are reticent at participating at non-formal activities, gradually they get involved more and their perception about learning the formal courses is enriched, their cultural horizon is widened and consequently their academic results get better.

Keywords:

Nonformal activities, Curriculum, Students, Learning, Academic Performance

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Introduction

Education is a significant and complete part of a person's life, it is the process by which knowledge is acquired or shared which helps in building a complete personality and aims at improving the quality of life. Education does not only mean the knowledge we discover in books, but it is a much broader concept that helps to optimally acquire the mental skills and abilities of human beings. Education extends far beyond the walls of classrooms, schools and universities, it focuses on developing academic skills and capabilities, the psychological, spiritual and physical sides of a person. We refer at the three forms of education, formal, non-formal and informal which, altogether, contribute at constructing a complete and fulfilled personality (Clichici V., 2020, p. 307).

At pre-university level, due to the international and national legislation and educational system, the formal and non-formal education are well articulated and put into practice. According to the National Education Law no. 198/2023, learning in non-formal contexts is considered to be learning integrated within some planned activities, with objectives which does not explicitly follow a curriculum and can differ in duration.

This type of learning depends on the intention of the learner and does not automatically lead to the certification of knowledge and acquired skills. Formal and non-formal education are complementary. They coexist. The elements of one can be found in the other (the report of the Working Group for Non-formal Education, from within the Council of Europe, <https://rm.coe.int/2012-compendium-non-formal-education/168077c10b>)

The competences and attitudes developed by students during their formation include interpersonal skills, the ability to work in a team, self-confidence, discipline and responsibility, planning, coordination and organization skills, project management, the ability

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to solve practical problems etc. Since these skills have increased relevance in the development of the individual, contributing equally to active participation in society and on the labor market, they are complementary to the purchased ones through formal education. The used methods are very different from those that pedagogy uses in education formal. In the case of non-formal education, the emphasis is on learning through action, peer learning and volunteering.

Why is Europe insisting on non-formal education? The interest of the European institutions on the subject of education resulted indirectly from certain sociological and economic starting points, but also from certain European modern values. What does this actually mean? Browsing many of the important documents, reports from meetings, sets of recommendations of important Council departments Europe, we find the following words that appear frequently: Knowledge-Based Economy, Multicultural Society, promoting equality and the trend towards social integration of all parts of society – social inclusion, Lifelong Learning Process. Europe expresses its conviction that formal education is no longer able to give answers to these challenges using exclusively its own forces and values, but needs a fortification in the meaning of practicing non-formal education (<https://www.link-academy.com/din-ce-cauza-europa-insista-asupra-invatamantului-nonformal>).

Holistic education realized that the development of children's ability to survive is very important in the modern world, not only their academic development. They need to be able to respond to the challenges that come their way and contribute to the improvement/modernization of the world in which they live (Mandă, A. 2020, p.). The same truth applies for students.

Students must learn to appreciate themselves, to achieve on their own their value and recognize their abilities and how they will pursue their dreams and paths in life. Holistic education teaches students about their immediate relationships with their friends and family and initiate them in the conditions of social development, in health education and helps them in their intellectual development.

In the current context of Romanian education, extracurricular activities are what they come to complete the education of our children and young people, being perhaps the most complex form of

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activity that teachers and professors have at hand to complete their work. Students need that, in addition to the variety of knowledge acquired in various fields of study, to complete themselves emotionally and behavioral and to benefit from quality in education (Anghel, A., 2023, pp. 136-138).

The revision of the speciality literature.

A lot more than in other periods in history, during the last decades non-formal education was subject for a very vast scientific litterature. The legislative frame is offered by the recommendations of the European Council, the Recomendations of the Committee of its Ministers to member States, the National Education Law no. 198/2023, government decisions and minister orders that periodically adjusts the non-formal education and the manner in which is implemented in the educational system. Regarding the non-formal education in universities, we mention Vilcea M. A. (2014), Harris J., Wihak C. (2018), Romi S., Schmida M. (2007), Brennan B. (2006), Garrido J. L. G. (2006), Latchem C. (2014), to name just a few. A real inspiration were the new trends in occidental teaching, which slowly but surely are implemented also in Romania - the Forest Pedagogy, Outdoor education and The School of the Forest.

Research methodology

The purpose of this research was to analyze if, by organizing non-formal activities with students during the university school year, the quality of education and their academic performances are improving. This is also our reserach hypothesys – if students are involved in extracurricular activities, their perception about learning is enriched and their performances will improve. The research is mixed, both qualitative and quantitative. The lot of students we worked with are matriculated at the program Pedagogy of Primary and Preschool Education, in all three years of license study, for a total of 210 students. The experiment and the observation developed for the last

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two years, 2022-2024. The hypothesis was confirmed, after analyzing and interpreting the findings.

Research results

In Romania, at the preuniversity school level, non-formal activities are systematically organized, according to the National Education Law. Besides the extracurricular activities that any teacher may and can put into practice, some national programmes are implemented annually in every Romanian school. First it was “Școala Altfel” (A Different School), followed by Green School and, during the last two years, A Weak for Skiing. This means that, today, during a school year, three weeks are dedicated to non-formal activities.

As far as the universities are concerned, no such regulations were made. Of course, non-formal activities can and are organized from time to time, but not on a regular basis. Formal education tends to prevail in the life of a student, who attends with seriousness the courses, prepares for the seminars and takes the exams in order to gather the necessary ECTS. Sometimes it tends to get quite stressful. Time runs very fast in the life of a student and the interaction with the professors is mainly an academic one. Before the Covid 19 pandemic, due to a collaboration that we closed with The National Museum Complex Princely Court from Târgoviște, we had the opportunity to take some of our courses inside the historical compound. From the very activity we noticed that students were much more relaxed than if we would have had the same course in an amphitheatre. They were more receptive and opened to discussions, their curiosity and attention more vivid. In an evaluation made in the following encounters, back to amphitheatres, we concluded that the activity was a real success, that the students understood more thoroughly what we had discussed and that their critical thinking and creativity were far more easier to be activated. And the students were more relaxed and elated. So we decided to organize more activities of this kind and we had some time to repeat them.

Unfortunately in March 2020 we were forced to adopt the online teaching and learning. Of course, it was a providential chance

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to benefit of the IT platforms and techniques, which allowed us to perform a quality act of education, but clearly the online encounters affected everybody, students and professors, both physically and psychologically. Education went on, but the human bonds and the general enthusiasm suffered a dramatic set back. Going back to school, face to face, was a happy moment for everyone. Returning was not easy, there was still a distance between students and between them and the professors, it was obvious that the communication act had suffered and the bonds had to be rebuild. We decided to organize non-formal activities in a more systematic manner, and the first step was to conclude collaboration protocols with several institutions, such as The National Museal Complex Princely Court from Târgovişte, with which we previously collaborated, and Bucegi Natural Park. We started to organize, periodically, courses within the compound of the historical site and to make one day trips to the mountains, accompanied by rangers from the Bucegi Natural Park. Especially students from the 2nd and 3rd years of study volunteered for these outdoor field trips, which took place 4-5 times a year, from 2022 to 2024. Besides the benefits of spending quality time in nature and bonding with each other as a group, students learnt how to integrate elements of nature in their own teaching and learning skills, while their knowledge about Science of Nature, History and Geography enriched visibly.

The evaluation of each activity showed us that students' self confidence was improving, their attitude towards learning became more relaxed but in the same time more responsible, the connection with their professors stronger, based on trust, wellbeing and mutual respect. If in first year students were more reluctant to communicate and showed stress during courses and especially at exams, from the second and especially during the third year of study they became more confident, and their academic results improved.

When questioned about how these non-formal activities have influenced their student life, all the students answered positively, considering them life constructive experiences for their wellbeing as well as for their academic performances.

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Conclusions

Students study hard to pass the class and get good grades on assessments. But are only studies important for the overall development of the student? Suppose we have a case where the student obtained good results in the assessment, but one cannot speak of a full development of himself, which would help him to overcome different obstacles and these problems may perpetuate after graduation, when he applies for various jobs. These students would feel rejected due to the lack of communication, relationship skills etc. Apart from studies, students must also be aware of the world outside them, of everything that happens around. This means that they must excel both verbally and mentally to cope current competitiveness. Grades and other assessment results are only part of the knowledge needed to pass in the next study year, but non-formal and extracurricular activities are important because they build a complete and complex personality, which is the basic requirement in the education of the third millennium. The hypothesis of our research is confirmed, by means of non-formal activities the students' academic performances, as well as the aforementioned skills, improved considerably.

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