



THE 21ST EDITION OF THE INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE EUROPEAN INTEGRATION REALITIES AND PERSPECTIVES

Non-formal Education as a Component of Lifelong Learning: Conceptual Perspectives and Practical Relevance

Ana Sava-Chistol¹

Abstract: This paper examines the role of non-formal education in supporting lifelong learning and developing transversal competencies in contemporary society. Starting from the relationship between formal, non-formal, and informal education, the study highlights the complementary, compensatory, and innovative functions of non-formal learning. The analysis emphasizes its flexible, experiential, participatory, and learner-centred character, reflected in extracurricular activities, educational workshops, community projects, camps, and cultural or sports programs. The paper also underlines the importance of educational management in planning, organizing, monitoring, and evaluating non-formal activities. The integration of non-formal education into school practice contributes to a modern, inclusive, and sustainable educational system.

Keywords: extracurricular activities; student-centered learning; competency development; community partnership

1. Introduction

Education today is on a continuous transformation process, mainly determined by globalization, internationalization, the growth of the knowledge society, and the fast-paced changes experienced in the labour market. In this environment, even a well-organized formal curriculum can't meet the diversity of human, professional, and social needs. Hence, the need to establish an integrated educational model in which formal, non-formal, and informal education serve in a complementary manner. Lifelong learning should no longer be interpreted only as an individual decision but as a principle for organizing modern education. It refers to the continuity of training, adaptability to diverse contexts, and the valorization of learning experiences acquired both within school and beyond it. Inside this context there lies non-formal education which offers a more flexible, participatory, and experiential educational context in terms of the learning and development process. It develops competencies that formal education cannot always develop sufficiently quickly or in a sufficiently applied manner through extracurricular activities, clubs, workshops, community projects, artistic and sports programs, or personal development initiatives.

¹ PhD Student, "Ion Creanga" State Pedagogical University of Chişinău, Republic of Moldova, Corresponding author: chistol.ana2009@gmail.com. <https://orcid.org/0009-0009-2325-8884>.



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2. Related Works

Pedagogical literature places and redefines non-formal education within the broader category of lifelong learning, viewing it as an additional and necessary aspect of character development throughout life. Non-formal education expands the boundaries of the traditional school framework, employing flexible, adaptive learning environments centered on genuine beneficiary needs. The conceptual foundation of non-formal education is linked in specialized literature by P. H. Coombs, C. Prosser and M. Ahmed, who have contributed to defining it as a series of organized educational activities conducted outside the traditional formal education system, but aimed at achieving explicit, formative objectives (Coombs, Prosser, Ahmed, 1973). By adopting this approach, the authors make it clear that education cannot be confined solely to the school system and should instead be approached from the perspective of the variety of social, cultural, or professional contexts in which learning occurs. An institutional perspective of relevance is provided by UNESCO, where non-formal education is described as a structured, organized, and sustained educational activity that does not fully correspond to the formal education system but has clear educational objectives for different age groups and social situations (UNESCO, 2022). This definition highlights the flexible, non-linear, contextualized, and learner-centered nature of non-formal education. In contrast, Ivan Illich identifies alternative forms of learning as essential, offering his own theory of the “deschooling society,” which critically engages with the institutionalization of education in academia, focusing on the problems of traditional schooling in an effort to create new learning networks (Illich, 2001). Thus, through this lens, educational non-formality has created a new role: it allows access to different educational tools, the transmission of knowledge, and the self-engagement of individual participants in their own development. In Romanian pedagogy, Sorin Cristea states the significance of non-formal education in establishing links between what is learned through practices in formal education and informal learning experiences from everyday life (Cristea, 2000). Therefore, non-formal education is the intermediate pedagogical environment where educational acquisitions may serve as a complement, cement, and contribute. This aligns with Viviane de Landsheere, who emphasizes that non-formal education has a vocational and formative dimension, arguing that it is helpful for developing competencies, integrating with society, and adapting to the needs of modern society (Landsheere, 1992). Extracurricular, para-school, and peri-school activities are also widely discussed in Romanian and Moldovan pedagogical literature and considered as concrete expressions of non-formal education. By valuing the prospective, interdisciplinarity, social life, democracy, and participation of pupils, these contribute to the harmonious development of students. As S. Cristea notes, non-formal education forms a part of formal education and makes connections between learned behaviors and informal experiences (Cristea, 2000); I. Nicola advocates education as preparing students for the demands of society in the future (Nicola, 1996). In Moldovan pedagogy, V. Mândăcanu, Vl. Guțu, and L. Pogolșa stress the need for complementary educational activities for personality formation, competency development, and to consolidate the school–family–community partnership (Guțu et al., 2017, Guțu, 2013; Pogolșa, 2015). When viewed through the lens of educational management, Vl. Guțu highlights the need for coherent planning and focus on education as a competency-creation domain (Guțu, 2013). Accordingly, for learners, non-formal education must not be understood as a series of “spontaneous” or “marginal” activities, but as an integral unit of education that should be pursued through “systems of education” which include active planning, resource allocation, and collaboration between the school, family, and community (Guțu et al., 2017).

3. Problem Statement

At the heart of the problem expressed in this paper lies the analysis of the pedagogical and managerial conditions through which non-formal education can facilitate its proper incorporation into the education process, in order to facilitate lifelong learning and the acquisition of skills required, in modern society. Non-formal education, from this viewpoint, is seen not as a secondary or peripheral type of education; rather, it is regarded as a complementary part of the educational system that can sustain, enhance, and interpret the acquisitions gained in formal education. Because formal education encompasses the institutionalized curriculum, organized instruction, and competency certification, the specialized literature emphasizes its shortcomings in light of the current societal context. This implies the valorization of alternative and complementary learning contexts because the rigidity of school programs, the slow pace of adaptation to socioeconomic transformations, and the difficulty of responding in a differentiated manner to the educational needs of all beneficiaries require the valorization of alternative and complementary learning contexts. According to Coombs, Prosser, & Ahmed, non-formal education is defined as a series of educational activities performed without the formal system, directed at specific formative objectives and molded around specific requirements for one's learning. Equally, the UNESCO perspective argues the need of the flexible, non-linear, and inclusive nature of non-formal education, where non-formal is appropriate to a range of ages and social situations and offers learning outside conventional schools. As a result, non-formal education itself can serve complementary, compensatory and even innovative roles and can overcome some limitations of formal education, and bring the education process more effectively and according to the actual needs of the individual and of the surrounding society. Pedagogically, Sorin Cristea indicates the importance of non-formal education in connecting the learning processes of lessons and informal learning experiences in order to apply, consolidate and pass on the educational gains. At the same time, Viviane de Landsheere underlines the more vocational and formative aspect of non-formal education in areas related to competency development and the individual's integration with the community in a socio-professional context. Ivan Illich takes a critical role in the context of education, which can include raising concerns about too extreme institutionalization of education for people and advocating for alternative networks for learning to enhance autonomy and active participating of people. In light of this, the research question has been formulated as follows: to what extent does such non-formal education-related practices, if properly planned, organized, and assessed, help shape an autonomous, capable, reflective personality capable of adapting itself to the needs of the modern society? It directs the exploration as to the relationship between non-formal education, management of educational activities, and the acquisition of transversal skills required for lifelong learning. Concept and Terms. Education refers to both a conscious, systematic, process of formation and development, and a teleological process, which promotes valuing the intellectual, moral, psychophysical, aesthetic, social, and technological aspects of the individual. In the era of globalization, digitalization and socio-professional mobility in modern society, education should not be confined to the school as an institutional structure, education must be seen as a lifelong learning and self-education. This emphasis is consistent with the orientation of lifelong learning, that is to say, combining formal, informal and non-formal learning in an ongoing project of personal and professional learning. Training in formal schools is in which education in formal school is taken place from the level of educational institutions, based on an official curriculum, and is defined by certain kinds of content and learning objectives, systematically organized content, standard teaching/learning strategies controlled, standard testing, and certification achievements, curriculum goals, outcome or certification. Informal education, on the other hand, happens spontaneously, unsystematically and non-institutionally through quotidian experiences, social interactions or the external influences of family, community, cultural and professional situation.

The non-formal education, between the two are, combines the purposefulness and the pedagogical orientation that the formal education does with the flexible, adaptable and experiential character of informal schooling. International pedagogical literature was the basis of the first study on non-formal education, written by P. H. Coombs, R. C. Prosser and M. Ahmed who examined this model of education based on the need to provide opportunities for learning more widely beyond a narrow scope of learning in the conventional school setting. Non-formal education by the authors is a set of educational activities that are out of the formal system, which are organized for specific, clear educational purposes and targeted to the individual category of beneficiaries. Their 1973 publication, *New Paths to Learning for Rural Children and Youth*, was one of the main reference works in developing modern notions of non-formal education as we know it. An relevant institutional view, presented by UNESCO, is that of non-formal education being institutionalized, intentional, and planned by an educational provider, with a defining characteristic that non-formal education is a complement, alternative, or extension of formal education. This perspective emphasizes not only the adaptable, contextualized, and beneficiary motivated nature of non-formal education but also that it plays a role in developing socio-professional skills for social and occupational integration. From the perspective of Romanian pedagogy, Sorin Cristea describes formal and non-formal education as pedagogical practices through social institutions, where there are pedagogical actions designed and carried out with formative intentionality. Thus, in this sense, non-formal education is an organised form of educational influence, one set in between the structured framework of formal education and the spontaneous aspect of informal education. Cristea identifies it for engaging more than knowledge acquired through teaching and learning activities related to various social settings that creates a link between the social contexts. The word “non-formal” therefore denotes a teaching reality less organized than formal education but characterized by clear formative aims, pedagogical organization, and practical relevance. Non-formal education applies to extracurricular, extra-didactic, para-school, and peri-school activities carried out in the school building and outside. Such activities are typically voluntary, participatory and applied, and therefore create a favorable context for the development of autonomy, responsibility, creativity, cooperation and transversal competences. Some extracurricular activities could be disciplinary and interdisciplinary circles, thematic clubs, artistic groups, competitions, Olympiads, excursions, camps, community projects, study visits, educational workshops, cultural and sports programs, or digital education activities. The activities in para-school are socio-professional activities and focus on training, career advice or making competences for integrating with the labour market. Peri-school activities revolve around socio-cultural, community and recreational activities, which is related to the ability of the individual’s educational experiences to extend beyond school-based environment. The experiential aspect of non-formal education can also be explained with reference to the experiential learning theory developed by David A. Kolb, as experience is the basis for learning and growth. From this point of view, the non-instructional actions enable students to become learners, in the mode of real practice (experience in relation to experiences), reflection, use and transferring of knowledge to realistic life environment. Meanwhile, Ivan Illich’s conception of the “deschooling society” highlights the boundaries of too much institutionalisation of education and encourages the establishment of alternative networks of learning. This lens is pertinent in the comprehension of non-formal education as an open, malleable, and participatory pedagogic terrain where the receiver of knowledge is not simply the recipient of knowledge but involved in his or her own education. The organization, control and management over extracurricular activities is an important element of education management and covers the planning, organization, leadership, coordination, monitoring, evaluation and valorization, of activities performed in parallel to the official teaching process. Thus, non-formal activities need to be understood not as isolated or sporadic actions, but rather as planned education and intervention aligned with school-related objectives, pupils’ needs, and external

community resources. Their effectiveness is linked to the quality of pedagogical design, teacher involvement, cooperation with the family and community, and the school institution's ability to integrate non-formal education into its educational strategy.

4. Solution Approach

This approach is based on a systematic way of mainstreaming the non-formal education into the educational project of school, by valuing it as a complementary and structural aspect of the formative process. Thus, non-formal education should not be regarded as a peripheral or sporadic project, but rather within the framework of an extended curriculum to develop transversal skills as well as the re-adjustment of students according to the context of a world dynamically shifting. For this purpose S. Cristea stresses on the non-formal education in support of the formal education as well as in connections of school acquisitions to some informal educational experiences (Cristea, 2000). The initial direction of action relates to the relationship of non-formal and formal activities to educational aims. In sum, any extracurricular activities should be designed so that students get to apply the things they learned in the classroom in relevant contexts and develop dimensions of personality that the traditional schooling only partially captures. Nicola (1996) offers a similar view emphasising the finalist and formative nature of education which strives to encourage the integral development of the pupil's personality, to name just one direction. This second direction relates to the strict pedagogical design of non-formal activities. These activities should have clear goals, a clearly defined target audience, proper resources, dividing responsibilities, participative processes, and appropriate evaluation conditions. The flexible nature of non-formal education does not rule out planning, however; it means a flexible system focused on the beneficiary and on actual formative needs of learners must take shape. An educational management perspective of Vl. Guțu highlights the need for coherent planning of education and of its focus on competency development (Guțu, 2013). The third direction is to establish partnerships between school, family and community. Non-formal education works as such if it recognizes community resources—libraries, museums, cultural centres, NGOs, sports institutions, economic agents, educational mass media, digital education channels. In documents provided by the Republic of Moldova, it is noted that educational partnership is regarded as a necessity of quality of education and the school's involvement in social issues (Guțu et al., 2017). The fourth approach is to monitor and self-regulate non-formal activities. Assessments are not just to analyze the involvement of the pupils, but also the accomplishment of those competences and the extent of participation, and the importance of the activities within society, and its influence on the level of autonomy, responsibility, creativity and cooperation. Hence the school's educational project should aim to include in-school activities within the framework of its structure a coherent, planned and assessable plan of self-cultivation by the person concerned to create an independent, capable and adaptive personality.

5. Analysis of Results

The content analysis highlights that non-formal education plays a significant role in the development of transversal competencies required by individuals in contemporary society, such as communication, cooperation, civic responsibility, creativity, autonomy, critical thinking, digital literacy, and adaptability. Through its applied and experiential character, non-formal education contributes to transforming the pupil from a mere receiver of information into an active participant in his or her own formative process. According to P. H. Coombs, R. C. Prosser, and M. Ahmed, non-formal education provides organized learning opportunities outside the formal system, while remaining oriented towards

clear educational objectives and adapted to the needs of beneficiaries. In the same direction, UNESCO emphasizes the flexible and complementary character of non-formal education, which may function as an extension or alternative to formal education. Extracurricular activities, as concrete forms of non-formal education, have a global, complementary, and prospective character, as they can be organized both within the school and in the community. They contribute to the harmonious development of pupils and prepare them for future requirements. Sorin Cristea highlights the role of non-formal education in connecting the acquisitions obtained during lessons with informal learning experiences, thereby facilitating the application of knowledge in various contexts. The social, optional, and participatory character of these activities stimulates intrinsic motivation, responsibility, and cooperation. Through collaboration with the family, the community, and local institutions, non-formal education supports the development of pupils' social potential. In this regard, Viviane de Landsheere emphasizes the formative and vocational dimension of non-formal education, while David A. Kolb, through the theory of experiential learning, underlines the importance of direct involvement, reflection, and practical application in the learning process. The pedagogical outcomes of non-formal education can be observed at the cognitive, affective, behavioural, and social levels, through the development of self-confidence, initiative, responsibility, cooperation, and self-regulation. At the same time, non-formal education may contribute to reducing educational gaps by providing alternative, flexible, and inclusive learning contexts. From a managerial perspective, the effectiveness of non-formal activities depends on the quality of their design, organization, coordination, and evaluation. The success of this approach requires objective-oriented planning, efficient use of resources, clear distribution of responsibilities, decision-making transparency, and collaboration among teachers, pupils, parents, school management, and community partners.

6. Conclusions

For today's contemporary education and lifelong learning, non-formal education is an indispensable ingredient. And not as something secondary to formal education, but as a structural dimension of the educational process which complements, compensates, and innovates the training provided within school. Through its flexibility, practical orientation, voluntary character, and interdisciplinary and participatory nature, non-formal education responds more rapidly to educational needs that are constantly changing. It enables the emergence of an autonomous, reflective, and adaptable personality prepared to face the challenges of the knowledge society. The integration of formal, non-formal, and informal education represents a necessary condition for building a modern, inclusive, and sustainable educational system. In this regard, educational management plays a decisive role in transforming non-formal activities into coherent, relevant, and effective learning experiences.

7. Future Work

By using empirical studies in schools, future research can examine more closely effects of non-formal activities on transversal development of competencies. Qualitative and quantitative instruments are one avenue through which these studies could more accurately measure the progress of pupils — questionnaires, observation grids, interviews, portfolios, self-assessment tools, and competency-based evaluation scales. The competencies of communication, cooperation, critical thinking, creativity, civic responsibility, autonomy, digital literacy, and adaptability may be specifically assessed. Another relevant direction involves examining whether any relationship between non-formal education and pupils' motivation, school engagement, social integration and personal development exists. Subsequent

research might also explore the impact of extracurricular activities on students' self-confidence, responsibility, initiative, teamwork, and capacity for self-regulated learning. Further research could involve comparisons of non-formal education across educational levels, school settings and local communities in order to determine the best way to teach and support students. It is also important to explore how digital platforms, online learning environments, multimedia materials, and educational technologies can enhance and promote non-formal education. In this sense, one could hope that the impact of virtual communities, digital projects, online workshops, educational applications and blended learning activities, in the facilitation of flexible and accessible learning opportunities outside of the formal classroom at the future level would have been investigated. The next area of research, therefore, looks like creating management models of both extracurricular and non-formal activities relevant to educational levels, institutional needs and community resources. These models should detail planning, organizing, coordinating, monitoring and evaluation techniques and include measures for working relationships between teachers, pupils, parents, school managers and community partners. Evaluation grids for assessing the quality and impact of non-formal activities would also be useful. These instruments should incorporate relevance, participation, inclusion, accessibility, educational coherence, social impact, sustainability, and the transfer of competencies into everyday life. With these directions for future research, non-formal education can become more embedded in school practice and properly valorised as a strategic dimension-construct within a lifetime of learning.

8. Acknowledgements

We would like to express our sincere gratitude to all teachers, pupils, parents, and educational partners who support the development and implementation of non-formal educational activities. Their involvement, openness, and active participation contribute significantly to strengthening the partnership between school, family, and community and to creating meaningful learning contexts beyond the formal classroom setting. Special appreciation is extended to the teaching staff and school managers who design, organize, coordinate, and evaluate extracurricular and non-formal activities with responsibility and professionalism. Through their commitment, these activities become valuable opportunities for pupils' personal, social, and professional development.

We also acknowledge the contribution of community institutions, cultural organizations, non-governmental organizations, and other educational stakeholders that provide resources, expertise, and support for the diversification of learning experiences. Their collaboration enhances the relevance of education and helps connect school learning with real social, cultural, and professional contexts. Finally, we express our appreciation to researchers and specialists in the field of pedagogy whose theoretical, conceptual, and methodological contributions have provided an essential foundation for the analysis of non-formal education, lifelong learning, and educational management. Their work has supported a deeper understanding of the role of non-formal education in the formation of autonomous, responsible, and adaptable individuals.

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