THE ROLE OF NON-FORMAL ACTIVITIES FOR PROMOTING AND ACCEPTING HUMAN DIVERSITY

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Abstract: *Diversity (human diversity), globalization, communication, digitalization, etc. are social values specific to contemporary society and that create new social ethics. Diversity is the fundament for acceptance and tolerance. Children with special educational needs, people of different religions, or race, with different habits and different culture can live and work together only if they accept the diversity of human beings. This article discusses the problem of the impact of non-formal activities on promoting and accepting the human diversity. The main goal of this study was to analyse the types of activities and their impact on students. A questionnaire regarding students' and teachers' perceptions on children with special educational needs and focus-groups were used. A number of 200 participants were included in the study, teachers and students, from schools from Brasov. One of the main conclusions drawn is that teachers must adopt a new mentality about their role in promoting social values like diversity, tolerance, and acceptance. They must design non-formal activities that are relevant for students' experience. The impact of non-formal activities that promote human diversity through learning by projects, collaboration and cooperation is both emotional and cognitive and changes the students' point of view.*

Keywords: human diversity; non-formal education; social values; transformative learning

1. INTRODUCTION

This paper focuses on non-formal activities that contribute to the promotion of human diversity. The theoretical premises of this research can be found in recent studies in education sciences (P. Senge 2016; H. Stolovitch, E. Keeps 2017) that underline the role of non-formal activities such as trips, competitions, social events, etc. with a formative impact on the development of social competences, the promotion of important social values for the present society.

2. NONFORMAL EDUCATION AS TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING

Why is non-formal education important today? The answer to the above question is, in fact, the solution for a school and learning that are more effective, more attractive for pupils and teachers, closer to social realities. Educational specialists (P. Senge 2016; H. Stolovitch & E. Keeps 2017; J. Mezirow 2014; J. Hattie 2014; H. Siebert 2001 etc.) express more and more vehemently the need to address human learning differently, meaning to offer a personalized learning for each individual, on one hand, and for the society, on the other hand.

This new approach to learning is necessary because both the psychological profile of today's pupils is different (we are talking about the generation of 'digital natives' - Ohler, 2010) and the values of society are re-set and nuanced. Values such as change, diversity, digitization, pragmatism, communication impose a type of learning that leads to the formation of skills necessary for the rapid integration into the labour market, for the individuals' personal and professional development.

Such learning, in accordance with the values promoted by society and the principles of constructivism in contemporary school, as described by H. Siebert (2001), is the transformative learning - "the process by which we transform problematic reference frameworks (mentalities, mental habits, perspectives on meanings) - sets of assumptions and expectations - to make them more comprehensive, lighter, more reflexive and more capable of affective change" (Mezirow, 2014:168). As can be seen from the author's view of the transformational learning theory, this learning is capable of producing a person's profound restructuring at the cognitive, attitude and emotional level, restructurings

objectively required by changing contexts and reference frameworks in people's lives.

Restructuring or transforming people's reference frameworks in order to adapt more effectively to the concrete reality of professional and/or personal life is possible because transformative learning is based on: critical reflection on our beliefs and others' beliefs; using empirical research methods for finding out the truth; free and responsible participation in debates through a well-informed speech; action from the transformed perspective; validating the transformative perspective by engaging in actions / speeches in line with the new perspective. Out of these, two elements are of particular importance, as the author of the theory emphasizes:

reflection or critical self-reflection on assumptions - critical assessment of the sources, nature and consequences of our mental habits and (....) free and total participation in the dialectical discourse to validate the best reflexive argumentation (Mezirow, 2014:172).

In other words, non-formal education is increasingly important nowadays for the following reasons:

1. Non-formal education through its more flexible structure, based on the students' interest and skills, better corresponds to the principles of the constructivist pedagogy in education.

2. It promotes authentic learning, exploiting the emotional potential of activities.

More and more neurobiology research emphasizes the role of emotions in learning. Educational specialists (L.Cozolino, 2017; Adams & Gupta, 2013) recommend teachers to use emotions as a catalyst for learning. Affectivity is a powerful engine of human action, conditioning work efficiency. Non-formal education benefits from a positive emotional load that has to be capitalized on for the human development process. Also, non-formal education benefits from the real, concrete context of the actions that bring learning closer to real life. All these characteristics demonstrate that non-formal education has a strong formative potential and contributes decisively to the formation of the skills necessary in nowadays society: problem-solving abilities, critical thinking, responsibility, tolerance, etc. In fact, non-formal education provides the specific framework for transformative learning.

Another important aspect of non-formal education refers to diversity as a value specific to postmodern society (in form, structure, content). Cultural diversity, an important feature of postmodernism, is becoming an increasingly active ingredient in our lives that needs to be managed more efficiently by everyone and even by school. The pedagogy of cultural diversity aims to change the perspective on: the relationship with alterity, the fundamental reshaping of the whole space by overcoming ethnocentrism and egocentrism, with the focus on schools, communities, curriculum, teachers.

Efforts to promote diversity in Romanian schools are becoming increasingly visible, especially by promoting diversity in non-formal activities under the 'A Different School' programme, introduced in 2012.

Non-formal activities are the best opportunity to promote and accept diversity, to integrate children / students with SEN into the class and community, to understand and accept the natural differences among people. Interactions with others and the collaborative practices in non-formal activities develop interests and identities and create the sense of community. (Stetsekenko,2008; Usher, 2014). Sometimes students learning more through nonformal activities than did they in schools, demonstrated Adams and Gupta, 2013.

3. RESEARCH ON THE ROLE OF NON-FORMAL ACTIVITIES FOR PROMOTING AND ACCEPTING HUMAN DIVERSITY

Starting from the theoretical background presented above, a research was carried out, having as general aim the identifying of the types of non-formal activities and their impact on the promotion and acceptance of human diversity, especially the integration of children / students with SEN.

The research was carried out on a number of 200 pupils from the urban area, from the schools in Brasov, from primary, secondary and high school, according to the distribution in the chart below.
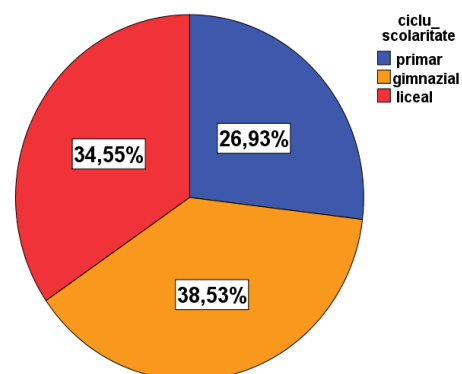

Fig.1. Participants from primary, secondary and high school

The methods used in the research were:

- a questionnaire addressed to students and teachers about the types of non-formal activities carried out, their frequency, and their impact.

- a focus group with students on the role of non-formal activities in integrating children with SEN into mainstream schools.

The quantitative analysis of the answers to the questionnaires revealed that the most pleasant activities were the following:

Table 1. Frequency of nonformal activities

Categories of answers	Frequency
Trips	48%
Cultural activities (visits to museum, shows)	25%
Sports activities	10%
Other answers	17 %

The impact of these activities is a strong one if we analyse the students' answers regarding the formative effects of non-formal activities. The charts below show the types of competences that students developed in these activities:

Table 2. Frequency of developed competences

Competences	Frequency Primary school	Frequency Secondary	Frequency High Scool
Communication	20.89%	24.95%	22.47%
Cooperation	21.47%	19.40%	15.92%
Teamwork	21.80%	26.78%	21.64%
Interest for learning	18.57%	12.10%	6.79 %
Interest for community	16.25%	13.34%	11.52%

As it can be seen from the previous table, students, regardless of the school cycle, state that non-formal activities develop their team spirit, which is a great gain in terms of the skills needed in nowadays society and in accepting differences. Also, the vast majority of the teachers included in the study stated that non-formal activities with students have a formative impact especially on the development of students' social skills. Also, the activities that explicitly aim at understanding and accepting others, being they different or with special educational needs, are considered interesting. For example, as it emerged from the focus groups, primary and secondary school pupils who took part in activities alongside pupils with special educational needs said the activity was useful because they understood that they were "children like us", that they had the same desires and joys.

Another activity that had an impact on secondary school pupils was the debate on the novel "Wonder" by R.J. Palacio and watching the film with the same name. The discussions about film and the novel unfolded in a non-formal environment made students more empathetic, able to understand and accept people with special needs around them. Some fifth grade students' statements are interesting from this point of view: "I think that today, through free discussions about painful things in the others' lives, I have learned one of the most important lessons" (I.A.). Another commonly seen opinion says: "We are learning things that are useful to us. I did not know anything about disabled children. From today on, I will pay more attention to people around me." (C.M.).

4. CONCLUSIONS & ACKNOWLEDGMENT

Even though this research has some limitations regarding the potential of generalizing the conclusions, the subjectivity of the answers to such a delicate problem, it raises new reflection issues and opens new in-depth research directions related to:

1. The type of non-formal activities that contribute to the promotion of values, to changing pupils' attitudes towards those who are different.

2. Teacher training for the design and development of non-formal activities that meet the students' interests.

3. The relationship between non-formal and formal activities; the way school can capitalize on non-formal activities in order to get closer to reality and to open up more to the community.

One of the main practical conclusions is that non-formal activities through their transformative learning potential contribute to the promotion of values specific to the current society. The non-formal activities like movies, playing, trips etc. Illustrate how people with special needs share many common problems and solution. Students and teachers need to experience that we are all the same in different ways.

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