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THE IMPACT OF EXPERIENTIAL OUTDOOR ACTIVITIES ON THE SOCIAL SKILLS OF PRESCHOOLERS

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Abstract

The need for outdoor activities is growing every day. We know that in foreign education systems this type of activity is part of the kindergarten program of preschoolers and students. Being outside is a sine qua non condition for people of all ages, especially as we refer to preschool age, outdoor education responds to the child's need to know and ensures the joy and pleasure of being in nature. Outdoor education valorizes on experiential learning, offering many and diverse learning tasks, which generate desirable learning experiences. Moreover, outdoor education encourages collaboration between participants; the joy of learning and completing the work task targets all members of the group, becoming the success of all. But are there outdoor activities in the preschool system in Romania? What are the advantages of this type of activity and how does it influence the development of preschoolers? Do outdoor activities help to develop the peer social skills of preschoolers? The present study aims at the impact of a program based on experiential outdoor activities on the peer social skills of preschoolers aged 5-6. To test the hypothesis, we used as a research tool Teacher-Child Rating Scale (T-CRS) 2.1, the scale Peer Social Skills. The study was attended by 104 preschoolers aged 5-6, from 4 preschool education units in Cluj and Sălaj counties, Romania.

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1. Introduction

In contemporary society, the need for green has become more and more pressing. This constant of our existence highlights the importance of going out in nature. Any outdoor activity is thus an occasion for joy, delight, recreation, recovery of strengths. The need for “outside” is felt at any age, especially in the golden age of childhood, when preschoolers are “little explorers”, always looking for new answers to “Why?”.

Outside the country, outdoor education is part of the daily program of preschoolers, while in our country it is at the beginning of the road. Green school type educational units have also appeared in Romania, which are based on outdoor education and which highlight its formative values. In the mass preschool education system in our country, outdoor education has gradually begun to attract the attention of teachers. Even if it arouses curiosity and the desire to try new ways to capture the attention of preschoolers and to meet their knowledge needs, outdoor education is still viewed with some reluctance. The risks involved in outdoor activities, the lack of clear legislation and methodological rules for implementation, the lack of a support curriculum, the lack of training of teachers in the field of outdoor education, the lack of funds for kindergarten, the poor financial situation of parents, the groups of preschoolers with a large staff, the lack of non-teaching staff, these are only a few aspects that prevent the realization of outdoor education in the Romanian preschool education system. Moreover, there is still no unanimously accepted meaning regarding the concept of outdoor education. Donaldson and Donaldson (1958) defined outdoor education as education in, about, and for things outside the classroom. In describing this concept as a learning method, they used three keywords: in, about and for. The word “in” shows the space - outside the classroom; the word “about” refers to the subject treated; the aspect of knowledge conveyed; the word “for” highlights the purpose of outdoor education - for the well-being of finite resources in the environment. Some educators believe that this type of education means more than learning about the environment. They highlighted the importance of independent learning, freedom of thought and expression, proposing solutions to solve the situations in which the child is placed. According to Câmpan and Bocoş (2020), outdoor activities are outdoor learning activities that involve practical learning experiences, aimed at training and developing the skills of the participants, as well as acquiring knowledge and applying them, capitalizing on the resources of the natural environment.

Of course, weaknesses exist, and we cannot neglect them, but knowing the positive effects of outdoor activities on the holistic development of preschoolers, through them we want to contribute in a positive, sustainable and effective way to the formation and development of children’s personality. In addition to the weaknesses, outdoor education has a number of advantages:

- direct familiarization of children with the surrounding nature;
- multilateral development of the child (psychomotor, socio-emotional and cognitive);
- capitalizing on the interests of preschoolers;
- outdoor activities are based on experiential learning, which facilitates the teaching-learning process, the preschooler being much easier to train in the activity;
- encourages active learning;
- outdoor activities are more motivating, more flexible, more varied;

- involvement of a larger number of participants;
- favors the development of team spirit;
- offers many challenges;
- promotes interdisciplinarity;
- due to the stimulating learning climate, preschoolers who face learning difficulties, who have a lower level of performance or those with undesirable behaviors, increasing the degree of motivation are encouraged and helped (Câmpan & Bocoş, 2019);
- ensures the joy of a successful activity.

Starting from the multitude of advantages of outdoor education and from the well-known fact that preschoolers like to spend as much time as possible in the middle of nature, we wanted to highlight the formative and informative values of outdoor education. Through the program of experiential outdoor activities proposed by us, we wanted to highlight the major importance of the child's participation in his own training and information, through situations that put him in a position to seek and find solutions, to interact, to cooperate with colleagues, to form attitudes and skills, to explore, to apply, to highlight his ability to solve problems and, last but not least, to offer him joys, satisfactions, thanks, the chance to succeed. Any activity that the child carries out is desirable to do with pleasure and fondly, responding to his need for knowledge, learning from his own actions.

The study presents the impact of the program developed and implemented by us on the development of peer social skills of preschoolers aged 5-6.

2. Problem Statement

The Teacher-Child Rating Scale (T-CRS) 2.1 research tool, developed by Hightower and Perkins, was applied in the pre-experimental (September 2018) and post-experimental (June 2019) stages of our research, which is the basis of the doctoral thesis "Promoting experiential pedagogy through outdoor activities in preschool education". This research tool was applied to a number of 104 preschoolers, coming from 4 preschool education units, from the urban area, from Cluj and Sălaj counties, on the Romanian territory. To study the impact of a program based on experiential outdoor activities on the peer social skills of preschoolers aged 5-6, we used the research tool T-CRS 2.1, Peer Social Skills scale.

3. Research Questions

The research questions that guided our study are:

- What is the impact of a program based on experiential outdoor activities on the peer social skills of preschoolers aged 5-6?
- Does the participation of preschoolers aged 5-6 in a program based on experiential outdoor activities determine the increase in the willingness to form peer social skills?

4. Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this research is to study the impact of organizing experiential outdoor activities on the peer social skills of preschoolers aged 5-6.

5. Research Methods

5.1. Research hypothesis

The experimental approach aims to verify the following **hypothesis**:

The higher the frequency of preschoolers in experiential outdoor activities, the greater their willingness to form peer social skills.

5.2. Research variables

The research variables are:

Independent variable:

the organization and development by the teacher for preschool education of a system of experiential outdoor activities, in compliance with the curriculum for preschool education;

Dependent variable:

the peer social skills of preschoolers.

5.3. Research methods

The research method we used is observation. The method of observation aims at the intentional and systematic pursuit of an individual or phenomenon, in its natural state, in familiar conditions of existence and manifestation (Bocoş, 2003). The participatory observation carried out took place in natural observation situations, valorizing, as a research tool, the Teacher-Child Rating Scale 2.1 (T-CRS 2.1), which consists of 32 items and assesses the preschooler's task orientation, behavior control, assertiveness and peer social skills. In this study we present the results obtained from the use of the Peer Social Skills scale.

6. Findings

Table 1. Comparative analysis of the variable "peer social skills of preschoolers", in the pre-test and post-test stages

Variable	Stage	M	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Peer social skills of preschoolers	pre-test	29.27	104	6.51	.64
	post-test	34.03	104	5.46	.53

Analyzing table 01 we find that in the pre-test the average obtained at the level of peer social skills (M=29.27) is moderate, noting optimizations in the post-test stage, where M=34.03, as we can see in table 02 and in figure 01.

Table 2. Paired Samples t test

Variable	Pre-test		Post-test		N	95% CI	r	t	df
	M	AS	M	AS					
Peer social skills of preschoolers	29.27	6.51	34.03	5.46	104	[-5.45; -4.06]	.83	13.56*	103

*p<0.001

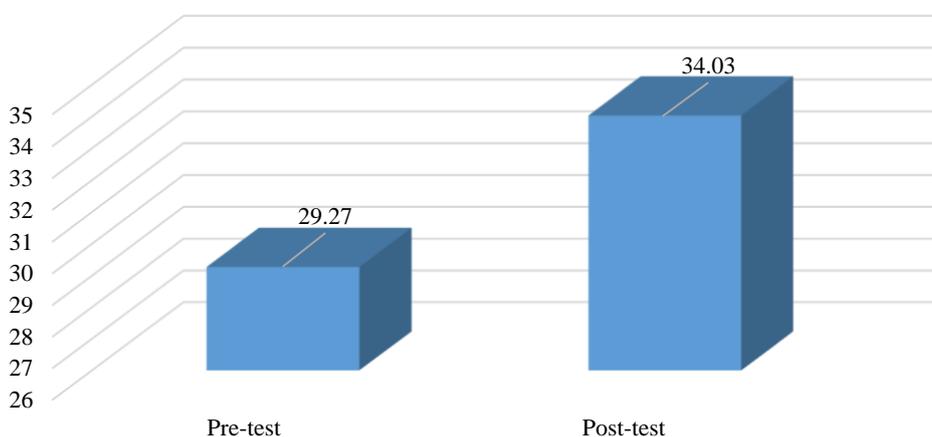


Figure 1. Graphical representation of variable averages “peer social skills of preschoolers”, in the pre-test and post-test stages

Following the calculation of the Paired Samples t test (table 02), a $t_{(103)} = 13.56$, $p = 0.00$, was obtained for peer social skills of preschoolers. Because t is significant, it results that there is a significant difference between the pre-test and post-test stages.

Calculating the effect size, a $d = 1.33$ was obtained, which means, according to Cohen's (1988) criteria, that the proposed intervention program had a strong effect on the social skills of preschoolers aged 5-6, manifested in the relationship with colleagues.

In conclusion, **the hypothesis of our research, the higher the frequency of preschoolers in experiential outdoor activities, the greater their willingness to form peer social skills, is confirmed.**

7. Conclusion

Currently, in kindergarten we notice that more and more people are advocating for the allocation of a period of time in order to carry out daily outdoor activities. Even if most often games and recreational activities have as an acting space the natural environment (kindergarten yard), we found that outdoor activities, with a focus on experiential areas, can be successfully performed in the environment and we encourage teachers to carry out such activities. The numerous formative and informative values of outdoor education are aspects that we bring as arguments to teachers: it offers the possibility of contact with nature, capitalize on experiences in nature; encourages the joy of being in nature; supports the learning process of students with learning difficulties; develops team spirit and fair play; it has physical, emotional, mental benefits, which contribute to the well-being of the individual and of the group (Bocoş et al., 2016).

Regarding our study, we showed that this type of activity helps to increase the willingness of preschoolers to form peer social skills, therefore we encourage teachers to carry out such activities. A weak

point of the research is the small number of study participants. The involvement of a larger number of preschoolers could be a plus in validating the hypothesis.

With regard to future directions of action, we intend to extend the study in future research, both in terms of the duration of the research, as well as in terms of the types of outdoor activities that can be carried out at the level of each age group, so as to contribute both to increasing the interest of teachers in carrying out such activities and to increasing the complexity of the data.

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