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THE OUTDOOR ACTIVITIES IN PRESCHOOL EDUCATION

Adela-SiminaCâmpan (a)^{*}, MuşataBocoş (b)

^{*}Corresponding author

(a) Babeş-Bolyai University, Faculty of Psychology and Education Sciences, 9 Sindicatelor Street, Cluj-Napoca, Romania, adela.campan@yahoo.com

(b) Babeş-Bolyai University, Faculty of Psychology and Education Sciences, 9 Sindicatelor Street, Cluj-Napoca, Romania, musata.bocos@ubbcluj.ro

Abstract

For always children, regardless of their age, have appreciated more the activities organized outside the classroom. Why? First of all, because this kind of activities are detached from the classroom routine. Changing the environment brings the change of learning climate. Put in front of some working tasks that are based on experiential learning through action, the child, together with his colleagues and guided by the teacher, manages to reach the desired result. Outdoor education is a relatively new concept for the educational system in Romania, while abroad has proved its efficiency in the act of learning and not only. It isn't separated from the activities of the group/ class, it doesn't exclude them, but it comes to strengthen them, offering children an environment of exploration, experimentation, application of some certain knowledge included in school curriculum, being related to school content. Outdoor type activities involve children cognitively, emotionally and dynamic. Engaged in a learning task, the child channels his energy and participates in the process of his own learning with all the feelings and the cheers he is capable of. The preschooler lives intensely every activity in which he is involved, and obtaining the desired outcome brings joy and satisfaction in learning and, additionally, efficiency. In summary, learning outside the class provides the link between theory and practice. The kindergarten's external environment offers a variety of resources which facilitate understanding and support the strengthening and the application of knowledge.

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1. Introduction

1.1. The qualities of outdoor education

According to the learning pyramid, we fix 20% of what we hear, 30% of what we see, 70% of what we say and 90% of what we say and do. Outdoor activities encourage learning in a practical way, through personal experiences, encouraging the development of communication and interpersonal skills. Outdoor education has a great number of advantages: it increases the degree of active participation, of effective involvement of the child in his own learning, it facilitates the process of education, offering a chance at success to children who usually have low school performance and encounter learning difficulties. Not only these children have part of the benefits of these activities. We note with sadness and concernment that, as time goes by, the number of children with special educational needs (those with behavioral disorders in particular) is increasing. Developing in a different environment than the usual, children become more motivated to engage in the tasks proposed and they manage to integrate better into the community.

The activities developed outside school, through their specifics, are more attractive, developing children curiosity. Children, the smaller they are (but not only them!), the more they want to be involved in any activity; for them it is very important both aspects - the process and the product.

Saint Augustine used to say that we are not of any use just to listen to the teachings, it is important to live them. So, we can affirm that important is not the information, but being able to get the information we need. This aspect highlights the fact that outdoor activities target child's personal and social development. Experiential learning that underlies this type of activities, aimed at both the child's socialization and the gradual obtaining of personal autonomy. Regarding child's socialization, communication and collaboration between children, negotiation, taking decision in common are important. Outdoor education leverages/ highlights the experiences of children, leads to develop strategies in order to achieve the desired result and encourages teamwork and self-discipline.

1.2. Outdoor education in preschool education

For the kindergarten teachers the most handy and most accessible environment is the nature. Children love nature, they are interested in everything that surrounds them, and have an unstoppable curiosity. Taking this into account, we can say that outdoor activities target also attitudes and behaviours changing in regard to the environment. Although at general level it encourages keeping the cleaning of nature and it makes public the harmful effects of pollution of air, soil, water, if the child does not form small habits regarding environmental health, it will be quite difficult to intervene for removal of undesirable behaviors. It happens that these aspects aren't learnt in the family, this task being awarded to teacher with the entry of the child into the collectivity. Outdoor type activities encourage healthy behaviours with respect to the environment, offering the possibility of direct contact with it (Cătunele Local Council, n.d.).

Both the preschoolers and the schoolers at all levels education spend quite a long time in the classroom. Outdoor activities are preferred by children mainly because the environment is more relaxing, without the constraints imposed by the classroom and because it offers many challenges. This kind of

activities offers gratitude and joy to the children's parents too, not few times proved to be too unsatisfied with the short time spent in nature - in the kindergarten yard, in particular.

2. Main Body

Outdoor education starts beyond the classroom door and takes place both in nature and in other environments than the school. Outdoor type activities are, for example, hiking, excursions, visits to the different spaces: neighborhoods, forests, shopping malls, cultural, etc. Of note is that, although they take place within the official education institutions, outdoor activities target school learning content, and put the children/ students in front of some research environment, of exploration, experimentation and implementation of knowledge. In the opinion of Cucuș (2012), outdoor learning is not only a new place of learning; it involves a change of optics, an unusual philosophy of action, insight into learning, a high permissiveness for experiential acquisition and by putting in situation.

Activities „outside the classroom” have input on many directions. Because they takes place outside the group/class, they are more attractive, becoming free of routine and the constraints imposed by „the four walls of the classroom” and providing a more relaxing environment, with numerous challenges. Thanks to the stimulating learning climate, children/students who are experiencing learning difficulties, which have a lower level of performance or those with undesirable behaviors are encouraged and helped, increasing their degree of motivation. Through their specificity, outdoor activities aim at personal and social development of the preschool/school children, encourage practicing their volitional and sensory potential, the development of team spirit (interactions between children and children-teachers stimulating active participation), of initiative and autonomy. Outdoor education also carries out the principle of linking theory to practice, by applying the knowledge stipulated in the curriculum for pre-school education and in school curriculums. Moreover, it highlights past experiences of children, offering joy and satisfaction in learning (Gilbertson, Bates, McLaughlin, & Ewert, 2006).

2.1. Outdoor education concept

The concept of „outdoor education” is relatively new in the context of the Romanian education system, however, it is starting to become a topic of interest for teachers. Outdoor activities are defined as experiential learning activities, which are conducted outside of the group/ class. In other words, outdoor education involves the realization of educational process in other spaces than school. National Association of Outdoor Education from United Kingdom defines outdoor education as a means of addressing the educational objectives through direct experience, guided by the external environment, using its resources as learning materials (Rubens, 1997).

At the core of literature regarding outdoor education there were principles, definitions and concepts proposed and substantiated by British, American and Australian schools. References to the meaning of outdoor education-outdoor activities-in the writings of some teachers, such as J. A. Comenius, J. Dewey, J. Locke, J. J. Rousseau, J. H. Pestalozzi.

The current named Experimental Education founded the grounding of the concept of „outdoor education”. Association for Experiential Education defines experiential education as a process whereby

the person who teaches forms their knowledge, skills and values through direct experience (Rubens, 1997).

Priest attempted to represent the model of outdoor education through a tree (Figure 01). The stem is represented by outdoor education, which detaches into two main branches: education for adventure and education for environment. The first is responsible for interpersonal relations and intrapersonale. Education for environment involves ecological studies and target ecosystem and ekistic relationships. The leaves of the tree represents the experiential learning and, like the leaves of the trees in the process of photosynthesis, these leaves are receiving energy from the sun and draw nutrients from the air and from the ground. In this case, the sun represents the external environment, which gives inspiration to all parts of the tree. The air contains the interdisciplinary curriculum, upon which rests the outdoor education programme and, as is the exchange of oxygen and carbon dioxide with the atmosphere, exchange of information occurs frequently between process and curriculum. The tree is firmly anchored in the soil through the roots. The ground, in this case, holds the five senses (visual, auditory, tactile, olfactory, gustatory) and intuition, plus the three domains of learning. Experiential learning process draws the direction from those senses and fields. (Priest, 1986, p. 14)

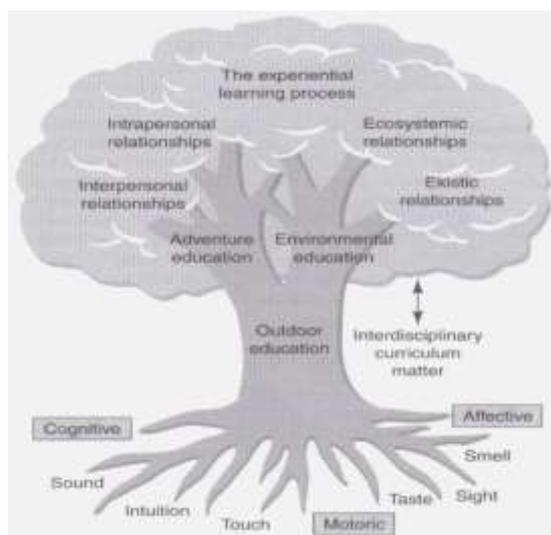


Figure 01. Outdoor education tree (Priest, 1986)

In our opinion, outdoor education refers to all actions undertaken by the teacher for the purpose of organising, structuring and carrying out the tasks of learning for the child, based on experiential learning, outside the classroom, which aims at training and developing some desirable skills, attitudes and behaviours regarding environment at preschoolers and pupils.

2.2. Outdoor education in Romanian education system

In the context of the Romanian education system, outdoor education has encountered a number of difficulties. First, it doesn't exist a unity of views regarding to what mean outdoor activities, so the meaning and specifics of such activities is still unclear. Also, there are no laws to support the conduct of such activities or curriculum support for their implementing. Another weak point is the lack of funds for

the implementation of activities; these activities are more expensive, and the educational institutions do not have the money to support them financially, in the same situation being the parents, who have a weaker material situation or are not willing to “invest”. We note that there is no interest for local development and the social partnership is almost non-existent. At the level of the education system, we note that teachers are not prepared to successfully conduct this kind of activities; the training of teachers with regard to this type of education doesn’t exist. To this obstacle there are added: the reluctance of teachers, the lack of cooperation and of constructive communication between them. Lastly, but not least important, is the fact that outdoor activities involve a number of risks that teachers don’t assume. All these are weaknesses of outdoor education faced by teachers in our country and which, unfortunately, are not encouraged to undertake such activities. While no decisions are made at a high level in order to determine the place that this type of education deserve and teachers, regardless of educational level at which they teach, are not encouraged, we are stagnating on a territory that could be greatly improved.

Being adjunct to the school content and providing experiences for their understanding and implementation, outdoor activities can be planned, integrated and carried out successfully within all experiential areas referred to in the preschool curriculum: the field of Language and communication, the field of Sciences (activities of environmental knowledge and mathematics), the field of Man and society, the field Aesthetics and creativity (artistic and music activities) and Psychomotric field.

3. Methodology

This theoretical work is based on specialized articles. The project „EcoEdu beyond rhetoric”, developed in Cătunele, Romania, also stands at the base of the work; it aimed at training teachers in outdoor education (Cătunele Local Council, s.a). These electronic sources have been used because they aim at redefining the concept of outdoor education and present the history of this concept.

4. Conclusion

The integrated kindergarten activities, like the ones from school, take place in the same formal space. Even though outdoor activities are conducted outside the classroom, they can be integrated successfully, along with experiential field in the daily program of preschoolers. Activities specific to outdoor education have benefits on mental and emotional health of preschoolers too. They come in addition to the usual activities without minimising them, on the contrary, they offer greater value, acting in the interests and for the welfare of the child. Outdoor activities can improve school performance of children. Through their integration in the experiential fields stipulated in the preschool curriculum, children will be able to better understand their knowledge and they will be accustomed to think critically.

Although at kindergarten level, outdoor activities are easier, they increasing in complexity with the age of the participants, there are a number of reasons that encourage us to conduct this kind of activities, being assured that simple does not mean artificial or of poor quality, but adapted for children’s needs and for their understanding ability. Outdoor activities offer an insight into how preschoolers interact - communication quality, possible integration problems, assuming responsibilities, cooperation level, development of strategies for solving problems, etc. Furthermore each activity brings new learning experiences, ensuring applicability of theoretical knowledge and interdisciplinarity. Outdoor activities

helps to identify the skills and inclinations of preschoolers, children having the opportunity to seek solutions in their own manner, some of them showing leadership skills. Based on a set of knowledge and living new learning experiences, children reorganise or form new cognitive schemas and scripts.

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