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TEACHERS' VIEWS ON OUTDOOR EDUCATION IN
PRESCHOOL EDUCATION

Adela-Simina Câmpan (a)*, Muşata Bocoş (b)

*Corresponding author

(a) Babeş-Bolyai University, Faculty of Psychology and Educational 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

Outdoor education is at the beginning of the road in Romania. We know that in other countries like Great Britain, Scotland, Scandinavian countries, Australia, New Zealand, USA and others, outdoor education has been given the proper status in the last period. Is the pre-university education system in our country prepared to do outdoor activities? Can they be done with preschoolers? To what extent and how? This study attempts to highlight the views of preschool teachers on outdoor education. The study highlights both the theoretical aspects (for example, personal definitions of the outdoor education concept) and practical aspects (for example, how do teachers think that outdoor activities in the kindergarten should be carried out, possible difficulties encountered, strengths and weaknesses in running this type of activity with preschools). The study also aims to establish the possible relationship between the profile and the status of the teacher and its opinion on outdoor education. The study involved 198 preschool teachers from 7 counties in Romania. This study is part of a broader research underlying the PhD thesis „Promoting experiential pedagogy through outdoor activities in preschool education”, conducted within the Doctoral School „Education, Reflection, Development”, Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences, Babeş-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca.

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1. Introduction

Our proposed and carried out research aims to investigate the formative and informative valences of an educational intervention program based on experiential outdoor activities in pre-school education at preschoolers (5-6 years old). We chose outdoor activities because they are a novelty element for the Romanian education system and which, in our opinion, can contribute to the formation and development of the child, responding to his needs of knowledge, movement and affection.

The study below is the basis for this research. In order to identify the valences of outdoor activities, we wanted to find out what the pre-school education teachers views are about. We believe that carrying out outdoor activities in the kindergarten is a plus value for both preschoolers and pre-school education system itself.

In Gilbertson, Bates, McLaughlin, and Ewert's (2006) views, outdoor education is considered a special area: the environment is different, the palette of participants is multicolored, and staff trained to do so must have a wide range of knowledge and skills. Kolb and Kolb (2017) claim that becoming an experiential teacher is a great art.

In our opinion, carrying out experiential outdoor activities aims at learning in practice, offering, due to their specificity, the possibility of active involvement of all preschoolers to a greater extent. Activities are different from those with which pre-school children are familiar, and the venue becomes a huge field of challenges.

2. Problem Statement

The teacher's questionnaire was designed by us and it was applied in September-October 2018, in the pre-experimental stage of our research, which is the basis of the PhD thesis "Promoting Experienced Pedagogy through Outdoor Activities in Preschool Education". This research tool was completed by 198 pre-school teachers (both urban and rural), which are active in Cluj, Sălaj, Bistrița-Năsăud, Hunedoara, Alba, Suceava and Mureș counties from the Romania's territory.

3. Research Questions

The research questions that directed our study are:

- What are the most successful ways of carrying out outdoor activities in the pre-school daily program?
- What are the main barriers that can be identified in educational practice in terms of outdoor activities in pre-school education?

4. Purpose of the Study

The application of the questionnaire was aimed at highlighting teachers' opinions on outdoor education in pre-school education.

5. Research Methods

The research method we use is the questionnaire survey. Regarding this method, depending on how the interviewed subjects provided answers, the investigation is indirect, with the answers written; as a research tool we used the questionnaire.

6. Findings

The questionnaire designed by us targets 25 items. In order to obtain both quantitative and qualitative data, we formulated objective, semi-objective and subjective items. We asked the teachers information about their profile (the name of the kindergarten, the county, the place of origin, the initials of the name and surname, the age, the status, the age in the education, the last didactic degree, the group they teach), and personal opinions on the concept of “outdoor education” (if they have heard of this concept, how they define it, if they consider that carrying out outdoor education an achievable objective in the Romanian education system, the experiential areas on which outdoor activities are mainly focused, if they believe that the systematic outdoor activities would be in favor of preschoolers, which would be the optimal frequency of activities, if they believe that pre-school children would be interested in participating in outdoor activities and what age level they consider more appropriate, the difficulties encountered in carrying out this type of activities, if training is needed for the teachers in this area, the strengths and weaknesses of the outdoor activities in the kindergarten, as well as aspects related to the motivation of the teachers to carry out these activities).

Table 01 showing the number of schools and teachers involved in completing the questionnaire for each county.

Table 01. Statistical data on education units and participating teachers

County	No. of education units, from which:		No. of teachers:
	Urban	Rural	
Cluj	23		34
	21	2	
Sălaj	22		29
	17	5	
Bistrița-Năsăud	16		38
	10	6	
Hunedoara	2		5
	2	0	
Alba	20		24
	14	6	
Suceava	9		16
	7	2	
Mureș	37		52
	21	16	
TOTAL	127		198

We find that the lowest number of completed questionnaires belongs to Hunedoara County, representing 3% of the total number of questionnaires, and the highest number of teachers involved in

filling in the questionnaire belongs to Mureș County, which obtained 26% of the total percentage. Here is the distribution of answers received in counties (Figure 01).

Concerning the age of the participating teachers, the highest share is between 36-40 years (26%), followed by teachers aged 41-45 (20%). In the middle interval we find, with a weight of 14%, teachers aged between 31-35 years and over 50 years. On equal terms, with 10%, we find the first two categories of age mentioned, 19-25 years and 26-30 years. The lowest percentage is recorded by teachers aged 46-50 years - 6%.

As far as the status of teachers is concerned, 87% of the teachers who completed the questionnaire are titular and 11% are qualified substitutes. The percentage of 2% is represented by teachers who are unqualified substitutes.

Analyzing the results of the teacher seniority, the highest percentage is represented by 15-20 year-olds (20%), immediately followed by those older than 25 years old (19%). Proximate percentages were in the 20-25 years (17%), 10-15 years (16%) and 0-5 years (16%) categories. The smallest percentage we found was represented by teachers 5-10 years seniority (12%).

Analyzing the distribution of the teaching staff according to the last didactic degree obtained, we can show the following results: 54% of the teaching staff are in the didactical degree I, 23% obtained the didactic degree II and 17% obtained definitivatul. The lowest percentage belongs to debutants.

As far as the group they teach, 32% of the teachers involved are teaching in the big group (children aged 5-6), 27% teach to the middle group (children aged 4-5), with a lower percentage being the ones in the small group (children aged 3-4), and the 15% is represented by the teaching staff teaching in the combined group (children aged 3-6).

When asked if they heard of outdoor education, 98% of teachers said they knew this concept, while 2% said they did not hear about outdoor education.

The next item was an open response, asking teachers to define the concept of outdoor education. For most of the teachers, outdoor education means open-air education. Most of the definitions focus on the location of this type of activity - the environment. Also, in defining this concept, it has been suggested that outdoor education offers many challenges for adventure learning. In addition, teachers believe that this type of activity is characterized by creativity, freedom and leisure. One of the teachers mentioned the importance of using the senses in doing outdoor activities. The diagram below outlines some of the ideas surprised by the teachers' definitions and highlights a number of outdoor education features.



Figure 01. The concept of "outdoor education"

Although we share some of the ideas mentioned in the definitions, we have found that there are also confusions. If for some teachers, outdoor education only focuses on practical aspects, other teachers believe that it aims at assimilation of knowledge, apprehension, and skills. There are also blurring about the form of education to which it belongs: there are teachers who are adept at formal, non-formal or informal education. One of the definitions misleads the role of the teacher as well as the venue, as can be seen in the following definition: “[outdoor education targets] a set of noninterventional activities whereby the educator leaves nature or other extracurricular backgrounds to hall-mark upon the self-development of the child”. Outdoor activities are not non-interference activities, the teacher / instructor performs intentional, conscious and organized activities; he leaves nature to make its contribution to the development of the child, using its resources, but not in a chaotic way. Moreover, outdoor education takes place in the natural environment, not in cultural and sports institutions, as it is mentioned in another definition.

Regarding the implementation of outdoor education in the educational system in Romania, 87% of the teachers consider that the implementation of outdoor education is an achievable objective in the education system in our country, 5% do not agree with this statement and 8% of the teachers states that they do not know / are reserved regarding this aspect. Teachers are reluctant or do not see this objective feasible due to several reasons:

- reluctance of some teachers and parents about change
- the large number of preschoolers in a group
- the lack / insufficiency of care staff
- the lack of training of teachers in the field of outdoor education
- the need to elaborate several documents for the outgoing units
- parents’ attitude towards outdoor activities during cold periods
- the lack of financial resources needed to carry out outdoor activities.

These variables may block the implementation and conduct of this type of activity. We note that these relate to both the educational system as a whole and the educational partners.

To the question about the experiential areas on which the outdoor activities were mainly focused, we obtained the following results. We note that, in teachers' opinion, the field of Science focuses mostly on outdoor activities. Psihomotric and Human and Society also received a great deal of appreciation. We find that the last two positions are the Aesthetic and Creative areas and Language and Communication. The latter is, according to the choices made, the area on which outdoor activities are focused to the smallest extent. Please note that this item has had the opportunity to choose a maximum of 3 alternatives.

To the question that teachers believe that the systematic development of outdoor activities would be in favor of preschoolers, 96% of the teachers responded affirmatively, 1% responded negatively, and 3% were reluctant about the contribution of outdoor activities to preschoolers.

The next item asked the teachers to give their opinion on the optimal frequency of outdoor activities. Nearly half of the teachers consider it to be the most desirable to carry out this type of activity once a week, followed by an almost equal number of teachers who appreciate the optimal frequency as 2-3 times a week. A lower number of teachers think that it is appropriate to do outdoor activities once a month, while the views of other teachers are turning to other variants, such as: daily, 1-2 times / week, at least once / week, once every 2 weeks, once / semester, whenever the opportunity arises, depending on the weather, time and facilities offered by the area where the kindergarten is located.

Regarding the interest of preschoolers in their involvement in outdoor activities, 98% of the teachers expressed their agreement, while 2% of them think that they do not know the interest of preschoolers in this type of activity.

As far as teachers' views on successful outdoor activities are concerned at a certain age, 26% of teachers believe that age is an important milestone in this respect, while 68% of them are that the success of outdoor activities does not depend on age. A 6% of teachers are reluctant to answer this question.

Of the teachers who responded affirmatively to the previous question, 60% consider the most appropriate age for successful outdoor activities to be 5-6 years old; 29% of them consider the 4-5 years as the most appropriate for this type of activity, while 11% of teachers opt for the age of 3-4 years.

The following point addresses the possible difficulties that teachers think they would encounter in planning, organizing and conducting outdoor activities. For this item, teachers have been able to choose all applicable variants or suggest others. We find that the lack of kindergarten funds and the lack of a support curriculum for organizing this kind of activities are the main difficulties identified. Also, the lack of formal regulations on this concept, as well as the risks of outdoor education, are difficulties that may pull back outdoor activities. A large number of choices had the option regarding the lack of professional training of teachers in this field. Difficulties have been reported and the lack of care staff, as well as the reluctance of teachers and parents to learn about outdoor education.

Regarding the professional training of the teaching staff in this field, 81% of the teachers consider it imperative, 14% think there is no need, and 5% of the teachers have been reserved to answer this question.

The next two items aimed at identifying the strengths and weaknesses of outdoor activities in the kindergarten. The synthesized results are shown in the table 2 below:

Table 02. Strengths and weaknesses of outdoor activities in the kindergarten

Strengths	Weaknesses
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - personal development (increasing self-esteem); - emotional development; - social development (team spirit, cooperation); - cognitive development (knowledge enrichment, immediate applicability); - motor development; - creative development, motivation; - attractive, flexible, varied, interesting, innovative activities; - encouragement of well-being; - health promotion (eg healthy lifestyle, development of immunity); - focus on experiential learning; - active, interactive, constructive learning; - familiarizing children with the natural environment; - innovative educational environment; - encouraging desirable behaviors; - value interdisciplinarity; - the opportunity to overcome the difficulties for all children, including those with special educational needs; - encouraging desirable behaviors; - involvement of educational partners; - the possibility to discover new interests and skills. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - the large number of children in a group; - possible accidents; - lack of the care staff; - lack of the funds of the kindergarten and the parents; - lack of professional training of educators in the field of outdoor activity; - the parents' attitude towards the proposed activities; - lack of teachers' experience; - teachers' prejudices; - lack of a support curriculum; - lack of a clear legislation; - lack of population's education in terms of ensuring the safety of pre-school groups outside the educational unit; - the weather conditions; - the multitude of documents required for the exits from the unit; - the need for a more careful preparation of the activity; - reluctance for new of the teachers; - lack of school buses; - the children's sensitivity to environmental factors; - the presence of a large number of stimuli that distract the attention of preschoolers; - lack of adequate equipment; - lack of green space in the kindergarten / of the materials needed for activities.

Analyzing the strengths, we can argue that the formative and informative valences of outdoor education on children are acknowledged and accepted by teachers; it has a multitude of advantages, aimed at multilateral development of preschoolers. Regarding the weaknesses, we find that some of them also appeared in the category of difficulties encountered in carrying out this kind of activities. We note that a number of weaknesses relate to the personality of the educator and the parents. We encounter the reluctance for new of teachers and parents.

The last item is about aspects that motivate teachers to do outdoor activities. In this item, teachers could choose all applicable variants, having the option to add the answer if they considered it necessary. We find that the elements that would motivate teachers to carry out outdoor activities the most are the need to bring children closer to the environment and the opportunity to carry out experiential learning activities. There were considered motivating both the change of the learning environment and the joy of a successful, attractive activity. The desire for affirmation and the creation of well-being had the fewest choices. Please note that the latter was proposed by a teacher, not on the list we proposed.

7. Conclusion

Analyzing the answers to the profile of the teacher, we found that the instrument proposed by us was completed by teachers of all ages with a harmonious career path. It was gratifying for us to find out that out that we received answers from 37 rural education units, which indicates that regardless of the county, there is concern about this subject regardless of the environment of origin.

Regarding teachers' opinions on the issue of outdoor education, we noticed that there is confusion about the direction of outdoor education, which is why we consider it imperative to have a continuous training course for teachers to familiarize them with this concept.

Although teachers have found it to be beneficial to carry out systematic outdoor activities, many of the difficulties they may encounter slow down their implementation. We also believe that there are a number of elements that pull back this kind of activities that do not depend on the teachers, so we think there should be:

- official regulations that will give the outdoor education the proper status
- support curriculum for carrying out outdoor activities
- professional training of teachers (eg continuous training) in the field of outdoor activities
- funds allocated for the systematic development of outdoor activities.

These difficulties were also identified in the project „EcoEdu beyond rhetoric”, coordinated by Liliana Bucică, Dana Lorena Bran, Gheorghita Caranda, Nazan Turan and it was co-financed by the European Commission through The Sectorial Programme Comenius Regio (Cătunele Local Council, n.d.).

It is sad and worrying that on both the list of difficulties and the weaknesses we find negative aspects regarding both teachers and parents. Reluctance on the new, the lack of initiative and interest of teachers, as well as the excessive concern of parents regarding the exposure of children to environmental factors regardless of weather conditions, to the possible illnesses of children, sums up their activity to what is happening in the group room. Louv (2011) highlighted the distancing of children to the natural environment through lack of direct contact with nature. Taking into account the difficult transition from the classroom to the natural environment, T. Walker recommends teachers to bring nature first into the room and then go out in nature (Walker, 2018).

We have found that the impact of outdoor education on preschool children and their relationships with the environment and the people they interact with is recognized. At the level of all the counties involved, we noticed that the same benefits of outdoor activities and the same problems were identified. Teachers in all counties face the same situation, regardless of location or background environment.

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