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**The Importance of Non-Formal Education  
and the Role of NGOs in its Promotion**

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**Abstract:** Non-formal education it is still a vague concept in our country but has begun to become more and more important especially after Romania's accession to the European Union. Although its development has taken small steps until now, we already see its importance not as a substitute but as a supplementary segment of formal education. The labor market today is more and more demandable, the competition between candidates is acerbic and the need for proving specific skills and competencies has gain a great importance. We cannot neglect the benefits and the added-value that non-formal activities can bring to the personal and professional development neither its contribution to the under-privileged groups. The NGOs remain the main providers of non-formal education and they should raise the awareness towards this educational component.

**Keywords:** intercultural dialogue; life-learning; skills; competences

*Motto: "Education is what survives when what has been learned has been forgotten"*

*B.F. Skinner*

## **1. Introduction**

Non-formal education is a concept very-well known and promoted in Western European countries and has known a real boom over the past few decades. The reason why it has been given so much attention to this segment of the education is that it has been acknowledged that formal education cannot supply anymore what young people need for their personal and professional development. Although we still witness a monopoly of formal education institutions, non-formal education contributes more and more to the life-learning process and to the development of human capital. Non-formal education first appeared as a concept in the late 80's when it has been noticed and agreed that formal education by itself cannot lead to the development of the society and cannot respond to learning needs and requirements of the labour market.

In Romania it is still acknowledged like an abstract concept with few areas of applicability in comparison to formal education programs and methods. The main question remains whether the curricula provided by the schools it is enough in order to prepare students for labor market and help them correspond to its demands. The skills and competencies acquired through non-formal education programs can make the difference between thousands of law students, for example that finish their studies every year. The Romanian educational system should not regard non-formal education as being less important than academic education but invest in it as a supplementary way for students to acquire personal and professional performances.

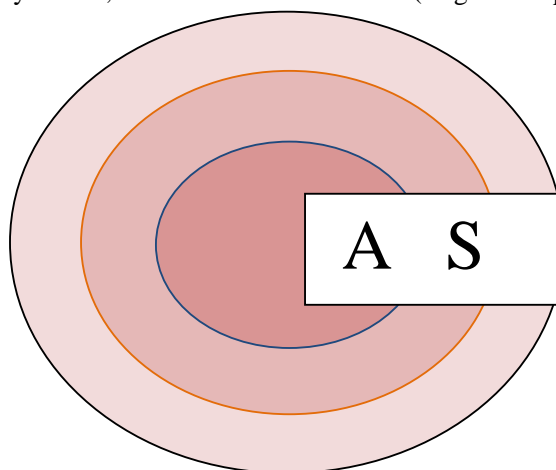
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## 2. Formal, Informal and Non-Formal Education. Features

The impact and the added-value of non-formal education in nowadays societies has been highlighted by institutions like UNESCO, the Council of Europe and the European Commission that have tried to create an inventory of features, principles, methods, and activities that run in the sphere on this concept. For example, UNESCO (1997) defines it in comparison with formal education pointing that informal education may take place both within and outside educational institutions and....depending on country context it may cover educational programs to impart adult literacy, basic education for out-of-school children, life-skills, work-skills and general culture. The Council of Europe (1999) also defines non-formal education in correlation with the traditional forms of education mentioning that it has to be placed outside but supplementary to the formal education curriculum ...and it is designed to improve the range of skills and competencies of young people. As for the European Union, non-formal education as a method of life-long learning is essential taking into consideration the need for active citizenship and improving employability (European Commission, 2001).

In comparison to formal education, non-formal education is neither chronological, hierarchical or addressed to a certain segment of the population. The interaction between the two concepts is seen as three concentrically circles, known as the ASK Model (Aegea Europe, 2008).



These are the three pillars of education: attitude, skills and knowledge. While academic education focuses on the exterior component, knowledge non-formal comprises the second two and integrates the information you already have in order to discover what you can do with them for your personal and professional development. The pattern also illustrates the fact that one circle of knowledge is not enough for the development of students and cannot prepare them for living in a community and obtaining a job. In order to achieve these objectives, learning has to comprise a cognitive dimension, a social dimension and a practical one.

Non-formal and formal education should be linked in order to achieve the best educational results for the youth. A first attempt to create a bridge between this two was made by the Council of Europe that published in 1995 the Education Pack “All different – All equal”. In the Communication on Lifelong Learning: formal, non-formal and informal learning published by the European Commission (2001) the three types of education are being differentiate as it follows:

Formal education	Informal education	Non-formal education
Structured and planned Intentional from the learner's perspective Leads to certification	Not structured Non-intentional Does not lead to certification	Structured Intentional from the learner's perspective Typically doesn't lead to certification

The main feature of non-formal education is linked to the development and the diversification of the educational dimensions over the past few years. The free-access provided by this form of education is a great opportunity for the children whose families don't have enough possibilities to keep in school. Also it reaches some under-privileged categories of young people such those living in the countryside, those abandoned and those with physical or mental handicap. Also, the programs provided are based on the active participation of those involved and it responds to certain needs and objectives established on a common ground with all the participants. Real life experiences are being reproduced so that you learn by doing not only by listening without knowing how to put something that you've learn in a context.

### **3. Principles and Characteristics**

We can distinguish two levels when we consider the results of non-formal education activities: the personal level and the social one. At the personal level we can identify results as self-esteem, self-awareness, involvement in community life, becoming more responsible toward yourself and others, more creative, more motivated. On the social level, the impact is also major and we can mention for example social inclusion, active citizenship, communication skills, networking, tolerance, etc.

We can also experience the "learn to learn" concept that encourages active studying through participation in role plays, games and simulations. You can easily reproduce situations that involve teamwork, language skills, public speaking skills or leadership and these soft skills are not yet offered the necessary importance by the curricula thought in Romanian schools today.

If we take a look over one of the European Union mottos we can see the importance shown to the **unity in diversity**, a Pan-European identity that can be achieved through intercultural learning, a major component of non-formal education. The mobility offered by youth projects such as Youth in Action, raises the awareness of young people in Europe about cultural diversity, encourages tolerance towards participants from other cultures and creates a feeling of belonging that prevents racism and xenophobia. Thus, young people can explore new countries, create relationships with people their age from all over the world and in the end this feeling of empathy and tolerance transforms them in enthusiastic promoters of human rights.

According to the European Commission and the Council of Europe (2004), the principles and characteristics of non-formal education are: voluntary and self-organised character of learning,, intrinsic motivation of participants, close link to young people's interests and aspirations, participative and learner-centred approach, supportive learning environment.

The recognition of the importance and impact of non-formal education is made by the Council of Europe through the Resolution of the Council and of the Representatives of the Governments of the Member States, meeting within the Council, on the recognition of the value of non-formal and informal learning within the European youth field. In this document it is mentioned that both formal and non-formal types of education enable young people to acquire additional knowledge, skills and competences and contribute to their personal development, social inclusion and active citizenship, thereby improving their employment prospects (Council of the European Union, 2006).

### **4. Importance for Students Access to Labor Market**

If we take a look to recent statistics we notice that, the youth unemployment rate in the EU 27 was around twice as high as the rate for the total population throughout the last decade and youth rates are generally much higher than unemployment rates for all ages (EUROSTAT, 2012). These numbers are highly concerning and give a signal of alarm concerning the lack of correlation between the education provided by formal education institutions and the requirement of the labor market. This explains in

fact the appearance of non-formal education programs as a result of the fact that the output of school classes is incompatible with the requirements of the employers.

In almost any job advertisement we see requirements like specific skills and competencies in addition to a certain academic background. In this case, NGOs have an important role in providing special programs and activities that develop the skills required and create equal opportunities for everyone interested in some kind of job. A student's CV with extra-curricular activities it has become more attractive to an employer that searches for employees with team spirit, great communication skills, respectful and self-determined to get their job done and reach their goals. Students participating in non-formal education programs can increase their chances to get their dream job and extending their connections and their list of potential employers by participating at different workshops, conferences, internships, traineeships. It has been proven that participating in programs like that and acquiring leadership competences, communication skills, organizational and social competences makes students more prepared for the professional life, more engaged citizens (as they) follow democratic and organizational value and practices (Atanasiu&Olteanu, 2010).

## **5. Methods and Activities**

According to the Council of Europe Symposium on NFE Report, appeared in 2001, there are four kinds of methods involved by non-formal education activities: communication – based methods, activity-based methods, socially-focused methods and self-directed methods. The first type focuses on interaction between participants, intercultural dialogue, conflict resolution, etc. The second one is based on experiments, simulation activities or different role-play while socially-focused methods imply teamwork, networking, etc. The self-directed methods it is focused on the participant that tries to become more involved in its activities, more responsible, discover his professional and personal objectives or develop his analytical thinking and creativity.

There is a wide range of activities implied by non-formal education, most of them recreating real life experiences. Every game or activity is supposed to develop a certain skill or transmit a certain message. For example, you can develop collaboration activities that are based especially on group interaction, leadership and teamwork games that involve coordinating a team, offering feedback, giving or receiving instructions, problem solving situations. In order to keep the cohesion of the group and encourage active participation we can propose ice-breaking and energizing games.

## **6. Future Development. The Role of NGOs in its Future Development**

Nowadays, NGOs are the main providers of non-formal education through their project and programs. This role implies the promotion of this kind of activities among a wide number of young people and raising awareness on the impact and importance of non-formal education in schools, universities, public institutions and business sector. They also should encourage lobby activities in order to incorporate non-formal education methodologies into the traditional curricula provided by formal education institutions. On the other side it is important for NGOs to make their activities accessible and attractive to all sorts of target groups in order to cover a wide area of domains.

NGOs should ensure the promotion of non-formal education activities and methods through the media and all the communication channels available such as socialization groups, forums, etc.

The Centre for Academic Excellence as a provider of non-formal education activities aims at developing human capital and strengthens personal and professional development of students outside the programs provided by Romanian universities. Thus, we try to facilitate access to relevant information for youth (scholarships, internships and jobs), to mobilize public and private resources in order to implement youth oriented programs and to offer professional guidance. The Centre has established numerous partnerships with institutions and organization with similar principles and reunites elite academia that share common values with respect to the necessity of developing

innovative methods in order to further improve academic progress, both by means of practice and research. Thus, we are creating a link between formal education as provided by the universities and non-formal activities that should be regarded as complementary not opposite types of education.

## 7. Conclusion

In the society of knowledge we cannot ignore the role of non-formal education in the development of persons and societies. We must create bridges between the traditional methods of education and non-formal ones in order to provide young people all the skills and competences required for them to integrate in the labor market. NGOs should develop projects and programs aimed at obtaining recognition and provide certification for non-formal education activities. The opportunities offered by the “European mobility” should be exploited in order for the next generation to become more and more aware of the democratic values, active citizenship, tolerance and intercultural dialogue.

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