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Alternative methods of learning during the summer schools for children from different environments

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Abstract

This paper presents alternative educational methods used for teaching children during the summer school. The aims of this approach were: understanding the complex issues associated with the process of learning during the holidays and the necessity of approaching differently children from different environments (urban space or rural space). In the last six years the nongovernmental association "Alternative Education" organized summer schools for children in Lugoj, Timiș, Romania, and in the last three years in different villages from Timiș County. The paper describes the methods, how they were used and the outcomes. The analysis of the process reveals that it is needed to adapt the methodology to the environment of the children in order to achieve the most efficient interactive learning process.

Keywords: Alternative educational methods, summer schools, children in need, poverty.

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1. Introduction

Since the eighteenth century, the child's education and growth have been a continuous challenge. Friedrich Frobel (1782-1852), who is considered the founder of early childhood education, became famous after introducing the concept "learn through play" and inventing the word "kindergarten". Ever since, many psychologists, teachers, and architects continued this research, studying aspects related to education (Șchiopu, Verza, 1995), the child's psychology (Morrand-De-Joffry, 2004; Piaget & Inhelder, 2005), life's stages and important factors in their emotional growth, but also the impact of the architectural environment on children's perception (Scott, 2010; Marcu, 2005).

Poverty has a tremendous effect on children; the miserable conditions of the slums in the big cities of the world destroy the childhood of millions of children, having an adverse effect on their physical, mental, emotional and spiritual growth. According to UNICEF reports, millions of children in the urban areas live in extreme poverty, facing terrible conditions. In the UNICEF report from May 2012, Romania turned out to be the country with the highest percentage of children living in poverty, 25.5% in relationship with the rest of the countries which were included in the research. This study included 35 member states of the European Union or the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (UNICEF, 2012).

Children who live in a poor and underdeveloped environment represent a real issue we can only understand up to a very limited extent, strictly based on the situation in Europe or in our country. The most disastrous effects of poverty; children, adolescents and young people suffering from various malformations and diseases, without access to education and the opportunity to acquire job skills are mostly registered in Africa and parts of Asia. Childhood deprivations have catastrophic and long-lasting effects on children, leading to the impairment of their intellectual and physical capacity. Children at risk often have problems such as physical and mental underdevelopment, health problems, addictions (drugs, alcohol), problems caused by the lack of affection, emotional and cognitive development impairment, incapacity to control their violent behavior and education problems since they are not used to obeying rules. There is no remedy for these effects later during their adult life, only in rare cases, but not completely. Often this remedy involves high costs that definitely outweigh the costs that would help to prevent these effects.

The incapacity to stop the emergence of new cases of children at-risk is due to the already existent vicious circle: poor parents raise children in poverty and deprivation conditions and these children will have their children of their own who will grow up in the same conditions. The key to breaking this vicious circle is focusing on this current generation of children. It requires investments to be able to break this chain and give them the opportunity to live their life in normal circumstances, to stop the perpetuation of this phenomenon and to prevent cases of new children at risk.

2. Methodology

2.1. Premises and assumptions

One of the main rights of children, according to the "Convention of the Rights of the Child" article 28, is the right to education (United Nations, 2015) This right of the children is undermined by the inequality and poverty conditions in certain urban areas. It is estimated that in developing countries more than 200 million children under 5 years fail to reach their full cognitive potential. In Romania, children in poor areas who are exposed to poverty, poor nutrition, and other deprivations give up education at the age of 12; this step will guide their evolution in society and even society's development (UNICEF & IRC, 2013)

In 2011, in Romania, there were 400 172 children between 3 to 17 years old who weren't attending any form of education.

This article provides a case study on the summer schools' activities organized by the association Alternative Education in Lugoj, in urban and rural areas, involving children of different social

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conditions. The focus is on how this alternative education method can be used in order to prevent new cases of children at risk and how it can be used for their rehabilitation.

2.2. Subjects and methods

The non-governmental association Alternative Education in Lugoj, organizes summer school courses in Lugoj dedicated to children between 5 and 10 years since 2011. These activities have been organized for 6 years. Each year, more than 100 children participated in these summer school activities, and the attendance percentage in the following year is about 90%. Since 2013, similar summer school activities have been organized in rural areas; in Petra Mare in 2013 and 2014 and approximately 50 children participated each year. In 2016 in the Criciova commune (villages Cireșu and Jdioara) another summer school was organized an approximately 40 children participated.

5 members of the association and around 10 volunteer students were involved in organizing the activities of these summer schools. The workshops were conducted without the physical participation of parents. During these summer schools the following workshops were organized: creative, educational and recreational workshops: English, craft, general knowledge, theater, dance, culinary workshop, entertainment, gardening, etc.

2.2.1. Theme and objectives of the activities

The main objectives of these summer schools were:

- Stimulating the voluntary involvement of children in educational and recreational activities, promoting and valuing their individual and group potential, and acquiring on short and long term, real educational alternatives to spend their free time.

- Developing the capacity of principled relationship and communication with other children of the same age, and different age and educational level;

- Acquiring and practicing age-related activities that imply a purposeful and beneficial use of their free time (games, behaviors, events);

- Manifesting joy in being together with others through a state of acceptance, negotiation, cooperation, solidarity;

- Increasing the interest for knowledge, reading and personal development among children through educational activities that combine game and passing on new concepts;

- Acquiring new knowledge related to humanity, society, environment, after watching animation movies and documentaries meant to arouse their curiosity;

- Acquiring communication and socialization skills through teamwork and games that require the collaboration of all the participants.

2.2.2. Organizing the activity

Every year, each summer school lasted for 2 weeks, and activities were carried on every day of the week, 4 hours a day, except for the weekends. Every day there were three or four workshops and the children were divided into 3 or 4 groups depending on the number of workshops. By rotation, with a break of 10-15 minutes, each group of children participated in a workshop, taking turns, so each group of children got to attend all the workshops. Besides the educational workshops: dance, theater, movie, music, gardening, culinary workshop, etc., in the first days there were also dance choreography workshops and various socialization games to facilitate the interaction between children and volunteers.

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3. Conclusions

During these summer schools both in the rural and in the urban areas we noticed the necessity of organizational changes between the two environments. Due to the financial resources, the number of recreational workshops was lower compared to that in the urban environment. In terms of organization, structure, content that was passed on, purposes and objectives, the two types of summer schools were the same, but we could also notice some differences. The community impact was much higher in the rural areas and so was the impact on these children who manifested a much higher interest and enthusiasm than the children in urban areas.

After evaluating the results of the two types of summer schools, we could notice that this kind of alternative educational method is also effective for children living in poverty who have a higher degree of school dropout. Through these educational workshops, children learn to obey certain rules, and a connection is also created with the environment where they will continue their formation. Thus, we can consider that this educational alternative method is prevention and also a rehabilitation method for children who are already at risk. The method gives these children a first glimpse of what school's rules mean and the chance to interact with other children of different ages and educational level.



Figure 1. a) Activities from summer school in Criciova, Timiș County - 2016; b) Activities from summer school in Lugoj, Timiș County- 2015.

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