

*Non-Formal Learning and Education: Policies, Practices and Discourses*  
*Неформално учене и образование: политики, практики и дискурси*

## NON-FORMAL LEARNING AND EDUCATION IN EUROPEAN EDUCATIONAL PRACTICE

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**Abstract.** This article exposes some theoretical, general aspects about non-formal learning and non-formal education in European educational practice. In first section it is presented a learning forms' model at European Commission recommendations and the active learning approaches which justify the importance of non-formal and informal learning in the contemporary, dynamic society; in the second section are sketched three possible variants for understanding non-formal education, reporting at an educational system. As conclusion, the article highlights the possibility of understanding trap, if the terms *learning* and *education* are used in synonymy relation.

**Keywords:** non-formal learning, active learning, life-long learning, non-formal education

In the context of the World Conference on Education for all, at Jomtien, Thailand, in 1990, it was reaffirmed (at global level) that education is a basic human right and one of the main pillars for development and formation of human being by all over the world.

A few years later, in 2002, to Dakar, following the World Education Forum, it has highlighted the necessity to focus on quality educational reforms and the importance of common efforts to identify appropriate methods for evaluate the learning that comes from everywhere experiences, to recognise knowledge, attitudes, capacities and values which are developed independently by educational school system (Dada, 2006). In this way, some countries, particularly those in Europe and North America, they have decided to concentrate on the economic dimensions of human existence, on the need to develop the necessary capacities in a knowledge economy, while others have focused more on the development of life skills which are necessary for people to adapt at the tensions and challenges of social environment. However, in all cases, the educational reforms have been centred around the principle of *life-long learning* and the efforts to identify ways for validation and equivalence of knowledge which are coming from different learning sources. Conforming with Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, the paradigm of life-long learning has become not only a strategy for economic growth

and building a social stability, but also an opportunity to create bridges between different forms of learning that have been delimited and defined as (Dada, 2006):

Learning forms	Characteristics
Formal learning	-intentional learning, provided in an organized, structured and designed context, specifically for learning; -ends with a formal recognition by the certificate or diploma.
Nonformal learning	-also intentional learning, planned and organised, but it consists in educational activities that respond to the needs of all ages people, as offer of institutions that are outside of formal educational system.
Informal learning	-non-intentional learning, out of organised situations which come from schooling system or nonformal educational insitutions.

**Fig. 1.** Types of learning after the OECD recommendations  
(source Dada, 2006)

The European Commission has recommended the use of *experiential learning* to designate learning through experience and learning from experience, so English *prior learning*, may designate all together learning experiences which involve experiential dimension, whether they be formale, non-formal or informal type (Cedefop, 2007). The priority given to experiential aspects in learning and *learning outcome*, as well scientific research focused on understanding why, where, when, how, and what motivates people to learn, are major indicators for the renouncing at traditional behaviorist approach of learning and the promotion a new, distinct approaches to learning and education in European space (Cedefop, 2009).

In 2009, Nielsen and Grootings, in one of the reports carried out by the European Centre for the development of Vocational Training have analysed different learning approaches and have conclusionated that *active learning approache* corresponds more to contemporary times because highlights the dynamism of social relations and situations where learning takes place (Cedefop, 2009).

The active learning model (constructivist) assumes that (Sălăvăstru, 2004; Grooting, Nielsen, 2009):

\*Learning is a *selective process* where people give their own meaning to information, continuous interacting with different backgrounds;

\*People are building their own meanings on the basis of what they already know (*tacit knowledge*) and depending on how they see the world around them, so that different people may give different interpretations to the same reality or may act differently based on the same information;

\*Learning can be achieved in several ways that may be the best at any one time and not necessarily by calling experts;

\*Learning for the most part is tacit, and is essentially a social activity because it involves interaction with peers;

\*Learning is **dynamic** and depends on the learning opportunities offered by environment.

The European countries have agreed on some common education practice for validation of the results of all learning types. Thus arose (Cedefop, 2010):

**\*European credit system for Vocational Education and Training VET** that allows citizens to transfer learning outcomes and to be recognised by the different qualification systems in the field of education, vocational training or general education;

**\*Unique reference Europass** which is a portfolio with five instruments (the European CV, certificate, diploma, certificate and diploma supplements, the common framework of reference virtual platform, the Europass linguistic) “...to make people’s skills and qualifications more easily understood in Europe.”<sup>1)</sup> (Cedefop, 2010, pp. 34).

European Inventory of non-formal and informal learning validation, by 2010, has recorded and shown in a unique way that “...validation is already being used at national, regional and local level to address issues relating to lifelong learning, employment and social exclusion”<sup>2)</sup> in 32 European countries. According with analysis of the reviewed and completed reports on the theme of national efforts for the promotion and recognition of non-formal and informal education/learning until 2010, European countries were included in four distinct categories, *using their level of development and implementation of a system for validating the results of non-formal and informal learning/education*. These categories include European countries whose educational practice have a holistic vision for all three forms of learning and meets a certain level of development as follows:

Categories	Development level	Countries that are included in a category
Countries that have established practices for validation results of all learning types and reflecting a high level of achievement.	High level	Finland, Norway, the Netherlands, France and Portugal
Countries where is a system for validate results of all learning forms or a framework for such a system, but the level of achievement has remained relatively low. Countries where there is a particular validation system, with a high level of achievement, but only in a particular sector, without having a general national framework.	High level to medium	Denmark, Germany, Romania, Spain, Sweden, UK-England, Wales, Northern Ireland and Scotland

Countries likely to be set up systems of validation of learning outcomes for one or more sectors, but does not amount to a general framework for all types of learning.	Medium to low level	Austria, Belgium, Czech Republic, Estonia, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Liechtenstein, Slovenia and Slovakia
Countries that have made small steps only in policy and practice that facilitates the validation of non-formal and informal education/learning.	Low level	Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Greece, Hungary, Latvia, Malta, Poland and Turkey

**Fig. 2.** European inventories on practices for the validation of non-formal and informal education/learning (European Inventory, 2010, pp. 9)

There are a voices that clasified European educational practices depending on the method of understanding and promote non- formal/informal learning and not in relation to the level that was reached in the effort to develop a system for their validation; Daniel Festeu and Barbara Humberstone in the “Non-formal Education through Outdoor Activities Guide” have reported that there are two visions on non-formal and informal learning/education which characterizes and separates the European countries.

*A first approach* highlights the dependency relationship between the education forms, in terms of a continuum of learning (Rogers, 2014), where nonformal education is understood as an educational alternative that promotes a complementar learning to formal one, while *the second approach* considers nonformal education an autonomous educational variant, which is totally distinct by formal education, a new force of twenty-first century, and not just a second and marginal education what is trying to be liked by the formal education system (Festeu, Humberstone, 2006).

*A third variant* to classificate non-formal educational practices in European countries brings to the fore the lack of tradition in promoting non-formal educational activites in the countries where was a close causal relationship between its geographical position and its history. In this sens, the European Association for Non-formal and Informal Education (EAICY) based in Prague, has done in 2005 a collection of articles that have been put in comparison how are understood, promoted and assessed the activities of non-formal learning/education in some Eastern European countries, mainly former Communist Bloc countries, and countries in Western Europe, with democratic tradition.

The national reports reflect the fact that, in countries where communist has dominated after World War II, as well countries of the former Soviet Union as Bulgaria, Moldova, Romania, Slovakia or the Czech Republic, non-formal education/learning was understood as a subsector of the formal education system, in

coordinating and directly related control with central system of school education. In Eastern countries was and still is a nonformal education subsystem, as local network of children's Clubs where students can spend their free time and get involved in various educational activities carried out by teachers (as servants of the same national formal education system and employment of the same rules as all the teachers in schools) by libraries, museums and cultural houses still under State control (Clarijs, 2005). Instead, in Western countries non-formal education offer is very diverse and comes mainly from private firms and Non-governmental Organizations that are constantly involved in the school life, since the time in which private initiative was totally annihilated in the Eastern countries.

Despite this diversity of understanding, there is a common recognition of the fact that in the 21st century the need of non-formal education and learning it is a necessity required by recent social, economic, cultural and political changed; the literature and politic areas have agreed that recognition and validation of them is based on five main arguments, namely (Festeu, Humberstone, 2006, pp. 19-20):

- Non-formal education promotes the learning of essential skills and competencies;
- Non-formal education enriches learning environments: adds personal experiences, values and critical reflections on the citizens education;
- Non-formal education extends the spectrum of citizens involvement and has a crossing effect over institutional policies;
- Non-formal education is a powerful tool for social integration;
- Non-formal education is an effective method of communication and intervention.

Above all the approaches and arguments which have been sketched up, the conceptual clarification of non-formal education is still confused in educational practice because are situations where the terms **education** and **learning** are used as **sinonime** (Rogers, 2004).

First premise for a valide rationament and a good understanding of non-formal education is that *“all education is learning, but not all learning is education, education is planned learning”*<sup>3)</sup>, exactly as *“bread is made from flour; but not all flour is bread, bread is processed flour”*<sup>4)</sup> (Rogers, 2014). In my opinion, the human being has different ways at his/her option; everybody can “walk” on a natural path or on a constructed auto-band, but, in both cases the person must be proper equipped...everyone of theses goes somewhere, but not with the same speed...they are not reciprocally excluded because their utility, but also they are not identically as form and construction.

Even non-formal education still remains an ambiguous concept, educational practices which usually involve a mix of learning elements, reflect its integration in European educational discourse through numerous examples of implemented programmes that promote non-formal learning experiences, in all Europe.

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## NOTES

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