

LEARNING AND OCCUPATION OF CHILDREN'S LEISURE TIME: CRISSCROSSING SCHOOL AND NON-SCHOOL EDUCATION

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Abstract

The understanding of the educational daily life of children requires considering the role assumed in that process by the socio-educational activities in which they are involved beyond school time, considering the formative complementarity they represent. Knowing that non-school education has always existed, it has deserved more attention and recognition since the second half of the 20th century, with the valorisation and clarification of "non formal" and "informal" education. It is on these dimensions that the study presented in this article is centred, investigating its characteristics and the relationships that are woven between school and non-school education, calling upon the theoretical contributions of authors who have worked on the subject, as well as the thoughts of children and teachers who participated in the study. The main objective of this study was to find out the opinions of children and teachers about the participation in non-formal educational activities, developed in leisure time, and was guided by the following questions: In which socio-educational activities do children engage beyond school time? How are these activities perceived by children? And by the teachers? What are the remaining motivation(s) for children's participation in non-formal activities? And that of the teachers? What role do children play in making decisions about the activities in which they participate? And what measures should be promoted to improve the organization of the children's leisure time? For data collection we used a questionnaire, applied to teachers (25) and children (109, from 6 to 12 years old), from a school center in the north of Portugal. The results show that the socio-educational activities in which children are most involved beyond school time are, according to the children and teachers, the extracurricular and sports activities. Opportunities for fun, for occupation while parents work, and for improving school results are the reasons most highlighted by children for their involvement in out-of-school activities. The decision making in the choice of these activities is, according to the children, predominantly made by the parents (father/mother) but perceived by most of them as important and fun. As suggestions for improving the answers regarding the occupation of children's free time, the interviewees point out the offer of activities of different nature, highlighting sports, individual and group activities. In turn, the interviewed teachers emphasize the need to reduce the permanence time of children in the school space and to increase the opportunities of physical activity, thus meeting the children's requirements. The contributions of the study to (re)thinking about the quality of the contexts and activities attended by children during their leisure time are highlighted, valuing them as important means of recreation and learning.

Keywords: Non-formal education, Free time, Learning, Recreation.

1 INTRODUCTION

Whenever the study of alternative educational systems is mentioned in the educational literature, we often perceive that they are allocated to expressions such as "open systems", "non-formal education", "distance learning", "non-conventional studies", "lifelong learning", among other terms. In some cases, these are even used as synonyms, while in others, there is no agreement on their meanings, preventing a consensus for their concepts. However, a more precise definition is fundamental, as well as their possible classification, aiming at a better understanding and practical use. Therefore, we will dissect the concepts of formal, non-formal and informal education in a brief essay that allows us to define their characteristics, advantages, limitations and interrelationships.

Besides the theoretical concepts, this article also reports on a study, whose discussion of results was based on research questions thought *a priori* and which aimed to know the opinions of the intervening parties in the study (109 children from 6 to 12 years old and 25 teachers) about the participation in non-formal educational activities, namely in free time activities. The data collection was carried out through the application of two questionnaires to the two groups of participants mentioned above, in a context in the northern area of Portugal.

During the 20th century, educational discourse was guided by non-school educational practices which, by gaining strength of expression, made a clear distinction between "formal", "non-formal" and "informal" education. In this sense, educational theorists have established differentiating criteria which have made it possible to classify educational processes in these three areas. Let us clarify these three strands.

The European Council recognises that the formal education system alone can no longer meet the challenges of modern society and therefore receives other types of practices as reinforcement, namely non-formal educational practices. For Caride Gómez, Freitas and Callejas [1] "formal education is an institutionalized, conventional and official educational modality, which responds to a rigid organization, oriented to contents established in a curriculum prescribed by the components of the society to which it applies" (p.163).

According to Schugurensky [2] if, in formal education, there are teachers, instructors or facilitators and a curriculum that may have varying degrees of inflexibility or flexibility, in non-formal education all educational programs are organized to take place outside the formal school process which are usually short term and voluntary. This encompasses a wide range of programmes such as second language programmes, rehabilitation programmes, painting courses, workshops, and others. Thus, the non-formal approach is characterised by what the formal approach is not, i.e., characteristics such as flexibility, informality, part-time, etc. are attributed to it. [3].

In fact, being a citizen in our society implies that young people take responsibility for the community in which they live in, so formal education needs to provide young people with general and theoretical knowledge and non-formal education, with its complementary role, provides them with support to find a set of values, also helping to incorporate them into their daily lives, making them active citizens. It is about providing alternative learning opportunities to all those who do not have access to formal schooling or who need specific life skills and knowledge to overcome different obstacles.

Non-formal education occurs when we choose to acquire more knowledge or skills by studying of our own free will with a teacher who assists our self-determined interests using an organized curriculum, as in many adult education courses and workshops. Therefore, about the level of learning intention and within the domain of non-formal learning we must recognise the phenomenon of implicit learning but also that of deliberate learning, where there is no intention to learn and no awareness of learning when it happens.

We can then argue that informal education is the lifelong process by which each person acquires and accumulates knowledge, skills, attitudes and perceptions from everyday experiences and exposure to the environment [4]. And it implies a lifelong developmental process of an individual in which he or she "acquires attitudes, values, skills and knowledge from daily experience and educational influences and resources in his or her environment - from family to neighbours, from work to play, from the labour market, the library and the media" [5].

2 METHODOLOGY

The research led us to understand what representations children and teachers have about non-formal educational experiences and activities. A questionnaire survey was chosen as the technique and instrument for data collection. The survey was answered by 109 children from 6 classes, one from each school year, from 1st to 6th grade, and by 25 teachers, from the same schools as the children. It was applied in the 2017/2018 school year, in schools in the northern area of Portugal. The questionnaire was composed of open, multiple choice and closed questions, considering Coutinho's classification [6].

All participants agreed to participate in the research and the children, had due authorization from their parents and their own agreement in wanting to participate.

All the questionnaires were coded using an alphanumeric code (c1, ...c109; for the children and p1,...p25 for the teachers) and the statistical treatment of the information collected through the closed and multiple choice questions was carried out. Content analysis was also used to analyse the descriptive data collected from the open questions. We tried to articulate all the information with the theoretical framework as well as with the objectives of the study, as recommended by Amado [7].

3 RESULTS

The data refers to the answers given by both the children and the teachers when completing the questionnaire survey. Regarding the children, the results refer to the following dimensions of analysis: characterisation of the participants, participation in non-formal education activities, regularity of that

participation, decision about the choice of activities, characterisation of the non-formal education activities and suggestion of activities. Regarding the teachers, the following dimensions were considered: characterisation of the participants, teachers' collaboration in non-teaching activities, reasons for this collaboration, perceptions about the role of leisure time centres and suggestions for improving these centres.

3.1 The case of children

A total of 109 children participated in the study, 54.1% males and 45.9% females (Figure 1).

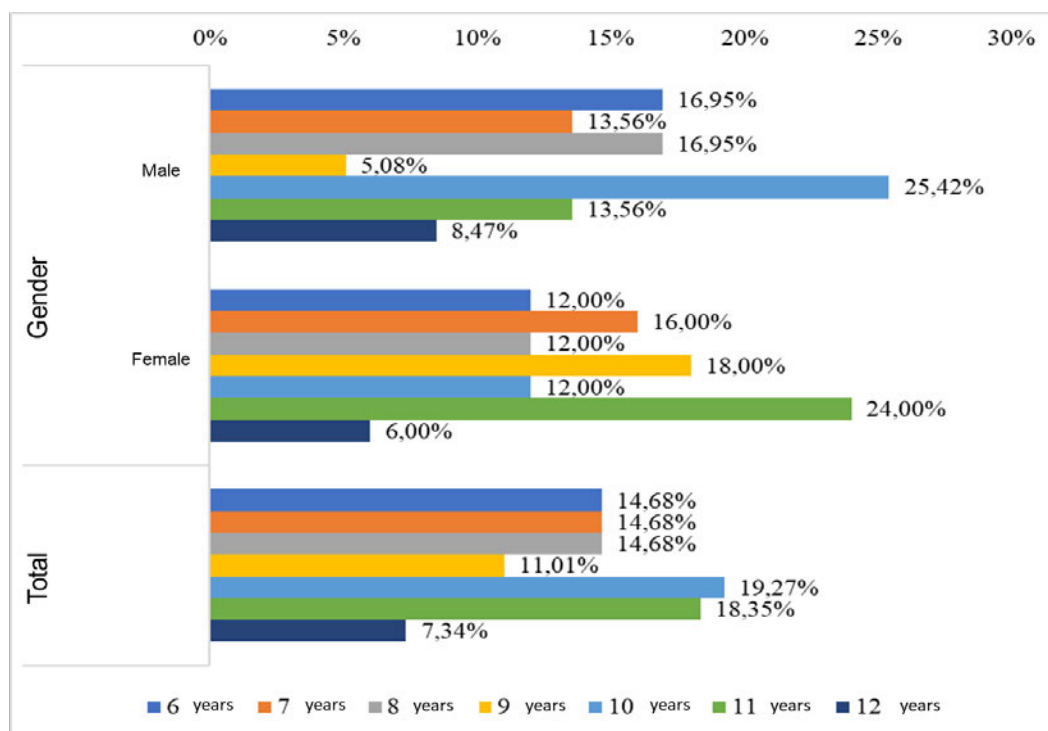


Figure 1. Characterisation of the children's gender and age.

Figure 1 shows that the most frequent ages are 10 and 11. The same percentage (14.68%) is observed for 6, 7 and 8 year-olds. In the case of the male children, 25.42% were 10 years old; 16.95% were 6 years old and the same number of children was 8 years old. It is also observed that 13.56% of the boys were 7 years old and 11 years old. Regarding the girls, 24% were 11 years old, 18% were 9 years old, 16% were 7 years old and 6% were 12 years old. At the age of 6, 8 and 10, the same number of girls is observed (12%).

Regarding the year of schooling that the children attended, 22.0% of the children surveyed were in the 1st year of schooling, 16.5% attended the 2nd year, 11.9% the 3rd year, 17.4% the 4th year, 18.3% the 5th year and 13.8% attended the 6th year of schooling.

All the children surveyed took part in some non-teaching activity. When analysing the data, it was found that the most popular non-teaching activities amongst the children were extracurricular activities and sports, as 70.6% stated that they took part in these activities. These are followed by free time activities mentioned by 38.5%. Study support activities were chosen by 24.8% of the children and 23.9% indicated the activities developed in cultural institutions. Music was indicated by 11.9% of the children, 9.2% selected learning other languages and 5.5% stated that they had tutoring in some subject. As regards the most popular activities, namely extracurricular activities, free time, study support, activities in cultural institutions and sporting activities, the chi-square test showed that these were not significantly associated with the gender of the children. On the other hand, it was concluded that extracurricular activities, free time, study support and activities in cultural institutions were significantly associated with the year of schooling, being that extracurricular activities, free time and those carried out in cultural institutions were preferred by 1st cycle children and study support by 2nd cycle children.

When it comes to the frequency of the referred activities per week, most of the children, 57.8% said they attended the non-teaching activities every day of the week and around 14.7% said they attended them 4 to 5 days a week. On the other hand, 20.2% attend them 2 to 3 times a week and 7.3% of the children mentioned that they had non-teaching activities once a week.

As regards the reasons why children participate in such activities, many (79.8%) say it is to have fun, followed by the fact that it is possible to learn more (58.7%) and in third place to occupy the time while their parents work (48.6%). On the other hand, 40.4% of the children pointed out the fact that they can improve their grades. 34.9% said that in this way they can meet new friends, and 31.2% said that these activities allow them to socialise with other people. For 29.4% of the children, the fact of being in these activities may contribute to help in the preparation of homework and 25.7% said that they enable help in the preparation of evaluation sheets. There were children (1.2%) who mentioned other reasons, namely: learning to play and medical recommendation.

It was verified that most of the children (77%) justified their participation in different activities because they consider the activities important. Therefore, the children justified this importance by underlining 46.4% the possibility of learning more, 34.5% answered that they really liked attending the activities so that they could play, 11.9% stated that so they didn't have to stay at home alone and 7.1% indicated the need to practise sport.

According to a large proportion of the children, 71.6%, the decision to attend non-school activities was taken jointly by their parents. For 14.7% of the children the decision was taken by the mother, for 9.2% it was the children themselves who decided, 3.7% stated that it was the father who made such a decision and 0.9% mentioned that it was the grandparents.

Regarding the sentence to complete: "I consider that the activities in which I participate, apart from class time, are...", an answer was obtained from 107 children. The answers are summarised in Table 1.

Table 1. Children's characterization of the sentence complement.

<i>I consider that the activities in which I participate are...</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>%</i>
Very important and fun	80	84,1%
Good	8	7,5%
Useful, because I like dancing	2	1,9%
Useful, because I like to draw	1	0,9%
Useful, to learn more	6	5,6%
Total	107	100%

By analysing Table 1 it was concluded that most of the children who answered this question, 84.1% completed the sentence referring that the activities in which they participate are very important and fun, 7.5% of the children referred that they were good and the remaining answered that they were useful to dance (1.9%), to draw (0.9%) and to learn more (5.6%).

3.2 The case of teachers

Twenty-five teachers participated in the study, of which 32% were male, and 68% female (Figure 2).

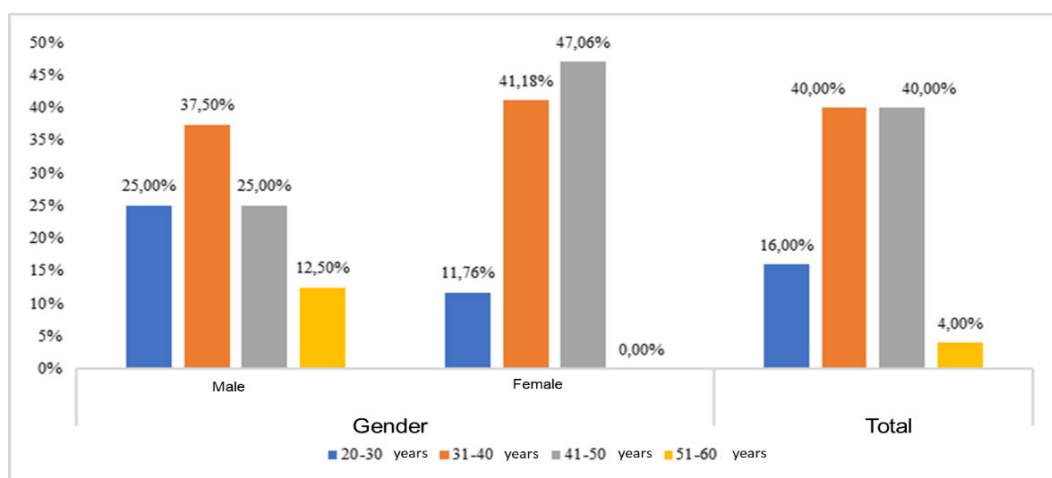


Figure 2. Characterization of gender and age of teachers.

The most common age ranges were between 31 and 40 years and between 41 and 50 years, with the same proportion (40%). This fact can also be seen regarding the gender of the teachers, particularly in the group of female teachers, where 41.18% are aged between 31 and 40 years and 47.06% are aged between 41 and 50 years. Male teachers aged between 20 and 30 years also stand out, with 25% of the total.

With regard to the teachers' academic qualifications, it was found that most of the respondents (68%) had a bachelor's degree, 24% had a master's degree and 8% a postgraduate degree. The average length of service varies from a minimum of 1 year to a maximum of 30 years, with a mean value of 14.91 years and a standard deviation of 8.30 years, which reveals a high dispersion of results.

As regards the level of education in which the teachers comprising the study teach, most of the teachers surveyed (84.0%) are qualified to teach in the 1st cycle of basic education and 32.0% to teach in the 2nd cycle of basic education. Only 8% of the teachers are qualified for pre-school education and secondary education. It should be noted that some teachers (32%) combine different teaching cycles. All the teachers stated that they work in the public network, while 9% also work in the private network.

The question on professional status was answered by 24 of the teachers surveyed. Eight of the teachers belong to the Pedagogical Zone Board (QZP), followed by the School Board (QE) or Grouping Board (QA), in which 7 of them works. Seven teachers had individual employment contracts and one teacher had an administrative contract and still another teacher (1) had an individual employment contract.

Regarding the collaboration of the teachers in non-teaching activities (Table 2), the data indicates that 28% of the teachers stated that they had not collaborated in any of the activities presented. Therefore, 72% of the teachers who had collaborated in these activities had a mean value of 2 activities and a standard deviation of 1.24 activities. In other words, each of the 18 teachers has collaborated, on average, in two different activities.

Table 2. Characterisation of the non-teaching activities in which teachers have collaborated.

<i>Collaboration in activities</i>	<i>Responses</i>		<i>% of cases in total that responded</i>
	<i>n</i>	<i>%</i>	
Extracurricular activities	14	38,9%	77,8%
Leisure time activities	5	13,9%	27,8%
Study support activities	4	11,1%	22,2%
Language teaching	6	16,7%	33,3%
Home tutoring	2	5,6%	11,1%
Activities in cultural institutions	4	11,1%	22,2%
Sporting activities	1	2,8%	5,6%
Total	36	100%	

Of the teachers who have collaborated or collaborate in non-teaching activities, 77.8% mentioned extracurricular activities, 33.3% language teaching, 27.8% free time activities, 22.2% study support activities and 22.2% activities in cultural institutions. Some of the teachers (11.1%) have given home tutoring and 5.6% stated that they have collaborated in sports activities. Of the 36 activities mentioned, extracurricular activities stand out, followed by language teaching.

Regarding the 18 teachers who collaborate or have collaborated in non-teaching activities, it was observed that 11 had a degree, two had post-graduate degrees and five had a master's degree. On the other hand, none of the teachers were teaching in pre-school education or in the 3rd cycle of basic education and secondary education, as all of them worked in the 1st and/or 2nd cycle of basic education. Regarding the professional status of the teachers who collaborate in non-teaching activities, 3 were in QE/QA, 5 in QZP, 1 had an administrative contract, 7 had an individual employment contract and 1 had a contract for the provision of services.

Regarding the reasons that led teachers to collaborate in non-teaching activities (Table 3), 15 teachers responded to at least one reason.

Table 3. Reasons for teachers' participation in such activities.

<i>Collaboration in the activities</i>	<i>Reponses</i>		<i>% of cases in total that responded</i>
	<i>n</i>	<i>%</i>	
Being unemployed	6	24,0%	40,0%
To have reduced working hours	4	16,0%	26,7%
To be able to improve the economic situation	9	36,0%	60,0%
Doing voluntary work	3	12,0%	20,0%
Other	3	12,0%	20,0%
Total	25	100%	

Table 3 shows that the main reason for teachers' participation in leisure time activities was to improve their economic situation (60%), followed by unemployment (40%). On the other hand, 26.7% of the teachers also mentioned the fact that they had a reduced timetable and so could supplement their salary, 20% said they did voluntary work and another 20% mentioned other motivations: a form of personal and professional enrichment and doing what they liked most.

According to the teachers surveyed, what best defines the role of the leisure centres (Table 4) is "an offer of opportunities for the improvement of curricular learning" (68.0%).

Table 4. Characterisation of what best describes the leisure centres.

<i>Collaboration in activities</i>	<i>Responses</i>		<i>% of cases in total that responded</i>
	<i>n</i>	<i>%</i>	
An answer to the problem of incompatibility of families' schedules	16	18,8%	64,0%
A complementary educational or non-formal educational service	12	14,1%	48,0%
A child-minding service during after-school hours	6	7,1%	24,0%
An offer of opportunities to improve curricular learning	17	20,0%	68,0%
An opportunity for recreation and leisure time socializing	10	11,8%	40,0%
A homework support service	10	11,8%	40,0%
An opportunity for involvement in artistic and sporting activities	13	15,8%	52,0%
Other	1	1,2%	4,0%
Total	85	100%	

It is observed that 64% of the teachers referred that the leisure centres are "an answer to the problem of incompatibility of family schedules", 52% referred that they are "an opportunity for involvement in artistic and sporting activities". It is also observed that 48% of the teachers believe that the leisure time occupation centres are also "a complementary educational or non-formal educational advisory service", 40% of the teachers assume that they are "a homework support service" and another 40% believe that they are "an opportunity for recreation and socialising in the occupation of leisure time". For 24% of the respondents, the leisure centres are "an after-school child-minding service".

According to most of the teachers surveyed, 56%, the understanding emerges that the activity most attended to by the children outside school is of a sporting nature and 44% of the teachers believe that they are extracurricular and study support activities.

As regards the suggestions to improve the organisation of children's leisure time, 33% of the teachers indicated that it would be relevant to reduce school time, whilst 23.8% referred that it would be useful to increase the number of hours of physical activity. The practices of playful activities (9.5%), as well as the practice of dance/dramatic activities and expressions (9.5%) were also mentioned, although with low expression.

4 CONCLUSIONS

This study on the experiences and representations of children and teachers regarding the leisure time activities allowed us to understand that many children attend these activities and spend a lot of time in

these spaces. It also allowed us to assess the little collaboration of teachers in the implementation of these activities, although we recognise their importance in solving the problem of incompatibility of timetables between the teaching activities and the working hours of the families, but also in the recovery of curricular learning of the children and in the offer of complementary activities to the teaching activity. As suggestions for improving the answers regarding the occupation of children's leisure time, the interviewed teachers point to the offer of activities of a different nature, highlighting sports activities, individual and group activities, as well as proposing a reduction of the school time.

The activities to be attended are usually decided by the family, there being little space for a joint decision, including the child itself. For the children the developed activities lead to fun, although learning is also very clear in their speeches. Diverse activities were identified, essentially of a playful and socio-educational nature. However, not rarely, they are referred to as an extension of the school activities.

The data analysis intends to contribute to the discussion and reflection on the non-formal education contexts and the activities attended by children during their leisure time, thus providing an increase in their well-being, an improvement of their skills and a greater appreciation of these activities as a fundamental means of recreation and reinforcement of learning.

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