

OUTDOOR EDUCATION AS AN INTERFACE BETWEEN TRADITIONAL AND MODERN LEARNING APPROACHES: A CURRICULUM-BASED ANALYSIS AT CORE CURRICULUM STAGE IN ROMANIA

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Abstract: *This study delves into the pivotal role of outdoor learning in acting as a connecting thread between conventional and contemporary teaching methods within the realm of core curriculum education. As educational methodologies continually evolve, educators are keen to adopt innovative approaches that effectively engage and educate students. Traditional teaching methods, while enduring, coexist with modern pedagogical practices that emphasize experiential learning, active participation, and holistic development. The research explores how outdoor learning functions as an intermediary, facilitating a seamless fusion of traditional and modern educational practices. Its primary focus is to investigate the influence of outdoor learning on student motivation, critical thinking, and overall educational achievements, particularly within the core curriculum stage. By employing a combination of quantitative and qualitative analyses, this study seeks to highlight the advantages and obstacles associated with the incorporation of outdoor learning in core curriculum subjects. It aims to pinpoint effective methods for embedding outdoor experiences into conventional classroom settings, thereby contributing to a more comprehensive comprehension of how outdoor learning can enrich the educational experience. The insights garnered from this research endeavor have the potential to provide valuable guidance to educators, curriculum designers, and policymakers in striking a harmonious balance between time-honored teaching techniques and innovative strategies. This equilibrium*

aims to create a well-rounded, enhanced learning environment for students at the core curriculum level.

Key words: *outdoor education; interface; curriculum, core procurement cycle; analysis.*

Introduction

One of the greatest dilemmas faced by educators in their professional activities is the transition of knowledge and learning content from theory to practice. The link between theory and practice, the bridge between outdoor activities and the outcomes they can have in developing cross-cutting competencies, is the teacher. Through their skill and professionalism, they select appropriate teaching methods, adapting them to the learning situations they offer for implementation. In this chapter, we propose examples of outdoor learning situations that complement traditional ones so that the two forms of education are seen as a single entity. Their interrelationship and the enhancement that outdoor activities can bring to the traditional ones represent significant benefits in the current educational process. Educators face a profound challenge in their roles: the seamless translation of knowledge and learning content from theory to practical application. The pivotal bridge between theory and practice, between traditional educational approaches and the potential for outdoor activities to enhance the development of cross-cutting competencies, is the teacher. The teacher, with their expertise and professionalism, selects teaching methods wisely, adapting them to the unique learning scenarios they provide for implementation. Within this study, we delve into a series of outdoor learning scenarios that complement traditional educational methods. The objective is to portray these two educational forms as a unified entity. The interconnectedness and the enrichment that outdoor activities bestow upon traditional education represent profound advantages in the modern educational process. In the following, we explore how outdoor learning experiences can be integrated harmoniously with conventional teaching methods, aiming to create a comprehensive educational landscape. This synthesis holds the promise of providing valuable insights for educators, curriculum designers, and policymakers as they endeavor to foster a more holistic, enriched learning environment for students. The study investigates the pivotal role of outdoor learning in bridging the gap between traditional and modern pedagogical practices, thus laying the foundation for an enriched educational experience.

Fundamental perspectives

Teachers are constantly concerned with selecting the methods they use in the instructive-educational process. Education is in a state of continuous development and change, and educators must keep pace with social and educational updates. Trends are imposed both by students, through their needs and interests, and by society, through the daily demands it presents. These directions are also determined by the leadership of educational systems, whether they are local, national, or international, through the policies they operate and the innovations they introduce into curricula. These translate into specific learning activities directly offered to learners, through the content and practices they engage with. Educators and teachers serve as the bridge between learners and society, and they must facilitate and streamline the educational process by understanding their students, traditional and modern working methods, adapting them to the group's needs, and through continuous updates of knowledge and their own policies and teaching styles. (Ciolan, 2008)

Consequently, an instructor should always be ahead when it comes to anticipating the various elements of the instructional and educational process. They should strive to create contemporary and effective learning experiences. This entails thorough research, continuous learning, adaptability, knowledge acquisition, and, most importantly, direct engagement with the classroom or student group. This involvement should encompass consistent observation and analysis to discern the necessary direction for their development. To provide effective teaching, it's essential to build a comprehensive understanding of the students' group profile. In the realm of education, the modern teacher faces a perpetual balancing act between two prominent educational approaches. On one hand, there's the traditional method, well-structured, deeply rooted, stable, and extensively studied, which has underpinned educational systems for decades. On the other hand, there's the modern approach, characterized by flexibility, interactive learning methods, communication, and development through teamwork techniques. It's crucial to acknowledge that achieving new outcomes in education requires departing from the same old methods. This holds particularly true in the field of education. (Crețu, 1997)

The discussion in the specialized literature often revolves around the need to educate in a way that fosters competencies, especially those that are transferable. This can only be achieved through the adoption of innovative, interactive methods that encourage teamwork, socialization, self-discovery, and mutual understanding. Such an approach may entail stepping outside the conventional boundaries of

learning, embracing the new, and being open to operating within diverse frameworks. The negative consequences of thoughtless changes and the desire for rapid implementation of new methods are emphasized, leading to chaos and the students' inability to adapt. Consequently, students become increasingly disengaged, failing to focus on competency development, integrated learning, or improving their own performance, turning classrooms into environments that churn out uniform and robotic end products. The first condition to have a good lesson is to be able to attract the students' attention which implies a selective trial of the psychological activity regarding an object or phenomenon. The filter or selection of the messages takes place not only in the brain but also in the inferior levels of our nervous system. The concentration of our attention determines the growth of the efficiency of the cognitive and practical activity. (Dughi & Cotră, 2014)

A curriculum-based analysis at core curriculum stage in Romania

In order to optimize the utilization of knowledge regarding the curriculum and its components, it is recommended to scrutinize the school curriculum at the fundamental acquisition level. This is imperative as there should be a well-defined understanding of expectations to facilitate the seamless integration of outdoor activities while closely adhering to the curriculum's principles.

First stage

Primary education represents the initial phase of compulsory education and its primary objective is to provide equal opportunities for all children in order to foster a balanced cognitive, emotional, and psychomotor development tailored to individual needs. Primary education encompasses the preparatory class and grades I to IV, with the preparatory class serving as the first step in primary education. (M.E.N., 2017)

The preparatory class represents a period aimed at acclimating students to school life, providing them with time to adjust to the schedule, the community, and the specific requirements of this diverse environment. Its primary purpose is to foster socio-emotional, intellectual, and physical development. From a socio-emotional perspective, the preparatory class helps children build self-confidence, enhance self-esteem, initiative, and the desire for success. It is an integral part of compulsory general education, preparing students primarily for the specific learning they will encounter in the first grade and subsequent years of schooling. The adjustment to the school environment is made as friendly as possible, with play being the predominant method of

learning, especially suitable for six-year-olds. In the same vein, it can be stated, in accordance with the Ministry of National Education, that the preparatory class fosters the intellectual development of each child. It equips them with improved communication skills, the ability to sustain intellectual effort, and a diverse range of learning experiences. Additionally, this level sets the conditions for a curriculum tailored to the age-specific needs of the students in a stimulating environment that promotes their mental and physical development. A relaxed environment is maintained by the absence of grade repetition, not only after the preparatory class but also after the first grade. This period is when measures are put in place to prevent and address inequalities among students from disadvantaged backgrounds at the beginning of their school journey. It aims to identify learning difficulties early and provide individualized interventions.

Assessment is conducted continuously, and based on the recorded results, immediate interventions are implemented throughout the school year. Students also have the opportunity to participate in the "School after School" program. The preparatory class enrolls children who have turned 6 years old by the beginning of the school year. Upon written request from parents, guardians, or legal representatives, children who turn 6 years old by the end of the calendar year may also be enrolled in the preparatory class if their psychosomatic development is appropriate. (M.E.N., 2017)

The main directions for modernizing the Romanian curriculum are based on an analysis of the current curriculum and the education system, as well as several European guidelines, such as the qualifications framework and key competencies. The OECD promotes curriculum flexibility through personalized education and a focus on the student. These directions require a deep understanding of each student's developmental needs, which serves as the foundation for educational approaches. It also involves the use of teaching strategies that engage all students in activities and allow for customization based on each individual's diverse learning needs and styles.

Romanian Education Law No. 1/2011, Article 6, outlines how the hours allocated to school subjects can be used. The curriculum covers 75% of teaching and evaluation hours, leaving the remaining 25% at the discretion of the teacher. The extra time can be used for remedial learning for children with special needs, to reinforce knowledge, or to stimulate students capable of superior performance, according to individual learning plans developed for each student.

In 2013, new programs were introduced with a restructured format, incorporating the three programs for the preparatory class, first grade, and second grade into a single format for better visualization and

monitoring of continuity and progress in terms of competencies and content. This presentation facilitates ongoing connections with the previous and subsequent grades, ensuring curriculum coherence. Another new element is the organization of content into specific domains for each subject, demonstrating continuity and progression from one year of study to the next. The specific competencies and content included in the programs are closely interlinked. The new program provides a more detailed presentation of content to emphasize the elements on which the focus should be placed when practicing specific competencies.

The curriculum areas around which content is organized are: language and communication, mathematics and natural sciences, human and society, physical education, sports and health, arts, technologies, and counseling and guidance. These areas are designated based on epistemological and psycho-pedagogical principles and criteria. Within each of the presented curriculum areas, content is delivered using diverse resources and through various types of activities designed to be as engaging as possible for children. For example, activities can be organized into simultaneous workshops to provide variety and better monitoring, especially for activities with increased difficulty levels. Outdoor education finds its place in organizing activities in the preparatory class, with the school curriculum encouraging beneficial educational practices for students, both individually and as a group.

Analyzing the competencies described at this level, it becomes apparent that cooperation, socialization, participation in activities in a variety of contexts are highly desired. In the document presented by specialists from the Ministry of National Education, the emphasis is placed on the use of natural materials, familiar and open environments, self-discovery, and belonging to diverse social groups. It encourages the discovery of national identity and connection to the urban or rural environment, as well as curiosity for phenomena, relationships, and regularities in the nearby environment. It also promotes caring for a clean and friendly environment. Problem-solving, critical thinking, observation, or comparison are expected to take place in a natural and friendly environment that offers numerous natural resources. Exploring sensations or emotions can be accomplished in the natural surroundings near the group room. Recognizing beauty in everyday life, participating in various competitive games, and identifying simple ways to maintain health in a familiar environment are competencies that should be developed at this age, utilizing outdoor education activities and adapting the content to the natural environment to facilitate the students' familiarity with this educational level more

easily and effectively. (***)Progresia competențelor în Ciclu achizițiilor fundamentale)

The elements presented above indicate an openness and motivation to utilize outdoor education, along with all its components, to develop key competencies and cross-cutting competencies at the level of the preparatory class. The core concept of interdisciplinarity lies in the fact that, on one hand, the conceptual and methodological frameworks of multiple disciplines are interconnected to examine a theme or issue, but more importantly, to foster integrated, cross-cutting, key, and interdisciplinary competencies. (Universitatea București, 2013)

The suggested teaching materials to be used in the proposed learning activities do not carry a mandatory requirement. These learning activities serve as recommendations for competency development. They can be adapted to the specific needs of each class, depending on the resources available to each teacher. Teachers should aim to establish connections between subjects by providing relevant learning contexts that align with the daily reality of preparatory class students. These contexts should keep the students engaged in their familiar environment while being simultaneously engaging, instructive, and useful. (Dumitrescu, 2013)

At the end of the preparatory class, an assessment report is generated in the form of a standard document. This report records the level of achievement of both general competencies and specific competencies associated with each subject. The document is an integral part of the student's educational portfolio, and its purpose is to guide and optimize the educational process, preparing students to meet school requirements. The report is utilized to improve the educational process and serves as the basis for educational guidance and counseling decisions. It helps in creating and updating individualized learning plans for students. The curriculum for the preparatory class marks the beginning of an unprecedented curriculum modernization in Romania. This includes the development of numerous high-quality curriculum documents and the training of teachers through participation in courses and seminars to enhance their instructional skills at this level.

The second stage

The second level in the fundamental acquisition cycle is the first grade. At this stage, students participate in school programs that capitalize on the learning experiences they've accumulated up to the age of seven, including those from the preparatory class. For children who haven't completed the preparatory class, there are no obstacles to acquiring knowledge and later developing competencies. This is because evaluation is concentric, and the content is constantly revisited. As

mentioned earlier, the first level of the fundamental acquisition cycle is designed for adaptation and socialization, whereas in the first grade, the curriculum analysis shows that it's the year of effective integration into the educational environment. Notably, there's the introduction of grades as a form of assessment. There are new elements in terms of content as well. Some content elements belonging to the curriculum areas have already been studied in the preparatory class, so they are given less time in the first-grade curriculum. Additionally, in the fundamental acquisition cycle, the emphasis is on communication, and students are put in situations where they communicate in concrete contexts. A welcoming and open working atmosphere can also be created at this level through the use of modern teaching strategies. Activities can be organized in a varied and enjoyable manner in open spaces, utilizing the natural environment and its elements as much as possible. Games and toys are equally utilized, with students encouraged to create their own resources for play and learning. Consequently, the use of outdoor learning elements is encouraged, as is the utilization of natural surroundings. Content is introduced gradually, as in the preparatory class, using counting and intuitive support in the context of exploring the student's nearby and familiar environment. Didactic games predominate, ensuring active student participation. Exploring the nearby environment, asking questions, verbal interventions, expressing their own ideas and feelings related to what they learn, and proposing solutions to problems are all encouraged. Whenever possible, it's preferable to organize teaching sequences for observing, experimenting, measuring, and collecting data regarding various plants and animals in the natural environment. Such holistic learning, closely aligned with the child's knowledge universe, is advantageous as it tends to be more engaging and aims to provide a deeper understanding of concepts. (**Anexa 7 la OMEN nr. 3371/12.03.2013)

Current school programs promote experiential learning by involving students directly in the studied reality. The focus is on applying knowledge, skills, and values in real-world contexts, increasing the emphasis on practical and applied activities within each school subject. The development of competencies largely depends on how the teacher designs and organizes learning and the extent to which they emphasize the applied dimension of knowledge. (Dumitrescu, 2013)

The third stage

The second grade is the final level among the three within the fundamental acquisition cycle. By the end of the second grade, the aim is for the student to be capable of:

- Using various forms of communication in real-life situations, including receiving and producing short and simple verbal and non-verbal messages in familiar contexts, employing basic terminology conventions specific to different school subjects, and interacting in familiar communication contexts in their native language.

- Demonstrating creative thinking and adaptability in various situations by displaying curiosity for change, showing interest in engaging in focused and structured activities like those proposed by the educator, and expressing artistic sensitivity through simple means.

- Valuing their own experiences in investigating the natural and social environment by observing elements in their nearby environment, demonstrating curiosity for phenomena in their surroundings, reporting observed relationships in their immediate environment, using simple procedures to solve problems, and providing simple explanations for questions like "When?", "How?", and "Why?", as well as expressing simple opinions about objects, events, or phenomena in the surrounding environment.

- Understanding and performing social roles within different types of communities, including showing an interest in relating within the classroom, participating in group activities, being willing to resolve conflicts, observing the identities of family members and how they interact, and manifesting their own personality within a social role.

- Understanding and using technology appropriately, including demonstrating discipline and perseverance in completing simple tasks in familiar contexts, accepting guidance and cooperation in the learning process, seeking information to solve simple, specific tasks, using information and communication technology, and showing an interest in a balanced computer access program.

- Internalizing a set of individual and social values to guide their behavior by displaying confidence in their abilities, caring for a clean and friendly environment, showing an interest in a healthy lifestyle and work regimen, and forming opinions about aesthetic aspects in their surroundings.

- Mobilizing their own potential to build a quality life through developing a sense of purpose, engaging in goal-oriented activities with a focus on achieving those goals, and playing different roles in playful activities and everyday life. (***)Notă privind elaborarea planului-cadru pentru învățământul primar, Clasa pregătitoare și clasele I – a II-a, 2013)

Through an analysis of the competencies required for a student who has completed the second grade and finished the fundamental acquisition cycle, one can observe the need for dynamic, natural, open

education that maintains a constant connection with society and its members. It emphasizes a commitment to the environment, natural areas, and harmonious physical and cognitive development in the natural environment. The encouragement of self-discovery and relationships based on communication, sharing, discovery, and experiential learning is also evident, with a holistic and interdisciplinary approach to education. (Roman, 2014) The goal of this educational level is to provide the conceptual, psychological, and behavioral foundations that allow a child to adapt efficiently to the next stage of education, and, more importantly, to ensure the rapid social integration of each individual. Competencies can be acquired more easily and rapidly if each teacher prepares the necessary space and resources for modern learning, taking into account the needs and interests of each child. This can be achieved, especially through the use of outdoor education activities. At the end of this study cycle, a national evaluation of fundamental competencies is conducted, with test items developed by the National Center for Evaluation and Examination. It begins with an integrated test based on reading in Language and Communication, followed by a test in Mathematics and Natural Sciences. Each test is allocated 30 minutes for completion, and the tests are administered in the normal classroom where students carry out their daily activities. The results are not recorded in the class register, and they are used at the school level for developing individualized learning plans and informing parents about the progress of the assessed competencies.

Good practices in integrating outdoor learning activities in the curriculum of coreprocurement cycle

There are specific methods used in primary education to achieve the most effective teaching and learning activities. A method is a set of operations that serves as a tool for human action, generally through which a knowledgeable subject approaches the revelation of the essence of the objective world. Didactic methodology signifies the entirety of methods and procedures used in the teaching process, based on a unified concept of the teaching-learning-evaluation process and the principles and laws it follows (Dumitru, 2005). In modern education, there is no longer a distinction between the significance of some methods over others. Presently, education focuses on how these methods are employed to achieve the set objectives (Cerghit, 2006).

Adapting Established Methods in the Context of Outdoor Education

Outdoor education, whether used as the sole form of learning or as a learning strategy within traditional education, brings about positive

changes in learning styles and the way existing methods are adapted in various situations. The most common way to use the outdoor approach is by applying well-established and known methods in outdoor settings. In this way, outdoor education becomes efficient and easy to use for every educator, regardless of the age group they are working with. Within outdoor education, both traditional teaching methods and interactive methods that enhance group cohesion can be employed. Depending on the objectives, the number of participants, the desired outcomes, and the chosen setting, the methods to be used can be determined, as well as how they will be adapted to meet the group's needs and ensure that the entire activity leads to effective learning. The science that deals with the study of teaching methods is didactic methodology, which serves as a theory and a collection of methods and procedures used in the teaching process. A method is a set of operations that functions as a tool for human action in general, through which the knowledgeable subject approaches the revelation of the essence of the objective world. (Dicționarul de pedagogie, 1979, Bocoș, 2007)

In the current and comprehensive conception of educational methods, as per the definition given by Ionescu, a teaching method represents a means of action, a tool through which students, under the guidance of the teacher or independently, acquire and deepen their knowledge, form and develop intellectual and practical skills, abilities, competences, behaviors, attitudes, and more (Ionescu, 2003, Dughi & Roman, 2008). According to this definition, it can be stated that outdoor education is an educational strategy that fosters competencies and can be utilized in various learning situations.

Research methodology

The primary objective of this study is to explore the role of outdoor education in connecting conventional and contemporary teaching approaches within the framework of the Romanian primary and secondary education core curriculum. This research will extensively examine the curriculum's content, teaching strategies, and the incorporation of outdoor learning activities to evaluate their influence on students' educational achievements and the broader educational experience. Also, it will offer an extensive comprehension of the integration of outdoor education into the central Romanian curriculum, illustrating how it functions as a bridge connecting conventional and contemporary educational methodologies. The results have the potential to enlighten educational policymakers, curriculum designers, and educators about the efficacy of outdoor education in enriching the learning experience and promoting holistic student growth.

Furthermore, it might provide valuable insights into potential enhancements to the curriculum and teacher training to maximize the advantages of outdoor education in Romania.

Teacher and Student Survey results

The main questions used were based on the following:

- Positive Attitudes and Perceptions
- Improved Engagement
- Academic Benefits
- Enhanced Social Skills
- Environmental Awareness
- Challenges and Concerns
- Integration with Curriculum
- Variability in Experiences
- Recommendations for Improvement
- Impact on Well-being
- Teacher Preparedness
- Barriers to Implementation

The results of these surveys inform us, as educational policies and practices, and are helping educators and policymakers make informed decisions about the incorporation of outdoor learning into the curriculum and how to optimize its benefits. They also highlight the strengths and weaknesses of outdoor education programs and guide improvements in this area of education.

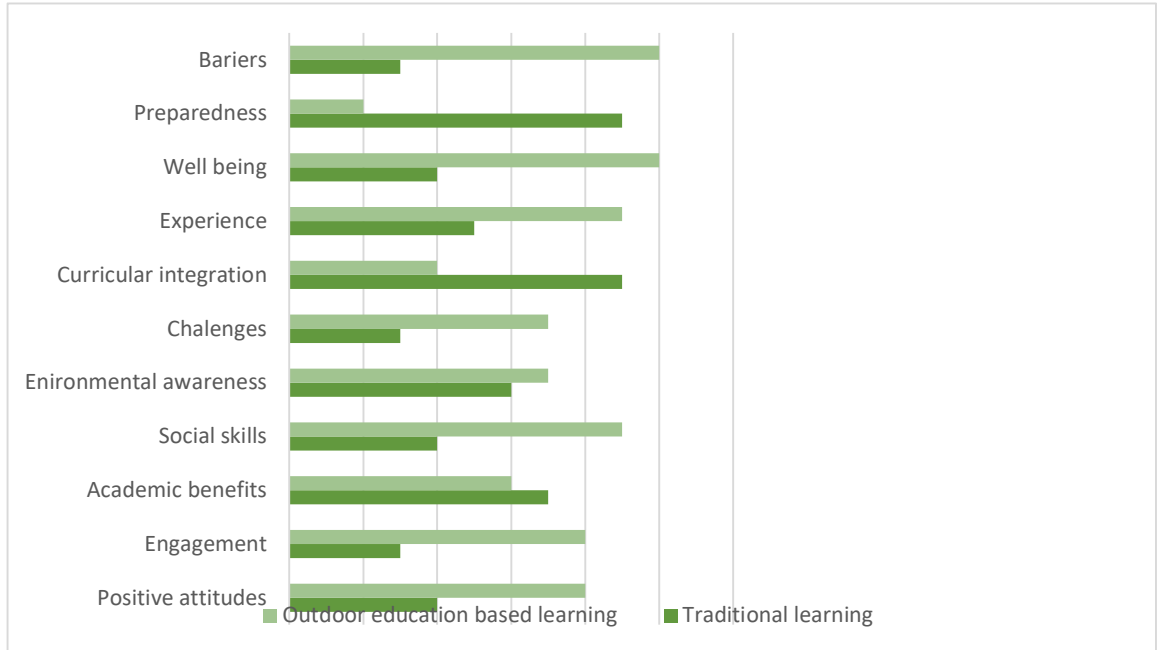


Fig. 1. Survey results on outdoor education as the interface between traditional and modern learning

Observations

After visiting numerous primary and preschools from Arad County, we have managed to compare methodologies and learning environments.

The main elements observed were as it follows:

- Diverse Outdoor Learning Environments
- Engaged Students
- Varied Teaching Methods
- Integration with Curriculum
- Teacher Involvement
- Safety Measures
- Student Interactions
- Student Learning Outcomes
- Environmental Education
- Challenges and Obstacles
- Teacher Training and Development
- Stakeholder Collaboration
- Equity and Inclusivity
- Student Well-being
- Use of Technology.

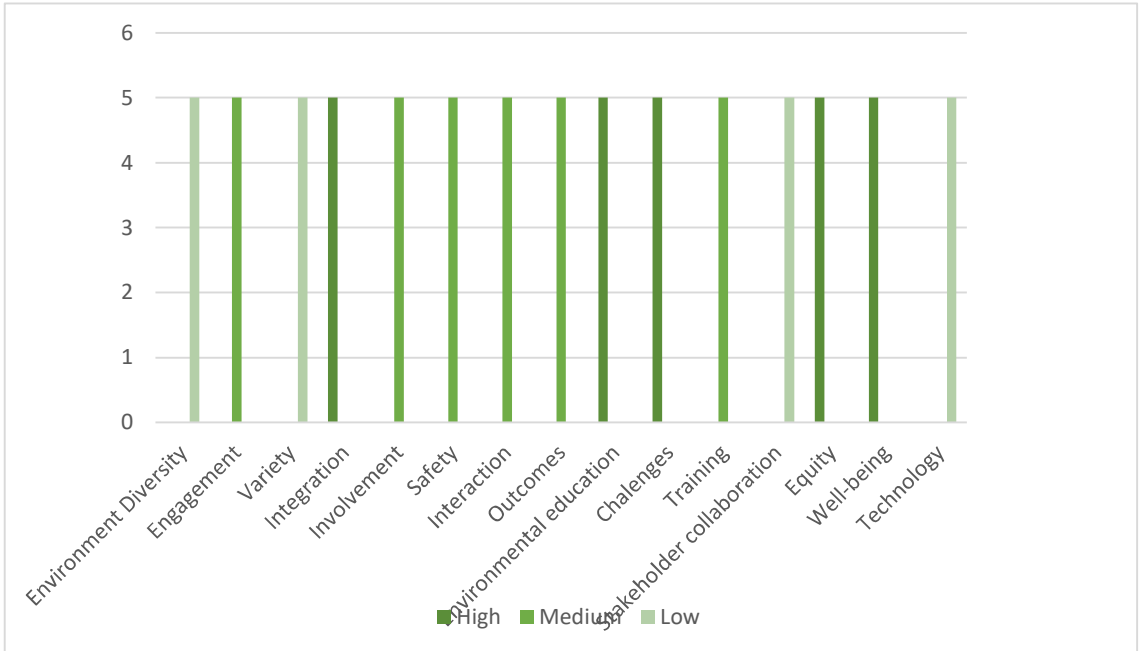


Fig. 2. Observation results of the on-filed activities on outdoor educational practices in Arad County preschools and primary schools

Data analysis

These results of a long stage research on the above mentioned concept, offer insights into various aspects of education in schools and preschools from Arad County, particularly focusing on the integration and impact of outdoor education. (Torkos, 2018)

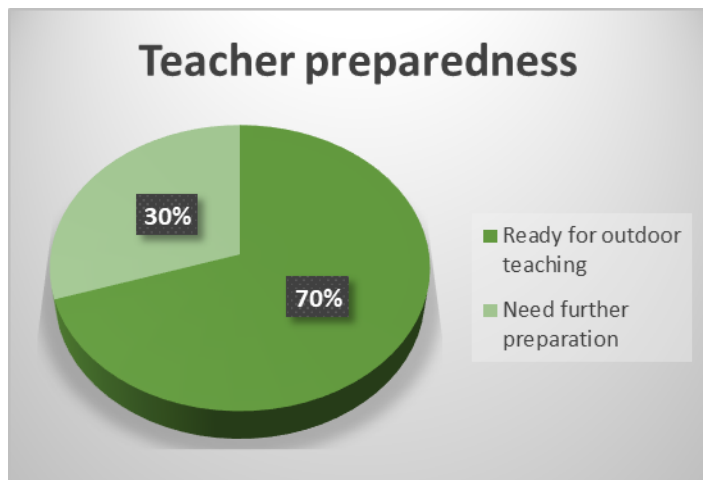


Fig. 3. Data analysis on teachers readiness

Data suggests that 70% of teachers feel adequately prepared to facilitate outdoor education activities, while 30% express a need for additional training and resources.

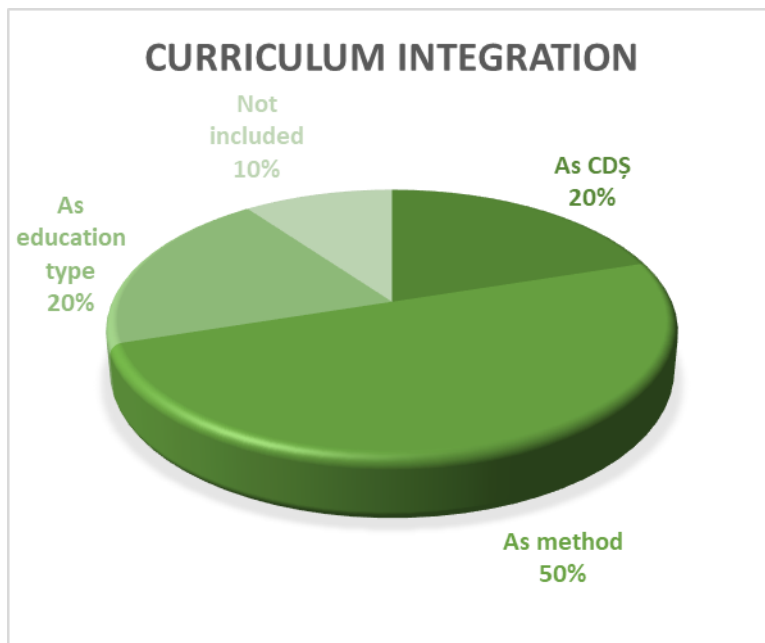


Fig. 4. Data analysis on curriculum integration

The analysis indicates that the majority of schools have successfully integrated outdoor education into their core curriculum, in one of its forms, with only a very small percent (2%) not having it integrated it at all.

Conclusions

The study indicates that outdoor education has a positive impact on student engagement. Students are more motivated and enthusiastic when involved in outdoor learning activities. This engagement can contribute to a more effective and enjoyable learning experience. The findings demonstrate that outdoor education is associated with improved academic performance, critical thinking skills, and problem-solving abilities among students. It enhances their cognitive development, which is essential for their overall educational progress. Outdoor education is effectively integrated into the Romanian core curriculum, acting as a bridge between traditional classroom-based learning and modern educational approaches. This integration fosters a more holistic and well-rounded educational experience. The study reveals that outdoor education significantly enhances students'

environmental awareness and their sense of responsibility for nature. This is essential in cultivating environmentally conscious citizens and contributing to sustainability efforts. Based on the findings, the study suggests recommendations for further enhancing outdoor education in Romania. These recommendations may include additional investment in outdoor learning resources, teacher training, and stronger community engagement. It is associated with reduced stress levels and an improved sense of mental and emotional well-being. Collaboration with local communities, environmental organizations, and experts is identified as a key factor in enriching outdoor education programs and expanding their impact.

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