

Non-formal education and its impact on society. Case study on the simulation of a judicial trial in the 7th grade

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Abstract. The article explores the role of non-formal education in the development of students' civic and social skills, by presenting a case study conducted in the 7th grade. The aim of the research was to demonstrate how interactive methods can support active learning and contribute to the formation of a responsible attitude towards the law and society.

The activity involved organizing a mock trial in the school environment, in which students played different roles in a fictional case. The simulation was complemented by the participation of a professional lawyer, within the project "Be a lawyer in your school!", who held applied lessons to deepen legal concepts. The approach was non-formal, focused on learning through direct experience.

Participation in the activity generated increased interest in the topic of justice and contributed to the development of communication, argumentation and collaboration skills. Students became more aware of the importance of respecting the law and demonstrated a better understanding of civic responsibilities. The activity strengthened self-confidence and stimulated active involvement in the educational process.

Mock trials and collaboration with professionals outside of school can have a significant impact on training young people as active citizens. Non-formal education enriches formal learning by providing relevant and authentic contexts that prepare students for life in society. Such practices should be encouraged and systematically integrated into the educational process.

Keywords: Non-formal education; Mock trials; Civic competences; Active citizenship; Experiential learning.

1. Introduction

In a constantly changing educational context, which places increasing emphasis on the formation of transversal skills and the development of critical thinking, non-formal education has become an indispensable pillar in the training process of young people. It is not limited to the transmission of information, but aims to create authentic, relevant learning contexts adapted to the individual rhythm of students (Niculescu, 2009).

Non-formal education has a voluntary, flexible and complementary character to the formal system, offering students opportunities for active learning and social involvement. Through methods such as learning through play, thematic projects, debates or simulations, students can

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experience real-life situations, which develop their autonomy, empathy and civic spirit (Petrescu, 2016).

In this article, I present a non-formal activity carried out with a 7th grade class, in which students participated in a simulated judicial trial. This approach aimed to develop social and civic skills, but also to familiarize with the values of the rule of law and justice.

2. Theoretical framework

Education for democratic citizenship involves not only teaching theoretical notions about state institutions, but also encouraging active participation, understanding of rights and obligations, and personal responsibility in society.

The Council of Europe has been promoting student-centred and experiential pedagogical approaches for years as the most effective in shaping democratic attitudes (Council of Europe, 2018).

Legal simulations, very popular in civic education in the United States (in the form of mock trials), have been successfully adopted in European schools. They offer students a clearly structured framework, but also the freedom to explore roles, support arguments, and understand the moral and legal implications of certain behaviours (Bîrzea, 2012).

These activities contribute to legal literacy, an essential element for the formation of active and aware citizens.

3. Methodology and activity development

In order to consolidate theoretical knowledge about the rule of law and the justice system, but also to stimulate critical thinking, I organized a simulation of a judicial trial with 7th grade students in April. The chosen case was a fictitious one, but inspired by real situations encountered in the school environment: the theft of a valuable object (a golden pen) and the manifestation of aggressive behaviours between classmates.

The students were assigned to teams and were given specific roles – judge, prosecutor, defence and prosecution lawyers, defendant, victim, witnesses, clerk. The preparation of the activity lasted for two weeks, during which the students drafted pleadings, studied codes of conduct and relevant articles from the Constitution and the Criminal Code, adapted to their level of understanding.

To provide authenticity, I made robes for the judge and lawyers and purchased a symbolic gavel. The classroom was redecorated to resemble a courtroom, and the activity was filmed with the parents' consent to allow for later analysis.

The simulation was followed by a reflective debate, in which students were encouraged to express their opinions on the roles played, the fairness of the decision made, and how violence in school can be prevented.

In addition, I integrated the activity into the national educational project “Be a lawyer in your school!”, carried out in partnership with the Constanta Bar Association. A volunteer lady lawyer

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held four interactive lessons, during which she explained the concepts of justice, the rights and responsibilities of minors, the role of the defence, and the legal consequences of criminal acts. Her presence added credibility and gave students the opportunity to ask direct questions to a legal professional.

4. Results and impact

The activity generated increased interest in the topic of justice and significantly contributed to the development of communication skills, active listening and logical argumentation. Students demonstrated empathy for victims, but also understanding of the complexity of the role of a judge or lawyer. Participants reported that they overcame their emotions in front of the public and learned to collaborate in a more structured way.

Based on a questionnaire administered after the activity, over 85% of students stated that they better understood how the justice system works and that they were more attentive to behaviours that may have legal consequences. Also, 70% of students mentioned that the activity helped them to reflect more deeply on the notion of personal responsibility.

Fellow teachers and parents noted a positive impact on students' self-confidence and a visible improvement in their ability to express structured opinions in other classes.

5. Conclusions

Non-formal education proves to be not only a complement to formal education, but a vital space for the development of essential skills in contemporary society. Simulation-type activities, especially legal ones, can become true transformative learning experiences, especially when supported by specialists and integrated into a coherent pedagogical framework.

The approach presented confirms that middle school students can understand complex concepts, if they are presented in an accessible, contextualized and active way. Collaboration with professionals outside the school, such as lawyers, adds value to the educational process and facilitates the building of bridges between school and real life.

In conclusion, non-formal education offers authentic opportunities for civic training, directly contributing to the creation of a generation of aware, involved and responsible citizens.

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