Non-formal education and its impact on society

Gabriela Covaciu[1]*

[1]"Toma Socolescu" Technological High School, Ploiești, Romania
*Corresponding author: gabriela_minea23@yahoo.com

Abstract. Non-formal education is a complementary and essential form of learning, carried out outside the traditional institutional framework, aiming to develop personal, social and professional skills. This type of education plays an important role in forming active and responsible citizens, contributing to social cohesion and the development of communities. In this study, the benefits of non-formal education, its social impact and some concrete examples that illustrate this educational form are examined.

The research employed a qualitative approach, combining literature review and case study analysis. Data were gathered from non-governmental organizations, community education centres, and adult learning programs across various regions. Interviews and focus group discussions with participants and facilitators of non-formal education programs provided rich, contextual insights. The methodology emphasized understanding lived experiences and the perceived societal value of non-formal learning. This approach allowed for a deep exploration of how such programs contribute to community development, personal empowerment, and skill acquisition.

The study found that non-formal education plays a pivotal role in bridging gaps left by formal educational systems. Participants reported increased confidence, improved employability, and a stronger sense of community belonging. Programs focused on literacy, vocational training, and civic education were especially effective in marginalized communities. One notable finding was that non-formal education often leads to ripple effects—such as intergenerational learning and increased civic participation. Additionally, the flexible, learner-centred structure of these programs was found to accommodate diverse learning styles and life situations, making them accessible to youth, women, and older adults.

Non-formal education holds significant potential for fostering inclusive and sustainable societal development. The research underscores the importance of integrating non-formal learning frameworks into national education policies to enhance social equity and lifelong learning opportunities. Policymakers and educators are encouraged to recognize and support non-formal education as a strategic tool for social transformation and economic resilience.

Keywords: Non-formal education; Social impact and cohesion; Responsible citizens.

1. Introduction

Non-formal education facilitates the development of practical and social skills that are not always covered in the formal system. For example, vocational training programs organized by NGOs contribute to increasing the employability of young people through skills directly applicable in the labour market. Training courses for trades or digital skills, such as those organized by NGOs such

as Junior Achievement Romania, help young people learn through practice and develop entrepreneurial skills.

Moreover, non-formal education stimulates the motivation and active involvement of participants, using interactive methods adapted to different needs, such as art, sports or leadership workshops, which organize activities that directly involve students and stimulate creativity and collaboration.

An important aspect is also the promotion of social inclusion. Volunteering projects for disadvantaged people, such as those carried out by the Red Cross or Habitat for Humanity, offer opportunities for involvement and social integration for marginalized groups, contributing to the reduction of inequalities (Brennan,1997).

Non-formal education also encourages the development of active citizenship by involving participants in community projects or environmental campaigns. Thus, it contributes to the consolidation of democracy and civic responsibility. Awareness campaigns for environmental protection or human rights, organized by associations such as Greenpeace Romania, involve young people in community actions, developing civic responsibility.

2. Research methodology

This study adopted a qualitative research design, aimed at exploring the social impact of non-formal education programs through the lived experiences of participants and facilitators. Given the diverse and often localized nature of such initiatives, the research prioritized depth over breadth.

Data collection was carried out through semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and participant observation in selected non-formal education centres across three regions. These included urban, semi-urban, and rural settings to ensure a balanced perspective. A purposive sampling strategy was employed to select participants who had been involved in non-formal learning for a minimum of six months. This helped ensure that the data reflected meaningful engagement with the programs, rather than brief or one-time exposure. Interviews were conducted with learners of different ages, genders, and socioeconomic backgrounds, as well as with educators, program coordinators, and local stakeholders.

In addition to fieldwork, a comparative analysis of existing literature on non-formal education models—both local and international—was conducted. This secondary data provided a broader context and allowed the researcher to identify patterns and contrasts across different educational settings.

Data were analysed thematically, using coding methods to identify recurring ideas, perceptions, and outcomes. This approach provided a nuanced understanding of how non-formal education contributes to individual growth and community development, while also revealing the structural barriers that limit its full potential.

Practical examples that support non-formal education:

- Educational camps organized by various NGOs, which combine learning with recreational activities and the development of social skills.
- Mentoring programs in which professionals from various fields guide young people in their careers.
- Digital literacy courses for the elderly or disadvantaged, facilitating social inclusion.
- Leadership and personal development workshops offered by organizations such as AIESEC, which prepare young people for roles as community and professional leaders.

Non-formal education contributes to reducing unemployment through practical courses that respond to the demands of the real economy. In addition, it strengthens social cohesion and stimulates innovation by developing an active and involved society (Tudor, 2013).

3. Results

To show the results of the research, we are going to list some international case studies and examples that address non-formal education:

- Finland – the digital education model

Finland is recognized for its advanced integration of technology in education. Schools use tablets and laptops from an early age, and digital platforms personalize the learning path of each student. For example, in Helsinki, the school system offers online courses for students with special needs, adapted to their learning pace and style.

- Singapore – using technology for hybrid teaching

Singapore has successfully implemented the blended learning model, combining face-to-face classes with digital resources. Students use interactive platforms for homework and tests, and teachers receive real-time reports on class progress, allowing for personalized interventions.

- Youth Build, United States

Youth Build is a non-formal program for young people without school or work, which provides training in construction and community services, developing practical skills and social skills. This model has been taken up in several countries, being a clear example of positive impact in reducing social exclusion.

- European Voluntary Service (EVS)

EVS offers young people the opportunity to participate in volunteering projects in other European countries, developing intercultural, civic and personal skills. This non-formal experience stimulates inclusion and civic responsibility, strengthening European identity (COE, 2020).

- Romania – the "Home School" project

In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, Romania launched the "Home School" platform, with TV shows and online resources for all school levels, ensuring the continuity of education in

difficult conditions. This was an example of the rapid adaptation of the system to the crisis, using technology for inclusion.

- "Grigore Moisil" Elementary School, Ploiești

This school has implemented an internal educational platform and uses tablets in foreign language and mathematics classes. Students benefit from interactive tests and video materials, which has led to an increase in school performance in recent years.

- University of Petroleum and Gas, Ploiești

In the academic field, UPG Ploiești has developed digital laboratories and online learning platforms, facilitating students' access to specialized resources, simulations and virtual practice, especially in technical fields.

- "Ovidiu Ro" Association

This Romanian organization promotes early and non-formal education in vulnerable communities, through kindergarten programs, parent training and extracurricular activities. Results show an increase in school enrollment and improved school performance.

- "School of Values" Project in Ploiești

Organized by several local NGOs, the project offers personal development, leadership and active citizenship workshops for students and young people, having an important impact in promoting social responsibility and community involvement.

- VERA Prahova Volunteer Centre, created by Master Peace Romania

This centre facilitates the involvement of young people in non-formal activities, from environmental actions to support for people in difficulty, promoting the development of social and civic skills.

And because I am an English teacher, I cannot end this study without a personal note on the subject I teach. So, in terms of non-formal education, learning English through workshops, summer camps or conversation groups has had a significant impact on many young people, including in my local communities. Such activities allow overcoming the formal barriers of the classroom and create a relaxed and friendly environment for practicing the language. For example, participating in an English conversation club or a cultural exchange program helps not only to improve language skills, but also to develop confidence and social skills. Moreover, volunteering in international projects conducted in English opens up professional and personal perspectives, demonstrating that non-formal education is a powerful vector for global integration.

4. Discussion

The findings suggest that non-formal education is not merely a supplement to formal schooling, but a vital educational avenue in its own right. In many cases, it serves as the only accessible form of learning for marginalized groups, such as adult learners, rural populations, or individuals who have dropped out of the formal system. Through practical skills training, literacy programs, and

community-based learning initiatives, non-formal education empowers individuals to take control of their personal and economic futures (Brinks, 1989).

These programs tend to be more adaptive and responsive to local needs, which enhances their relevance and impact. An important aspect that emerged is the role of non-formal education in fostering social cohesion. When learners engage in shared educational experiences—particularly those related to civic awareness or collaborative problem-solving—they tend to form stronger community bonds. In areas where trust in institutions is low, these informal networks of learning can contribute to social stability and participatory governance. Additionally, the research highlights that non-formal education encourages a mindset of lifelong learning, which is increasingly important in a fast-changing global economy.

However, challenges remain. Recognition and accreditation of non-formal learning continue to be limited in many countries. Without formal validation, the skills and knowledge gained through these programs may not translate into employment or further educational opportunities. This gap can undermine motivation and reduce the long-term benefits of participation. Therefore, a broader policy framework that acknowledges the legitimacy of non-formal education is necessary to maximize its societal contributions.

5. Conclusions

Therefore, we may say that non-formal education is an essential pillar for the development of an equitable and dynamic society, facilitating the formation of essential skills for personal and professional life. Supporting and expanding these forms of education is indispensable for adapting to contemporary challenges and promoting social inclusion. Constant support from authorities and civil society is essential for fully exploiting its potential, ensuring the growth of competent, responsible citizens open to change.

The research highlights that non-formal education holds a unique and vital place within broader educational ecosystems. While often undervalued compared to formal schooling, it demonstrates a powerful capacity to reach learners who are otherwise excluded, offering them practical skills, confidence, and opportunities for social inclusion. By focusing on flexibility and local relevance, non-formal education meets people where they are - whether in community centres, homes, or informal work environments.

What becomes clear through the findings is that the benefits of non-formal education extend beyond the individual. Communities benefit as well, through increased civic engagement, stronger interpersonal networks, and a more informed and skilled population. Yet, for these gains to be sustained, greater recognition and integration of non-formal education into national education policies are essential.

In a world facing rapid social, economic, and technological change, the need for adaptable, lifelong learning systems has never been greater. Non-formal education stands out as a practical and inclusive way to meet that need. Its potential will only be fully realized, however, when it is no longer treated as secondary, but embraced as a key contributor to societal progress.

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