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Research article

Predispositions and Openings in the Romanian School Curriculum from the Perspective of Outdoor Teaching-Learning-Assessment Activities. A Content Analysis

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Abstract

The Romanian national curriculum sets the general framework for organizing teaching-learning-assessment processes but does not always explicitly reference outdoor education. This analysis seeks to identify the extent to which school curricula support or limit lower secondary and high school teachers' initiatives to implement outdoor activities. Such opportunities become real extensions or even substitutions for classroom-delivered content and provide occasions for personality development, value and attitude formation, experimentation with less commonly assumed roles and responsibilities, and recognition of students' qualities that often escape traditional evaluations. Outdoor education, through experiential learning, direct observation, and research, should not be disregarded, regardless of how sophisticated school structures may become. Essentially, the curriculum represents the totality of learning experiences offered to students within an educational institution or specific program. In the field of outdoor education, discussions about curriculum encompass what students learn (content) and how they learn and experience education outdoors. Therefore, a curriculum that includes outdoor education involves planning and implementing activities, setting learning objectives, integrating key themes and concepts, and defining how students will actively participate and receive feedback on their learning process.

Keywords:
content analysis, curriculum, outdoor activities, specific goals, specific objectives, teachers' perspectives

1. Introduction

The holistic integration of practical outdoor experiences into the Romanian school curriculum includes innovative teaching methods and educational objectives specific to outdoor education. In this context, the curriculum aims to provide students with learning opportunities that transcend the boundaries of traditional classrooms, enabling them to develop skills and knowledge in a natural and interactive environment (Abendan et al., 2023).

This study investigates the pedagogical practices of a sample of 642 teachers from schools across Romania, encompassing a range of disciplines represented within the national curriculum. It explores how these teachers integrate outdoor education activities into their teaching, learning, and assessment practices.

The research aims to address a significant conceptual and practical gap in the existing literature regarding the integration of Outdoor Education (OE) within the formal school curriculum, with a specific focus on the Romanian educational context. Although numerous international studies highlight the positive impact of outdoor education on students' cognitive, socio-emotional, and physical development, there remains a scarcity of research exploring Romanian teachers' perspectives. Therefore, this study seeks to contribute to bridging this gap by offering a contextualized and applicable view of the potential of outdoor education in Romanian schools.

The study analyzes teachers' perceptions regarding the incorporation of outdoor activities into the lower secondary and high school curriculum, considering the predispositions and openness of the Romanian school curriculum towards outdoor teaching, learning, and assessment activities.

Accordingly, the objectives of this study are:

(a) To analyze teachers' responses concerning the integration of outdoor activities into the school curriculum and to identify which outdoor activities they deem appropriate for lower secondary and high school levels;

(b) To illustrate, through educational activities outlined in the national curriculum, how specific competencies can be achieved through outdoor education objectives.

The integration of outdoor activities into the school curriculum offers students diverse and relevant educational experiences, thus contributing to the development of their competencies, skills, and abilities. This hypothesis suggests that participation in outdoor activities provides interactive and tangible learning opportunities compared to traditional teaching methods and that such activities can be aligned with the objectives and content of the Romanian school curriculum.

2. Theoretical foundation

The Romanian curriculum should promote the integration of academic content with the surrounding environment, thereby facilitating contextualized learning by emphasizing its relevance to students' real lives. Studies (Pîrciu & Nițulescu, 2023; Pricob, 2020; Torkos & Coșarbă, 2023) have highlighted how teachers integrate and adapt teaching strategies to external environments in order to ensure effective and sustainable educational experiences. Research findings (Marin et al., 2022; Mîndrescu & Manea-Tonis, 2022; Simion & Rusu, 2020) underline that teacher training plays a crucial role in the future development of outdoor education concepts.

Teacher preparation (Haberman, 2005) should also focus on developing classroom management skills (Feille, 2017) and effective communication with students (Gross et al., 2019), parents, and colleagues (Judge & Bono, 2001). Teachers must be capable (Darling-Hammond & Baratz-Snowden, 2005) of creating a safe and positive learning environment while managing student behavior in the classroom. These research results support the necessity and importance of children spending time outdoors, emphasizing the cognitive, emotional, and physical benefits of such experiences (Crandall, 1973).

Outdoor education constitutes an important component of the educational systems in Nordic countries such as Norway, Sweden, Denmark, Finland, and Iceland (Norðdahl & Jóhannesson, 2015). These countries have a long-standing tradition of outdoor education, making extensive use of natural resources to support children's learning and development. For instance, in Sweden and Norway (Skar et al., 2016), students spend up to 20% of their school time engaged in outdoor activities, while in Finland (Sjöblom & Svens, 2019), a strong tradition of forest learning, known as *metsäkoulu* (forest school), exists.

Several notable studies in this field include the works of Barfod and Mygind (2022) and Sam and Kouhirostami (2020). These studies focus on different aspects of *udeskole* (outdoor schooling), such as its impact on learning, the socio-emotional development of students, health and well-being, the relationship with the natural environment, among others. They provide valuable insights into the effects and benefits of outdoor education within the Danish *udeskole* context (Waite et al., 2016).

3. Research methodology

This research focuses on two fundamental aspects of the educational process: the analysis of teachers' responses regarding the incorporation of outdoor activities into the school curriculum and the observation of positive teaching-learning-assessment experiences.

The questionnaire used in this study (Appendix 1: Questionnaire Items Addressing the Research Objectives) aimed to capture teachers' opinions on the necessary steps for integrating outdoor activities into the school curriculum. These steps include: identifying objectives and competencies specified in the National Curriculum for each subject; establishing outdoor activity objectives; developing a didactic strategy; assessing material, financial, and human resources; evaluating, self-evaluating, and providing feedback; reporting results; adjusting future activities based on observations; and designing outdoor activities by examining the curriculum, defining the activity's objectives based on identified competencies, selecting content, planning activities, exploring interdisciplinary integration, employing diverse teaching and learning methods, providing continuous feedback, developing appropriate assessment tools, reflecting on outcomes, ensuring safety measures, and involving the community.

The sample of 642 teachers was recruited through individual communication and distribution of the questionnaire via Google Forms through WhatsApp messages, emails sent to schools listed in the national school directory, and in-person distribution of printed questionnaires. Out of over 12,000 emails sent to middle schools, high schools, colleges, and vocational schools in Romania, approximately 3% responded electronically (384 respondents). Additionally, 47 teachers from the Sports Program High School in Iași completed printed questionnaires, along with 146 teachers specializing in religion and Romanian language, and another 65 teachers through referrals from former students of the Sports Program High School who are now teaching across the country.

The sample includes teachers from all curricular areas. All participants were informed about the ethical principles of the study and that the questions referred to their personal pedagogical practices (experiences in teaching, learning, and assessment, and their approaches to integrating outdoor education into their respective subjects). Teachers were informed that outdoor education involves a program based on experiential and practical activities occurring outside the classroom and those specific elements of outdoor education can be integrated into the disciplines covered by the national curriculum, given the flexibility of the curriculum's general and specific competencies.

Regarding the teaching environment, 461 teachers were from urban areas, and 181 were from rural schools, a discrepancy maintained across individual disciplines. This confirms that motivation to participate in the research decreased with the distance from the source of the questionnaire, either due to the absence of the researcher or the impersonal nature of email invitations compared to personal or WhatsApp communication. Most responses were received from Iași County, but the sample also includes responses from other counties and Bucharest.

In terms of subjects and teaching levels (lower secondary/high school), the distribution was approximately even, with some exceptions. Romanian language, physical education, and biology teachers had twice as many respondents at the high school level, due to a higher number of teaching hours, resulting in more teachers filling out the questionnaire. Overall, 275 teachers taught at the lower secondary level, and 359 at the high school level.

Responses were electronically recorded into a .sav file to build the database used for the research. This process helped identify potential difficulties related to coding the questionnaire items and monitor the variability of responses for each item. Data entry was performed using SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences), applying a coding system for questions and answers: 1 - agree, 2 - disagree, 3 - other.

Increased interest in this topic was observed among novice urban teachers with 1–5 years of experience, and among senior teachers with 21–25 or 26–35 years of experience (holding the highest teaching rank), as well as experienced rural teachers. This interest benefits the analysis of outdoor education as a source of new and diversified learning experiences, supported both by the enthusiasm of novice teachers and the expertise of experienced ones.

4. Results

The research focused on teachers' responses using SPSS pathways (Analyze → Descriptive Statistics → Frequencies → Charts → none → Descending Counts) to the following questions:

4.1. Identifying objectives and competencies specified in the National Curriculum for each subject

97% of teachers considered this step important for effectively planning and implementing activities aligned with the National Curriculum. 3% disagreed, arguing that outdoor experiences should allow greater flexibility and free exploration rather than being strictly tied to curricular objectives.

4.2. Establishing clear objectives for outdoor activities based on curriculum requirements

96.7% of teachers emphasized the importance of correlating outdoor activities with curricular objectives and competencies. 3.1% disagreed, while 2% maintained an intermediate position, recognizing the importance of alignment but also advocating for innovation and adaptability in implementation.

4.3. Selecting teaching methods and strategies that match objectives and encourage active participation

98.9% of respondents agreed on the importance of assigning students active roles in planning, implementing, and evaluating outdoor projects. Only 0.5% found educational games less effective for achieving deeper learning objectives, and 0.6% preferred reflective observation without group activities.

4.4. Integrating outdoor activities into the annual lesson plans and school projects

98.9% of teachers supported the integration of outdoor activities, citing their tangible and relevant educational benefits. A minority (0.5%) considered such activities difficult to organize, and 0.6% suggested selective integration, depending on discipline, weather, or other factors.

4.5. Adjusting activities according to available material, financial, and human resources

99.5% agreed that adapting activities to available resources is essential, promoting creativity in maximizing learning opportunities even with limited means. A small fraction (0.5%) expressed concerns that limited resources might significantly constrain the quality and diversity of activities.

4.6. Planning logistical details: location, equipment, approvals, and scheduling

99.8% of teachers considered logistical planning crucial for the efficient and safe implementation of outdoor activities. Only 0.2% disagreed, mainly citing limited school resources.

4.7. Creating relevant teaching materials to support outdoor activities and reinforce academic content

99.8% believed that materials should align with learning objectives and facilitate practical application of theoretical concepts outdoors. 0.2% disagreed.

4.8. Assessing students' existing knowledge and skills before the outdoor activity

99.1% stressed the necessity of pre-activity assessments to tailor the experience to students' needs. 0.8% believed previous acquisitions were irrelevant, while 0.2% noted exceptions in small rural schools with combined classes.

4.9. Creating appropriate assessment tools (questionnaires, observations, portfolios, projects, etc.)

99.7% emphasized the need for varied and objective assessment tools to monitor students' progress. 0.3% indicated that providing model templates to teachers would suffice.

4.10. Monitoring and evaluating the activity implementation process

99.7% agreed on the importance of continuous monitoring to make necessary adjustments. 0.2% disagreed, suggesting that school counsellors or support teachers should handle these tasks.

4.11. Encouraging students to self-assess and reflect on their outdoor experiences

99.5% endorsed promoting self-assessment and reflection to help students understand their own progress. 0.2% disagreed, while 0.3% noted demographic constraints in small schools.

4.12. Obtaining feedback from participating teachers and adjusting future activities accordingly

99.8% supported gathering teacher feedback to improve future activities. 0.2% disagreed; emphasizing that feedback is important but not imperative.

4.13. Assessing academic outcomes and the impact of outdoor activities on student development

99.7% recognized the importance of evaluating both academic results and broader developmental outcomes. 0.3% disagreed.

4.14. Reporting relevant results and observations to parents, teachers, and community members

98.8% agreed on the importance of transparent communication with parents and the school community. 1.1% disagreed, and 0.2% emphasized the need for student consent when sharing information.

Teachers' responses highlight the wide range of potential educational benefits offered by outdoor education: developing practical skills, fostering teamwork and social abilities, reinforcing theoretical knowledge through practical application, stimulating creativity, and promoting environmental responsibility. Outdoor activities present an excellent opportunity to implement an integrated, transdisciplinary curriculum where students learn experientially, dynamically, and in strong connection with reality. The diversity of ideas proposed by teachers underscores that any subject can benefit from such innovative educational frameworks.

5. Discussions

Teachers' responses regarding the incorporation of outdoor activities in the school curriculum and activities considered integrative fit for the secondary/high school level were summarized as follows: geography teachers listed nine responses focused on discovering the local horizon through hiking, making maps and plan sketches.

At Psychology we collected the following 11 responses that propose survival activities in limited situations, orientation activities in isolated areas, resource management activities. Teachers of economics in 19 answers specified: hiking and nature trips to explore local landscapes and learn about the environment, geography/economics/accounting. The activities stated by the history professors include 17 answers: museum visits, observations on buildings, which involve as many participants as possible, with different level of psychosomatic development. Teachers supporting pedagogical and practice classes have stated 54 responses: visits to local historical sites, environmental conservation projects, astronomical observation sessions, games and outdoor sports activities that strengthen a good relationship with other members of the group. At the Biology discipline we have 28 answers with the following specifications: using virtual reality in biology and anatomy; activities with ecological themes in which we approach subjects from the point of view of biology, geography, chemistry. Math teachers listed 30 synthesized answers as follows: exploration, length measurement, units of measure in nature, geometric bodies made of cardboard. To the Religion discipline in 57 answers were mentioned: discovery of the local cultural heritage, exploration of nature, Christian ecology, philanthropy, pilgrimages and thematic trips, volunteer activities. Teachers of human socio gave 25 answers and listed: sports activities, art cultural, counseling and personal development. The responses of 53 English teachers exemplify: self-knowledge activities that promote health and fitness, which can also develop team spirit, leadership and communication skills. Teachers of Physical Education and Sports propose in 41 answers: any type of physical activity that can be associated with another discipline. The Romanian language and literature discipline proposes through the specialized teachers in 116 answers the following activities: organizing cultural events, social activities, conducted in Romanian or in a foreign language, to practice free speech and to develop interdisciplinary skills in students. The subjects of Fine Education and Arts in 16 answers specified: drawing and painting in the open air, study by nature, photography, information on local fauna and flora. In the German and French disciplines we have 5 answers and 6 answers, which include outdoor interdisciplinary activities in the school curriculum. To the discipline Technological education are listed 17 answers: networking activities, collaboration, support; creation/collaboration and group activities (bicycle, board, skates, hiking, etc.). At Music in 8 responses were stated: excursions in nature to explore natural ecosystems, climate and human activities on the environment. At ICT in 7 answers: interdisciplinary activities in nature. At Chemistry in 10 answers: surface measurements, volume; chemistry-biology. In Physics 10 answers listed areas such as: thermodynamics, optics, mechanics using notions learned in chemistry, biology or technical modules that can be integrated into outdoor education. In Latin, Logic, Psychology, Philosophy, answers that stated that any activity that actively involves students can be mentioned. In Latin, Logic, Psychology, Philosophy, answers that stated that any activity that actively involves students can be mentioned.

The integration of outdoor activities into the school curriculum has become a major concern for teachers from various disciplines, their responses highlighting both the diversity of ideas and the educational potential of activities outside the classroom. In the field of socio-human sciences (Geography, History, Psychology, Socio-human Sciences), teachers propose activities to explore the local environment, visits to historical sites, hiking, nature orientation and resource management. These initiatives focus on developing the skills to adapt, observe and understand the social and historical context, while strengthening interpersonal relationships and community spirit. The exact disciplines (Mathematics, Physics, Chemistry, Biology, ICT) propose outdoor activities through which students apply theoretical knowledge in practical contexts: real measurements, case studies in nature, interdisciplinary experiments (chemistry-biology, physics-technology). A pragmatic approach is noted, oriented towards the immediate applicability of knowledge and the stimulation of critical thinking. Romanian language and literature, together with foreign languages (English, French, German, and Latin) contribute by promoting free communication in informal contexts, organizing cultural events, self-knowledge activities and developing social skills. These activities support expressiveness, leadership and teamwork. In the artistic field (Plastic Education, Arts, Music), the proposals of the professors support creative activities such as drawing, painting, outdoor photography, but also exploring ecosystems through music and visual arts, promoting aesthetic sensitivity and connection with nature. Religion proposes a wide range of activities, from Christian ecology and volunteering, to pilgrimages and the discovery of cultural heritage, marking a link between the spiritual and community development of students. Physical and technological education guides students towards interdisciplinary integrated physical activities (hiking, bicycle, skating), highlighting the importance of physical health, collaboration and cooperation.

In summary, teachers' responses illustrate a clear vision of the multiple benefits of outdoor education: developing practical competencies, fostering teamwork and social abilities, consolidating theoretical knowledge through direct application, stimulating creativity, and promoting environmental awareness. Outdoor education activities present an excellent opportunity to implement an integrated and transdisciplinary curriculum where students learn through experience in an attractive, dynamic, and reality-connected manner. The diversity of ideas confirms that any discipline can benefit from an innovative educational framework of this kind.

6. Conclusions

Outdoor education has gained increasing attention over the past decades, being associated with multiple cognitive, emotional, and social benefits for students. However, current research in the field reveals certain methodological and contextual limitations that must be considered to achieve a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon.

The study included 642 teachers; however, certain subgroups — such as rural educators or those teaching specialized disciplines — were underrepresented. This may reduce the generalizability of the conclusions to the entire educational system. The research relies mainly on teachers' perspectives, excluding students, parents, and school administrators, thus limiting a holistic view of the impact of outdoor education across the educational ecosystem. The methodological framework adopted favors objectivity and generalizability but may omit subtle aspects of individual experiences, such as the emotional and behavioral development effects on students.

Seasonal factors, access to suitable outdoor spaces, and available resources were not analyzed in detail, even though they can significantly influence the application and success of outdoor educational activities. Moreover, the constraints of current school programs reduce opportunities for integrating outdoor activities, and the study does not explore possibilities for curricular reforms that could allow more flexible implementation. Regarding educational levels, although the research includes both lower secondary and high school education, implementing outdoor education at higher levels proves to be more challenging due to the theoretical and rigid nature of the curriculum.

The particular cultural and institutional features of the Romanian educational system limit the direct transferability of conclusions to other international contexts where pedagogical norms and environmental conditions may vary significantly. Longitudinal studies would be essential to understand the long-term impact of outdoor education on students' cognitive, emotional, and social development. Furthermore, it is necessary to broaden the perspectives investigated by including students', parents', and school managers' viewpoints. Conducting international comparative analyses could help identify best practices and success factors for outdoor education across different cultural contexts. Simultaneously, research should explore the potential of outdoor education to facilitate interdisciplinary learning, integrating fields such as science, arts, and physical education.

Another important direction concerns the integration of technology, by using innovative digital tools such as augmented reality or mobile applications to overcome logistical constraints related to outdoor activities. Teacher training and mentorship must become priorities to develop the competencies required for the effective implementation of outdoor education. Additionally, a more in-depth analysis of the impact of local and national educational policies on the adoption of outdoor education is needed.

In conclusion, while the present study provides a solid foundation for understanding the impact of outdoor education, it is essential for future research to address the identified limitations and explore new, innovative directions. Only by doing so can an educational framework be built that is adapted to students' real needs and to the demands of contemporary society.

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Appendixes

Annex no.1 Questionnaire questions aimed at achieving the research objectives. Implementing outdoor activities within the National Curriculum can be an effective way to provide varied and relevant educational experiences for students.

The series of stages for the development and evaluation of outdoor activities in the context of the National Curriculum, having the following types of response: agreement, disagreement, other response. We've been following the teachers' answers for:

1. Identify the objectives and competencies specified in the National Curriculum for each discipline. 2. Establishing clear objectives of outdoor activities according to curriculum requirements.

3. Selection of didactic methods and strategies to suit the objectives and encourage active participation.

4. Integration of outdoor activities in the annual planning of lessons and school projects.

5. Adjustment of activities according to material, financial and human resources available in the school.

6. Establishing logistical details, including location, necessary equipment, approvals and schedule of activities.

7. Creating relevant teaching materials to support outdoor activities and strengthen academic content.

8. Evaluating the existing knowledge level and skills of students prior to outdoor activity in order to adequately adapt the content.

9. Creating appropriate assessment tools such as questionnaires, comments, portfolios, projects, etc.

10. Monitoring and evaluation of the work process in order to identify any necessary adjustments and to ensure an efficient implementation.

11. Encourage students to self-assess and reflect on their experiences in outdoor activities.

12. Gaining feedback from the teachers involved and adjusting future activities according to these observations.

13. Evaluation of academic results and the impact of outdoor activities on student development.

14. Reporting relevant results and observations to parents, teachers and school community members.