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The structure of outdoor adventure education programs and their regional distribution in Romania

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Abstract

The present article focused on two aspects, i.e. the identification of the modern theoretical components that define outdoor adventure education and the distribution of these specific activity programs in Romania. Along with formal, non-formal and informal education, outdoor adventure education holds the tools needed to create the image of the European student. Creating and adapting the activities that belong to a component or the interrelation between them is the main objective of the program managers.

The purpose of the article was to identify common contents in order to achieve a classification of the specific defining components regarding adventure education activities, to identify activities according to their usage degree and to the programs used in the development regions.

The research was carried out during the year 2018 and presents a classification of the specific activity programs on 5 components: educational, adventure, nature, recreation and environment. The content of adventure programs is based on the notion of recreation, but they presuppose a number of skills and values that are extremely useful for real life, with a major contribution to the development of social, personal, management and motor skills.

In Romania, we have identified 39 programs, specific to adventure education, the southern region having the maximum number of programs, i.e. 13, which represent 33.29% from the total number of activities. The main activity is represented by games or walking on ropes mounted in the forest at higher or lower distance from the ground, climbing and zip lining, in a percentage of 32%.

The practical character of these activities attributes to these programs the idea of extending school physical education by contributing to the formation of a healthy lifestyle and by ensuring the transition from passive to active learning.

Keywords: structure of adventure education programs, educational component, adventure component, nature component, recreation component and environmental component, percentage of activities, regional distribution in Romania.

Introduction

Developing the indispensable skills for an adult in a rapid technological advancement and ensuring an optimal physical condition are the key indicators in the comprehensive education process. They ensure a proactive development in children and adolescents, and the quality with which they are implemented can predict the health status in the later stages of an individual's life.

The possibilities of changing the means of conducting practical activities led us to the idea of performing a research in which we analyzed the structure of a program with specific adventure education (AE) activities. Part of experiential education, AE is found in high-performance education systems, contributing to the acquisition of general competencies mentioned in the curriculum, as well as social, cognitive and non-cognitive abilities.

The EU physical activity guidelines aimed at improving health (the EU Working Group "Sport and Health") called for special attention to be paid to physical and mental health problems caused by the decline in physical activity among young people, together with an increase in sedentary lifestyle and obesity. They estimated that up to 80% of school-age children are engaged in physical activities only at school and that they should have at least one hour of moderate-intensity physical activity daily. Sufficient time devoted to physical activity in school, both within the formal curriculum and by means of extracurricular

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activities, can bring a key contribution to a healthier lifestyle (***, 2013).

The diversification and restructuring of the physical education lesson content can ensure the continuous participation of students in practical activities. Indoor or outdoor movement games represent the ideal tool by means of which students can acquire a healthy lifestyle on a long-term basis (Iconomescu et al., 2018; Iconomescu et al., 2013).

Especially in primary school, in order to ensure an active participation throughout the practical activity, which will develop both attention and concentration, games represent the ideal means of organization (Talaghir & Cherepov, 2018).

Specialists in the field define AE as a variety of activities and of teaching and learning experiences that involve using a natural environment with elements of real or perceived danger or risk. The content and outcome may be influenced by the participants' actions and circumstances (Ewert & Sibthrop, 2014).

The outdoor AE specific activities can be considered complementary to other forms of movement, equivalent to the most natural human needs based on the skills acquired during schooling, on a different genetic background from one individual to another (Moldovan, 2015).

Scientific research shows that AE significantly contributes to the physiological and psychological benefits brought by recreational activities by reducing stress and the incidence of depressive symptoms. The activities implemented within the programs contain inherent physical, cognitive and emotional challenges, specially created to meet the proposed objectives (Shellman & Hill, 2017).

A research conducted by Save the Children Romania in 2018 showed that about 8 out of 10 pupils between the ages of 12 and 17 years constantly watch online content, 63.7% use the Internet to learn what interests them, 51.9% play and about 27% spend more than 6 hours online during a regular school day. The same research points out the tendency towards a constant increase in the time spent in the online environment, by comparing statistical data from studies carried out in 2010, 2013 and 2015 (1).

An analysis of these data shows that the schooling period no longer involves the development within the integrated education system and the use of free time to deepen and develop the necessary skills. The activities specific to free time, dedicated to non-formal and informal education, are gradually replaced by the online environment, the educational system failing to integrate them into alternative programs that could provide the necessary means to adopt a healthy lifestyle and develop interpersonal skills representative of the statistical data presented above.

Maximizing proactive behavior towards nature, developing and deepening life skills by means of games and practical courses in specially designed environments are increasingly becoming part of the non-formal educational space in Romania and can represent a valid alternative for the beneficial use of free time. By analyzing the effort specific to outdoor AE activities, one can identify the parameters that may have biological influences in the development of certain motor skills and abilities.

The components of outdoor AE programs

Programs with specific AE activities or adventure camps, due to their relatively accelerated development, their relatively high demand and the combination of relatively random activities, represent the most important novelty factor for the diversification of outdoor leisure time activities.

The main features of the AE programs complement and maximize the theoretical notions, the social and life skills, which are insufficiently developed within formal education. Their success only confirms that society accepts much more easily the modern citizens, who are multilaterally developed and those who are rooted in the educational reality of Romania.

By means of its specific programs, AE aims to achieve a series of general objectives such as developing socio-personal skills, improving team spirit, improving social relationships as well as developing leadership skills, developing management skills such as organizing, coordinating and evaluating both those who implement AE activities and pupils. At the same time, AE develops the psycho-motor aspect of the participants and creates a logical continuity by transposing them to different training conditions, with objectives and experiences that convey to the participant an idea much closer to what reality means, adapted to the participant's age.

The programs aimed at achieving the objectives are based on five essential components: education, adventure, nature, recreation and the environment (Fig. 1).

Fig. 1 – The components of outdoor AE programs (original contribution)

a) Education

Non-formal education transfers its own objectives entirely to the educational component of AE. The participants in the activities access and acquire various types of general knowledge by actively participating in the activities, by performing tasks or by communicating at group level. The information acquired in the above-mentioned ways is much better assimilated by the participants, as it comes in response to their curiosity and to their explicit desire to obtain information in the direction dictated by them.

The research presents increasing evidence regarding the beneficial impact of the education transferred to the area of outdoor activities, but most programs do not have a clear structure and they do not have experimental rigor or value (Quibell et al., 2017).

Studies have been carried out regarding the educational, cultural and leisure impact in urban and rural tourism areas (Leanza et al., 2017), and the latest research in the field supports and encourages the upgrading of the educational process by implementing adventure sports, recreation and entertainment programs, which can contribute to an increase in the participants' intellectual, physical, cultural and social potential (Bădău & Bădău, 2018).

Adventure, or controlled/planned risk, is part of the AE program and represents the key to the success of such a program. Adventure used in the context of activities can be extremely valuable if it is integrated as a concept within them, that is to say it is a part of the outdoor and experiential education.

b) Adventure

Educational adventure is characterized by the fact that participants take part in activities voluntarily, on their own initiative, no material gain is offered, the only purpose being that of pursuing spiritual satisfaction, the result is uncertain, but educational, and it involves certain dangers.

AE consists of a variety of teaching and learning activities and experiences that involve a close interaction with the outdoor environment, and which may contain a number of elements perceived to have a certain degree of "controlled risk". The results of these activities, due to this experience, can sometimes be considered uncertain, being clearly influenced by the actions of the individuals taking part in them and by circumstances.

Education with the help of planned adventure consists of lessons, programs or internships, also called educational expeditions, in which participants led by a teacher-trainer or entertainer experience one or more planned adventures. The participants are presented with an apparently higher level of risk than their competence, so that at the end of the activity, their self-esteem and interpersonal confidence increase.

By introducing controlled risk in outdoor exercises, the achievement of greater satisfaction is guaranteed, because the most significant challenge, that is the one involving risks, involves a healthy degree of fear and uncertainty about the final outcome (Potter et al., 2011).

c) Nature

Nature, outdoors, or "outside the walls" represents the space for carrying out the proposed activities. Nature continues to impress by its mere presence and to offer unlimited possibilities of meeting the proposed objectives in a perfect partnership with non-formal education.

AE programs present different combinations of the terms adventure, environment, recreation, education and nature or the outdoors, the latter having the leading potential through its metaphorical greatness and its demonstrable eloquence. Nature is a complex system that may represent both a danger and a partner; therefore AE program managers must select and design the appropriate philosophy of AE (Kim, 2006).

d) Recreation

Recreation represents an essential objective of AE specific activity programs and is most often found in the answer received from the participants in specific activities to the question: Why did you choose to participate in an AE program?

Free time is the period of time left after work and is made up of the time dedicated to sleep, to personal and household activities, to different social tasks and, last but not least, to recreation. Recreation is a voluntary activity, performed without any constraint, which results in the revitalization of the body and mind. It can also be defined as an activity outside of work, intended for pleasure and enjoyed during rest (Dinu, 2002).

Involving young people in outdoor recreational activities within AE programs aims to raise awareness and participation by experimenting different forms of activity in different environments. Stimulating the young generation to actively participate in recreational, adventure and leisure education activities is an important premise that needs to be strengthened and diversified (Bădău & Bădău, 2018).

The benefits of recreation, and especially of outdoor activities, are numerous and include physiological benefits, as well as a number of mental health benefits, such as reducing stress and the incidence of depressive symptoms, improving general well-being and increasing self-confidence (Orsega-Smith et al., 2004).

e) The environment

The environment is identified within AE programs as representing the pro-ecological side and translates into the educational environment, into environmental education. This is not only a form of education, but also a tool for solving environmental problems or managing the natural resources.

The combination of environmental education and AE ensures the creation of an essential dimension in recognizing the values of the environment and in defining the concepts that describe the environment, whose main purpose is to improve the quality of life.

AE ensures the practical experience of learning, through direct contact with the components of the environment, it develops data collection and field research skills and stimulates the concern for the environment.

Within the activities specific to AE programs, the environment develops responsibility, increases motivation, the ability to participate in improving its quality and promotes the desire and ability to approach a lifestyle which is compatible with the concepts of sustainable development (Dezso et al., 2010).

The objective of using adventure in education is to help participants develop and evolve through experiences that promote the improvement of physical, cognitive, non-cognitive and emotional factors, as well as the awareness and respect for the environment.

Analysis of the activities that make up adventure programs

Based on a review of the international literature for planning specific activities, we identified five components: adventure, physical activity, nature, guided experience and social environment. To date, research has claimed

that there is no single accepted method to conduct outdoor adventure programs, but there is some evidence suggesting that various informal combinations of the five components improve adolescents' health and well-being (Ian et al., 2018).

Participation in programs with specific AE activities for a minimum period of 5 days ensures a significantly higher level of involvement, physical activity, motivation and self-determination, as compared to the activities performed before or after the school program (Susan et al., 2018).

The main features of AE programs complement and maximize theoretical notions, social and life skills, which are insufficiently developed in formal and non-formal education. Their success only confirms that society accepts much more easily the modern citizens, who are multilaterally developed and rooted in the educational reality of Romania.

A number of 39 AE programs in Romania were analyzed in terms of the activities proposed in the summer camps. Each program proposes 2 main activities per day, for an average period of 6 days, of which one is left for transportation to and from the camp location (Fig. 2).

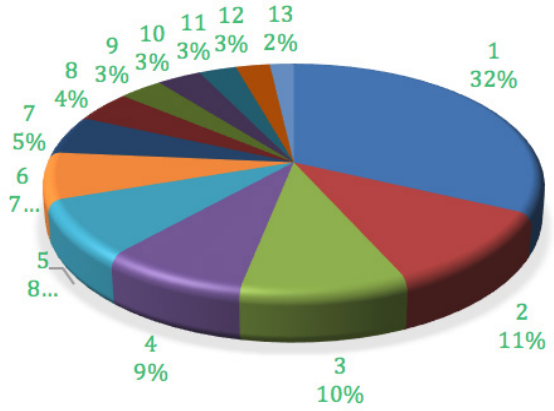

Fig. 2 – Analysis of the activities that make up AE programs.

Following analysis of the activities, the largest share, 32%, is represented by the activities carried out in adventure parks, consisting of games or walking on ropes mounted in the forest, at a higher or lower distance from the ground, climbing and zip lining.

The activity ranking second, with a percentage of 11%, is represented by hiking, followed, and sometimes supplemented, by survival and orientation courses, with 10%.

Representing less than 10% are, in order, sports activities, 9%, outdoor themed games, 8%, treasure hunt, 7%, arts & crafts workshops, 5%, archery and paintball, 4%, first aid courses, day trips, experimental and personal development workshops, 3%, and mountain biking activities, 2%.

The geographical distribution of adventure education programs in Romania

Visiting recreational and protected areas is increasing in many regions at a global level, including Europe. In addition to the generalities related to the concept of leisure time, how others spend it and what is actually useful, the benefits of specific AE outdoor activities, respecting the components that define them, can only be assimilated within the adventure camps that exist in our country.

Due to the lack of a culture, of a strategy and a national curriculum integrated in the education system, only very few pupils who are "prisoners" of a performance-based education system, which is inefficient, unproductive and unadapted to reality, will be able to access an adventure camp. For the others, the adventure will have a negative impact, the risk will be uncontrolled, and the development of life skills and of a healthy lifestyle will always be an unattainable goal.

The demand for locations and programs for spending leisure time, with multiple beneficial effects, especially among students, is increasing. The resources involved in outdoor recreation activities require an understanding of the impact on the participants' perceptions. The emotional connections or feelings of attachment to a particular place can influence the relationship between impact and perception (Shantel et al., 2018).

Fig. 3 – The regional distribution of AE programs in Romania (2).

As shown in Figure 3, not all developing regions in Romania benefit from the presence of at least one facilitator of specific outdoor AE activities, for example the South-East region. The South-West region (2.57 %) has a single active program, whereas the North-East region (5.13%) has 2 programs.

In the North-East region we identified 3 specific AE programs that represent 7.71%, and the Western region hosts 9 of the 39 programs existing at national level, that is 23.05%. Over half of the local adventure camps, 24 out of 39, representing 61.53%, are found in the Central and South regions, with 28.24% and 33.29%, respectively.

Conclusions

1. The role of recreational activities in society goes beyond the dimensions of entertainment activities, these being part of a broader preparation and training program of the citizen for work and social life. Their integration into the school period, by means of non-formal education, and then into the lifelong learning stage, must represent

constant concerns for creating the right framework to ensure and maintain a balance in personal development.

2. The specific AE activities, as compared to general motor skills, ensure the harmony and ease of motor expression through various bodily, playful, sports activities, which require the involvement and coordination of the important muscle groups.

3. Adventure education is an increasingly popular trend, which offers the possibility of psychological and behavioral effects by placing the participant in a natural, unfamiliar environment, within an activity or experience containing a controlled amount of risk. AE holds the cumulated effects of the interaction between education, adventure, nature, recreation and the environment.

4. Specific outdoor AE programs have had a great expansion. This is due to modern research and the world view on education and the demands of the new generations. The advent of adventure parks and the increase in their number in Romania have a major contribution to the development of activity programs with specific content.

5. It should be mentioned that all AE programs are carried out by private equity companies, since so far there is no location in Romania that offers the possibility to participate in outdoor adventure camps through the Ministry of National Education or the Ministry of Youth and Sports, as it is the case in Eastern Europe and the United States of America.

6. The very small number of programs developed on approximately one third of the country's territory brings major disadvantages among the school population regarding the development and experimentation of modern solutions for spending their free time and benefiting from the advantages brought by these programs.

7. There is an inability of the national education system to implement a national strategy that offers all students equal opportunities for sustainable development, focused on modern trends of spending free time in an organized format and with scientifically proven benefits.

Conflicts of interest

No conflict to declare.

Contributions

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