The Role of Public Libraries in Non-Formal Learning

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Abstract: At present, access to information and knowledge is no longer an essential aspect, but the generation and transfer of new knowledge. The current social dynamics is characterized by the acceleration of information exchanges, both in the society as a whole and at the level of each community. In this context, the question arises whether each person is adapted to the requirements and rhythm of modern life, if everyone has equal chances to integrate into the social environment. Thus, education in the knowledge society must respond to the challenges imposed by the labor market by building an open-minded education system based on intensive and continuous training not only within the school but also without it. Socio-economic changes have often exceeded the power of adaptation of education systems to labor market requirements and values, which determined the emergence of alternative forms of learning.

The present paper proposes, starting from the idea that school is not the only place to learn, to demonstrate that the activities outside the formal system have grown, namely in libraries, which meet the willingness to learn of the community members, serving their objectives and interests, providing professional information assistance. If the school prepares the individual for self-education and permanent education, the library and other information structures support this approach by using non-formal methods.

Keywords: *public library; non-formal education; knowledge society; learning services; Dâmbovița County Library.*

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1. Introduction

In the last decades, the library's orientation towards the users has been observed, to meet their sociocultural requirements and their information, documentary, reading, lifelong learning needs, creating an exchange between the two partners, a mutual cooperation (Zecheru, 2005: 13). In the current context, a particular emphasis is placed on enhancing the value of European education in the world, which implies specific actions and investments (“Investiția eficientă”, 2017). This implies that education systems become more open, more flexible, tailored to the needs of the learner and its real potential. It is recognized that a large number of learning experiences have taken place outside the formal education system, i.e. in libraries, museums, workplaces, in different organizations, in the family. Today, libraries have acquired new information and communication technologies providing users added value services derived from information literacy. Public libraries understand the need to revise the traditional role and to expand their sphere of influence on issues related to education, training, providing opportunities to develop skills necessary in lifelong learning.

2. Non-Formal Education

Depending on the level of organization and formalized forms of education, there are three types:

- *formal education*: a formal and planned activity, carried out in an institutional framework, being a structured educational system aimed at acquiring professional skills and specialized knowledge;

- *non-formal education*: an extra-curricular activity, organized or semi-organized, aimed at improving certain skills and competences outside the school system;

- *informal education*: a spontaneous, unplanned activity that represents a continuous learning process, in which skills and knowledge are acquired according to the educational resources existing in their own development environment (Costea, Cerkez, & Sariva, 2009).

The first two represent institutionalized forms of organization, and the third is a non-institutionalized form. Regarding the curriculum, there are differences: in formal education, the curriculum is imposed; in non-formal education is a negotiated curriculum; and in informal education there is no established curriculum.

Non-formal education has its origins since the founding of education. It began to take shape around the 1960s and 1970s and was

associated with the concept of lifelong learning. The goal was to maximize learning and knowledge in the formal system (Costea et al., 2009). From a conceptual point of view, non-formal education refers to all activities that take place in an institutionalized setting, organized but out of school, as a connection between formal and informal learning. Between formal and informal education there is a complementarity report, both in terms of content and forms and modalities, in the first case the content being organized on the areas of interest. Non-formal education implies assuming responsibilities being advisable that in education programs the personal benefit to be clearly outline and to justify the requested engagement effort. The educational program includes not only the acquisition of knowledge, skills and abilities, but also skills and creativity development, and skills training that would be useful for users in everyday life, in personal and social development. At present, formal education tends to become more flexible, more responsive to the needs and motivations of users, while non-formal education tends to organize itself better, aiming at ensuring a certain quality and using methods already proven and recognized by specialists.

Regarding the access of all citizens to correct information, an important role is played by public institutions (schools, libraries, and cultural institutions), mass media and culture people. Although the number of initiatives in the field of non-formal learning of young people has increased and important experiences, methods and initiatives have accumulated, even in Europe it is considered that this form of education and training is still insufficiently known and theorized, with insufficiently used potential. Concerning education, the Romanian Education and Training Strategy: 2016-2020 (“Strategia educației”, 2016) aims, among other things, to increase participation and facilitate access to vocational training programs. This objective defines how the vocational training system is addressed to direct beneficiaries, either through initial or in-service training, through appropriate responses to the needs of individuals, employers and communities. To achieve this strategic objective, the following lines of action are foreseen:

- Development of marketing of vocational training programs and learning outcomes acquired in non-formal and informal contexts
- Improve professional orientation and career counseling
- Strengthen and streamline mechanisms for recognizing and validating learning outcomes acquired in non-formal and informal contexts
- Facilitating access to vocational training programs for young people with a focus on vulnerable groups

Institutions that can engage in non-formal activities are: pre-university and university education institutions, companies, non-

governmental organizations, museums, theaters, cultural centers, libraries, cinemas, cultural houses, professional associations, trade unions and so on.

The directions that can be addressed in non-formal education by these institutions are:

- Development of trade, agriculture, industry;
- Professional development or change of professional route;
- Education for health;
- Digital literacy and so on.

The beneficiaries of these activities can be people of all ages and of all socio-professional categories who want to develop personally, to develop certain skills and abilities beyond the formal education matrix.

3. The Role of Public Libraries in Non-Formal Learning

Education cannot be limited to school, but must encompass all dimensions of existence, contribute to the development of individual personality to help him understand his place in society. Learning is not done exclusively in formal institutions (schools, colleges and universities), an important role having non-formal and informal learning institutions.

Non-formal education is a fundamental dimension of the instructive-educational process and an essential component of lifelong learning, from which the library cannot fail. In addition to access to information, reading, loisir, libraries have started to focus their activities on different types of learning over the last decades, representing a highly valuable and widely accessible resource for lifelong learning.

Public libraries promote national and European goals that aim to build a knowledge-based society. This means acquiring new skills based on knowledge, knowledge of foreign languages, and ownership of e-government concepts for digitally literate citizens, integration of individuals from different social backgrounds, preservation of cultural identity in the context of globalization, education through new technologies information and communication. We note that libraries are important institutions within local communities and therefore national government policies should increasingly develop a favorable environment for them to be accepted as institutions providing lifelong learning strategies. An important role in promoting this sector of activity lies with professional associations (“Strategii, politici și consiliere”, 2010).

Public libraries can play an important role in providing learning services accessible to all citizens. In order for this to be achieved, it is necessary for the staff of the library to be further trained; recruitment

policies are more flexible, assuming a set of skills needed to support learners and create a learning environment, develop new human resource management models, and work with the public to change into depending on user needs.

EBLIDA (The European Bureau of Library, Information and Documentation Associations) have made a survey on how libraries contribute to informal and non-formal learning and found out that actually 92% of libraries in Europe provide for informal or non-formal learning ("Results of the Survey", 2016).

Nowadays, libraries and museums in the communities all over the world offer learning opportunities to prepare young people for tomorrow's society. So, in American museums children are allowed to learn about the science of light in the walk-in kaleidoscope (New York Hall of Science); in public libraries immigrant families attend at-home parties where public library staff present reading materials for parents to use with their children at home (Columbus Metropolitan Library) or they participate in the public library's summer reading program ("Growing young minds", 2015). In EU many public libraries cooperate with local schools, complementing the services which school libraries provide, helping to strengthen a culture of reading and learning more broadly in young people. Libraries must to be a space where everybody can come to supplement the support they are getting at school or at work, in order to develop their personal and professional skills.

In most European countries, in public libraries are organized courses that contribute to vocational education or to acquiring certain qualifications. Others are closely related to the curriculum and are supported by associations or organizations active in the relevant field: literature, heritage, astronomy, climate etc.

Also, throughout the summer can be organized literary activities and workshops, painting, crafts and other artistic pursuits particularly suited for children and the elderly. Many public libraries come to help pupils with their homework, providing access to databases, provide reference tools and practices for pupils and students. All these activities can be carried out in informally arranged spaces such as homework café in which children and young people carry out their homework supervised and guided by qualified library staff to help them learn technological and digital skills, information, data filtering, correct evaluation of the information.

As a provider of public information services, libraries must support people with special needs and socially excluded groups, attracting them in learning or helping them spend their spare time in a positive way, thus

improving their quality of life. Also, through web services, they can create personalized virtual learning environments. Providing such services, of course, involves additional costs and public funding is often a real challenge for public libraries wishing to expand their learning services.

On the other hand, the permanent education and training services provided by public libraries are often considered outside the official policies of lifelong learning, and are not always recognized as basic services in a library. Therefore, cooperation and partnerships of libraries with local and national authorities and other organizations (schools, municipalities, educational institutions, including remote ones, non-governmental training and regional development agencies, NGOs etc.) are essential to obtaining the necessary funding their strategic needs.

In the information society, the library redefines its mission and responsibilities, reinvents itself in such a way that users, besides traditional services, have quality information and new services adapted to the needs of the community, support for training and lifelong learning. By satisfying the wishes and interests of young people's knowledge, the library becomes a resource center for the development of the local community.

4. Non-Formal Learning Activities Carried out within the Dâmbovița County Library

Dâmbovița County Library has realized that organizing non-formal learning activities would attract much more readers to smaller or larger users. Thus, within the "Different School" program, special events are organized for small users: *The house with story characters* - through which they are instigated to recognize the heroes of the read stories; *The 5-Star Book* - reading recommendations pupils of grades I-VIII; *Financial education*; *Watching documentary films*; *With about teenagers* - free dialogue where different specialists answer adolescent questions.

Another successful activity was the *Living Library*, a project that aims to draw attention to the acceptance of diversity in society. Living library books are people experiencing prejudices or stereotypes about gender, age, education, trade, ethnicity, race, religion, etc. and who are victims of discrimination or social exclusion. People who volunteer wants to become "books" make their experiences open and available, usually on issues that people tend to have a difficult time discussing. "Readers" are encouraged to ask questions freely, and they'll get honest answers in return ("At the human library", 2016). The Living Library aims to promote respect for human rights

and human dignity, draw attention to diversity in all its forms, stimulate dialogue between people (“Biblioteca vie”, 2011).

An important project carried out within the Dâmbovița County Library was the creation of a network of non-formal education centers for life in the rural area of Dâmbovița. The main objective was the creation of a network of non-formal education centers made up of 10 NGOs and 70 public libraries in Dâmbovița and the provision of educational services such as the development of life skills among 1,400 children aged 10-15 years in situations of risk in rural areas of the county. Other objectives were the training of 10 NGOs and 70 librarians of public libraries in the fields of Trainer and Methods of Non-Formal Education and their transformation into community resource people.

The county library was a partner in another project, Irresistible – Including Responsible Research and Innovation in Cutting Edge Science and Inquiry-based Science Education to Improve Teacher’s Ability of Bridging Learning Environments. The project was based on collaboration between educational partners (schools, lyceums, and universities), research, culture (library, museums) and the economic environment, who have set out to work together to make young people aware of the specific Research and Responsible Innovation. Within the partnership, universities, libraries and museums have collaborated by harnessing their expertise and experience in formal and non-formal learning activities.

5. Conclusions

The public library plays a vital role in the communities it serves, being the main institution providing information and documentation services under various forms and in different contexts. Thus, it contributes to the users’ personal development through formal education, life-long learning, after-school activities, information culture, leisure time activities or access to information. Another aspect covered by the public library is related to social cohesion, the area of the institution becoming a meeting place and a community development center. Cultural identity and local identity are problems with a significant impact on the community, so they need to be publicized by the public library by means of imagination and creativity, so as to increase the interest of the public for cultural activities. All these demonstrate that a public library plays a special social role in the community, and the services offered by it foster the accomplishment of this role.

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