

HOW IMPORTANT ARE OUTDOOR ACTIVITIES IN TEACHING PRATICE? A RESEARCH WITH PORTUGUESE TEACHERS

Valter Rato* and António Almeida**

** Centro Interdisciplinar de Estudos Educacionais; ** Instituto Politécnico de Lisboa /
Escola Superior de Educação de Lisboa / Centro Interdisciplinar de Estudos
Educacionais / Centro de Investigação em Didática e Tecnologia na Formação de
Formadores, University of Aveiro (Portugal)*

Abstract

This study tries to understand the importance of outdoor activities in teaching practice in the 2nd Cycle of Schooling in Portugal. For that, 110 teachers from two disciplinary groups, Maths and Science versus Mother Tongue and History and Geography, were inquired through a questionnaire. The questionnaire was sent to 20 schools randomly chosen in Lisbon and 55 teachers of each disciplinary group answered it. The teachers of both groups answered in a very similar way. They stated doing these activities once or twice a year, being satisfied with this frequency. In the advantages, more than half highlighted the improvement in learning and the majority the importance of the contact with new realities. The disadvantages were the time spent in planning and the pupils' behaviour. The obstacles partially repeated the disadvantages, and the costs were the main aspect mentioned by the teachers. When highlighting a successful visit, more than half of the teachers of both groups mentioned the features of certain places and in describing an unsuccessful visit the bad behavior of the pupils. The results can give a contribution to a better discussion of the issue in teacher training courses, especially to overcome the negative aspects revealed.

Keywords: Outdoor activities, teaching practice, 2nd Cycle of Primary Education.

Resumen

Este estudio aborda importancia de las actividades al aire libre en las prácticas docentes en el segundo ciclo de escolarización en Portugal. Para ello, 110 maestros de dos grupos disciplinares diferentes, Matemáticas y Ciencias frente a Lengua Materna, Historia y Geografía, respondieron a un cuestionario. El cuestionario, que fue respondido por 55

maestros de cada grupo disciplinar, fue enviado a 20 escuelas de Lisboa elegidas aleatoriamente. Los maestros de ambos grupos respondieron de modo similar, realizando estas actividades una o dos veces al año y encontrándose satisfechos con esta frecuencia. Más de la mitad destacó como ventajas la mejora en el aprendizaje y la importancia del contacto con nuevas realidades. Las desventajas destacadas fueron el tiempo dedicado a la planificación y el comportamiento de los alumnos. Los obstáculos fueron también citados como desventajas, destacando los costes. Más de la mitad de los participantes de ambos grupos citaron las características de ciertos lugares como condicionantes del éxito de la visita, y el comportamiento de los alumnos como causante de su poco éxito. Estos resultados pretenden contribuir a la discusión de esta cuestión en formación docente, especialmente para ayudar a superar aquellos aspectos señalados como negativos.

Palabras clave: Actividades al aire libre, práctica docente, educación primaria.

Introduction

This study has been developed in order to analyse the importance given to outdoor activities by the teachers of the disciplinary groups of Sciences, Math, Mother Tongue and History and Geography as a context of formal learning. This study has been started since this kind of activities is considered to possess important educational implications.

Outdoor activities may be considered as strategies, since teachers choose to use these either as a way to enrich their pupils' learning process, or as activities, something these pupils can experience. The organization of outdoor activities potentiates the contact of the students with the reality around them, which is a way to provide meaningful learning experiences (Ferreira, Martins, Hortas, & Dias, 2011).

In certain publications or even among teachers, several terms to define this kind of outdoor activities (field trips, journeys, among many others) can be used. However, in this study it was decided to use the term outdoor activities, since it has a broader sense.

Concerning the advantages of outdoor activities, several authors have displayed a wide range of potentialities associated: there is an increase in learning motivation shown by the students (Oliveira, 2012); a more specific learning of the curricular contents, allowing a more solid relation between theory and practice (Couto, & Afonso,

2008); the development of scientific processes (Reis, 2009) and the development of the teachers' professional experience by the contact with diversified resources and strategies (Chinelli, Pereira, & Aguiar, 2009).

Concerning the disadvantages and obstacles of outdoor activities, Almeida and Vasconcelos (2013) refer to this dimension dividing the obstacles by internal and external to the teacher. In the external category, the bureaucracy during the preparation of the outdoor activities and the financing of the visits are the most important. In the internal obstacles, the same authors highlight the time invested on the preparation of the outdoor activities and the negative behaviours of the students and the risks taken by the teachers.

According to most of the previously referred authors, the teachers ought to equate three crucial stages of the outdoor activities process that must be balanced within: (i) the “before the visit” - the preparation/organization moment; (ii) the elapsing of the visit/the “during” moment; (iii) the “after the visit” – consolidation and evaluation.

Methods

In this study it was chosen to highlight the collection of data through a survey composed by open and closed questions. This survey was validated by three experts on Didactics of Sciences, and previously piloted. After the validation process, 25 schools of the Lisbon area were randomly chosen and contacted for verification of their interest in participating in the survey. From these 25, 20 accepted to participate. In a total of 110 inquired teachers, 55 belong to the group of Science and Math (considered in this work as the 1st group) and the remaining 55 belong to Mother Tongue and History/Geography group (the 2nd group).

During the data examination, the closed questions were relatively predominant. The open questions were subjected to analysis of content analysis in order to identify the expressed ideas and posterior categorization. The absolute and relative frequency of answers was calculated on each category.

Results

In answer to the question about the frequency with which outdoor activities are implemented, 72% teachers of the 1st group and 89% of the 2nd group claimed that the average of organized outdoor activities was by 1-2 per year for each of the classes they teach. The greatest part of the teachers claims to be satisfied with this frequency; however they didn't identify the reasons for this satisfaction. Even so, the 1st group teachers highlighted as main outdoor activities obstacles the hardship in the fulfilling the syllabus, while the 2nd group teachers referred the economic struggle of the students.

Relatively to the advantages, 54% of the 1st group and 73% of the 2nd group pointed out improvement in learning, as the potentialities of contact with the places a positive aspect to highlight, by 67% and 41% of each group respectively.

Relatively to the disadvantages, it was indicated a wider range of aspects if we compare with the questions pertaining to advantages. The cost and the exhaustive planification of the outdoor activities were the reasons pointed out by 36% and 28% of the teachers on the 1st group. In the 2nd group, it was mostly pointed out the disruptive behaviour of the students (24%), as well as the excessive planification that may be required by outdoor activities (22%).

Concerning the previously referred question relative to the outdoor activities obstacles, both groups indicated two main obstacles: the cost of the visit (49% in the 1st group and 61% in the 2nd group) and its planification (36% and 37% respectively), aspects coincident to the disadvantages.

On the opposite, in the identification of a well succeeded outdoor activity, 54% of the elements on the 1st group and 57% of the 2nd group claimed the local where the outdoor activities occurred to be a relevant aspect. On the other hand, the disruptive behaviour of the students has been envisioned as an aspect that causes outdoor activities to be less successful (18% and 20% of answers on each group respectively).

Discussion/Conclusions

With this study, it could be concluded that the teachers submitted to the survey believe that students should not learn only inside the school, since outdoor activities were referred by both groups as a potential to the improvement in their learning. In this sense, the teachers associate outdoor activities to the learning process rather than just

leisure walkings and moments without contextualization, being that this sense of learning, according to Mesquita (2007) is believed to be a common sense even among the teachers.

However, despite of this opinion, there were enumerated various obstacles by the teachers relatively to a more frequent organization of outdoor activities, as bureaucratic and organizational aspects, being these very frequent in the teachers' answers from both disciplinary groups. To minorate this aspect, Santos (2005), for example, suggests that the students must be invited to the preparation of the outdoor activities, being that, this way, there will be a delegation of tasks and shared responsibility. On the other hand, authors like Marques (2001), claim that the students' parents must be summoned to collaborate on the outdoor activities organization, in order to better understand the dynamics and goals of these and to associate them to didactic activities.

The irregular behaviour of the students has also been pointed out by the teachers as an obstacle in the preparation of the outdoor activities. However, Almeida and Vasconcelos (2013) alerted that not always the classes who worst behave in the classroom context are necessarily the ones who are the most troublesome during the outdoor activities, in the way to avoid the anticipated penalization of some classes, depriving them of the opportunity of this kind of experience by a hasty judgment.

In summary, with this study it could be seen that the answers of both groups share similarities, both relatively to the advantages and disadvantages of the organization of outdoor activities. In pedagogic-didactic terms, this study also allowed to know the conceptions assumed by middle school (2nd cycle primary school) teachers relatively to outdoor activities, since there are few studies targeted to this cycle of schooling.

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