

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORKS AND REFLECTIONS ON THE INSTITUTIONALISATION OF NON-FORMAL EDUCATION (NFE)

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Abstract. This paper presents the results of research on the conceptual and methodological framework of non-formal education for children in the Republic of Moldova. One of the main objectives is to clarify the conceptual aspects of the institutionalisation of non-formal education and to develop a pedagogical model for its institutionalisation within a European context.

The article argues in favour of neo-institutionalism as the central theoretical foundation, highlighting the need for a flexible, adaptive, participatory and accessible (FAPA) framework. At the same time, it presents a model for the institutionalisation of non-formal education for children, adapted to the realities of the Republic of Moldova and aligned with European trends in the field.

Keywords: non-formal education, institutionalisation, neo-institutionalism, pedagogical model.

REPERE CONCEPTUALE ŞI REFLECȚII

PRIVIND INSTITUȚIONALIZAREA EDUCAȚIEI NONFORMALE (ENF)

Rezumat. Lucrarea prezintă rezultatele cercetării de doctorat privind cadrul conceptual și metodologic al educației nonformale a copiilor în Republica Moldova. Unul dintre obiectivele principale îl constituie clarificarea aspectelor conceptuale ale instituționalizării educației nonformale și elaborarea unui model pedagogic de instituționalizare a acestora în context european.

Articolul argumentează opțiunea pentru neoinstituționalism ca fundament teoretic central, evidențiind necesitatea unui cadru flexibil, adaptiv, participativ și accesibil (FAPA). Totodată, este prezentat modelul de instituționalizare a educației nonformale a copiilor, adaptat realităților Republicii Moldova și corelat cu tendințele europene în domeniu.

Cuvinte-cheie: educație nonformală, instituționalizare, neoinstituționalism, model pedagogic.

Introduction

Institutions are, today, indispensable entities of the social landscape. Most often, we refer to state institutions: ministries, central administrative authorities and subordinate public institutions that ensure the functioning of the executive, legislative, judicial and public administration branches, as well as the media. Another term that has become established in common usage, in reference to the term ‘institution’, is that of a public institution. Their purpose is to serve the population and to respond to its general interests in all areas of life: health, education, family, justice, culture, civil relations, etc.

Alongside institutions, at both public and private levels, other forms of organisation also operate – organisations, companies, enterprises and firms. Their organisation and operation are regulated by laws and specific regulations, such as: Law No. 86/2020 on non-

profit organisations, Law No. 845/1992 on entrepreneurship and enterprises, and Trade Union Law No. 1129/2000.

People do not always make clear distinctions between the organisational and operational structures of these entities, although they have different and specific missions, knowledge of which is useful for effective interaction in the social, economic, public or private spheres.

Theoretical approaches

The term ‘institution’ has multiple meanings and uses, varying depending on the context in which it is used. According to the Explanatory Dictionary of the Romanian Language (DEX), the most important definitions of this word are as follows:

- “a body or organisation that carries out activities of a social, cultural, administrative, etc. nature;
- a form of organisation of social relations, governed by legal rules specific to each field of activity;
- an organisation operating at international, national or local level in the service of a common interest” [8].

Researchers note that the study of institutions and their interactions have been a subject of academic research for many years, in fields such as political science, public administration and sociology (Blanovschi, Pop, Meyer).

Theoretical thinking in the field of institutions and institutionalisation is divided into three schools: classical, human relations and systemic.

The classical school is represented by Weber’s bureaucratic theory, Taylor’s theory of the scientific organisation of work, and Fayol’s doctrine of formal organisation.

The human relations school approached the institutionalised individual primarily through the social sphere. It demonstrated the complexity of behavioural factors (both intra- and extra-economic), highlighting in particular the significance of informal circumstances. The human relations school proposed the concept of participation in production based on the degree and manner of meeting fundamental needs.

The systemic school promoted the idea of the ‘complex human being’ acting within a ‘complex organisation’. It is also worth noting that, unlike the adherents of the previous schools, the proponents of the systemic school abandoned the interpretation of the organisation as an isolated entity, examining it within the context of the environment in which it operates.

The researcher Blanovschi specifies that “Institutionalism emerged and matured as a critical reaction to classical and neoclassical liberalism. This is because economic liberalism, which dominated economic theory and practice for over 160 years, was not

embraced by all countries, and even where it enjoyed support, not everyone accepted it” [5, p. 61].

„Institutionalisation is a process that is triggered, rather, by chance, at random; it may be the unanticipated result of the creation of various social structures, whereas deinstitutionalisation is rarely an accidental process; it seems rather to be the result of actions directed against convention and ‘the natural order’, and may also arise as a consequence of the disappearance of the actors or interactions that sustained those institutionalised forms. Institutional changes occur when there is a discrepancy between the attitudinal, behavioural or action-oriented expectations of individuals, structured within certain social institutions, and the formal-legal environment in which they live” [Apud 10, p. 47].

In its development, institutionalism has gone through three stages:

1. Negativist or protest institutionalism;
2. Positivist institutionalism;
3. Neo-institutionalism.

For the institutionalisation of non-formal education at this stage, the concepts of neo-institutionalism are relevant, as they emphasise the symbolic aspects of institutions and the notion of the agent of change, the social actor.

The learner – the child or young person – is the main actor in non-formal and out-of-school education, and the methodology of interaction in the productive, creative, learning and communication processes of NFE and OSE is interactive and subject-centred.

An analysis of the institutionalisation model of early childhood education (ECE) through the lens of neo-institutionalism highlights how social structures, norms and practices influence the organisation and recognition of this form of education.

Non-formal education is conceptualised as a ‘social institution’, a ‘resource for human capital development’, and a ‘resource for democratic education / education for democracy’, thereby ‘diluting’ the association of this form of education solely with the education system. Non-formal education is conceptualised within the family, folk traditions, youth work, continuing vocational training for employees / human resource development, and adult learning and education. However, researchers specify that the most important institutions of contemporary society are considered to be the family, the state, religion, business, legislation, customs and traditions.

The model for institutionalising non-formal education through the resources of these institutions is consistent with its form, mission and objectives, in contrast to formal education.

Currently, non-formal education covers a wide range of learning and educational activities: educational work, out-of-school education, complementary education, extracurricular activities, ethnopedagogy, adult learning and education, community

education, youth work, on-the-job training, leisure education and, as A. Rogers, “Non-formal education (NFE) is becoming a common matrix with lifelong learning” [14].

The pedagogical model for the institutionalisation of non-formal education

In our research into the conceptual and methodological framework of non-formal education for children in the Republic of Moldova, we have developed a pedagogical model for the institutionalisation of non-formal education for children within the European context of the Republic of Moldova. The model proposes a framework for institutionalisation based on flexibility, adaptability, participation and accessibility (FAPA).

The model is based on four complementary theoretical approaches. Firstly, neo-institutionalism, which treats education as a social institution that reproduces norms and values, suggesting that non-formal education (NFE) is already culturally recognised but insufficiently valued administratively. Secondly, the perspective of institutional transition, which highlights that institutionalisation occurs gradually, through social practices, discourse and internal legitimacy, not merely through formal regulations. Thirdly, educational humanism, which places the individual at the centre of the educational process, emphasising that the institutionalisation of NFE must respect the individual’s interests, motivations and free participation. Finally, ethnocultural and historical determinism, which explains the evolution of ENF as an adaptive process, influenced by the historical and cultural context, from spontaneous forms to organised, democratic and participatory models [10, 14, 15, 16].

The pedagogical model we propose comprises five components: three levels – structural (formal), functional (interactional) and symbolic (cognitive-normative); transitive mechanisms of institutionalisation; and international trends integrated into the model (Figure 1).

The structural level concerns the legal framework, the mixed institutional network, diversified funding and quality standards, as well as the expansion of educational opportunities.

The functional level refers to varied activities, centred on the interests of children and young people, based on interactive and participatory methods.

The symbolic level highlights social recognition, pedagogical autonomy and the internalisation of the value of education, integrated into youth policies and lifelong learning, in partnership with the family and the community.

Transitional mechanisms describe the gradual institutionalisation through pilot schemes, the dissemination of best practice, certification and collaborative networks.

The model incorporates *international trends* such as voluntary participation, inclusion, personalised education and, in certain cases, compulsory participation.

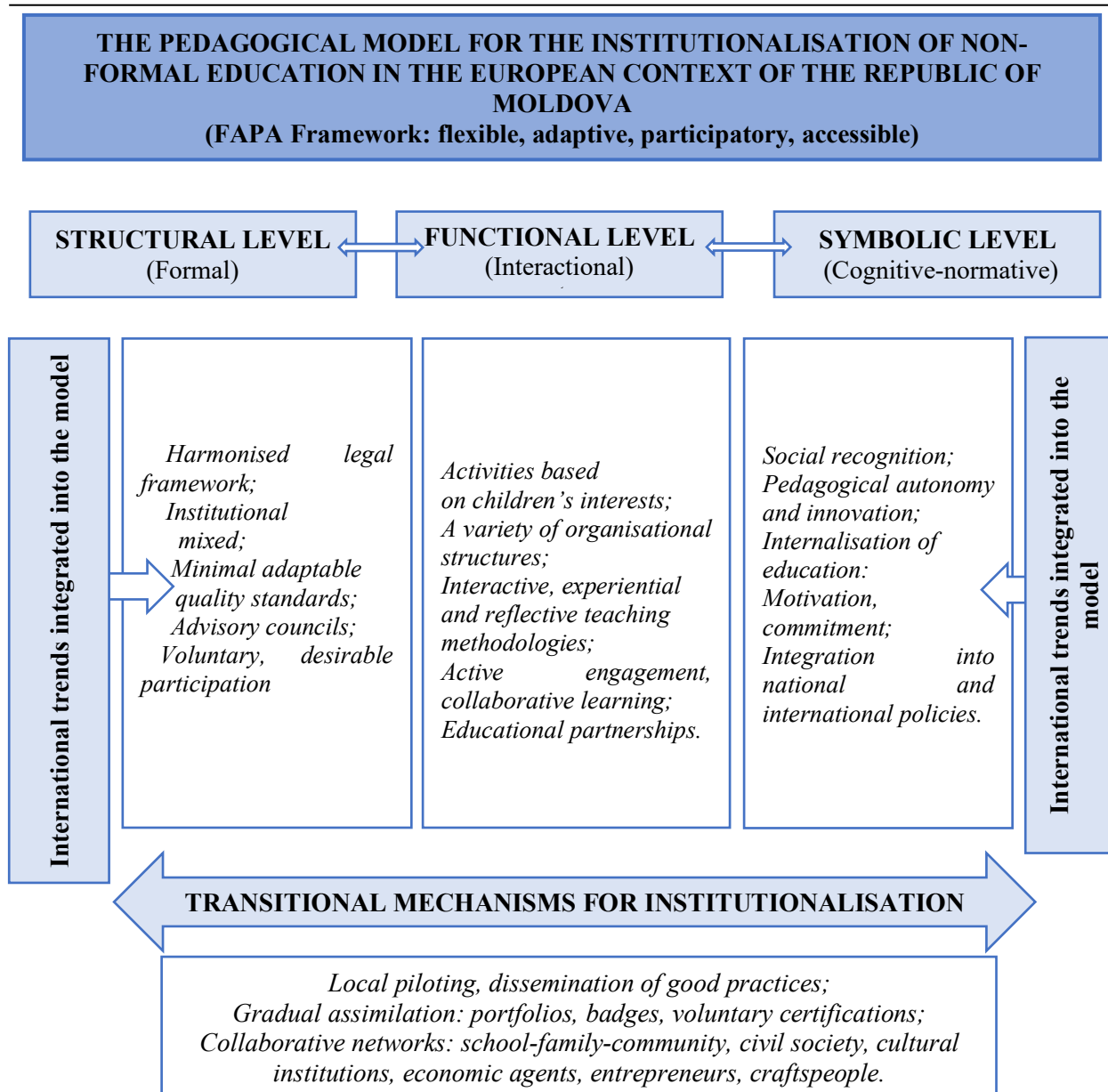


Figure 1. The pedagogical model for the institutionalisation of children's non-formal education in the European context of the Republic of Moldova

The pedagogical model for institutionalising non-formal education for children has been validated within the Republican Centre for Children and Youth ARTICO, as a resource for streamlining the institutionalisation of processes and services provided.

According to its Rules of Procedure (2020), the ARTICO Republican Centre for Children and Youth has the mission of contributing to the development and implementation of state policy in the field of education for children and young people, by achieving the following objectives:

“a) providing methodological and practical support to extracurricular educational institutions at national level;

b) coordinating programmes and projects in the field of out-of-school education at national level;

c) implementing out-of-school education services and disseminating good practices at national level” [3].

The institutionalisation of ENF in the Republic of Moldova, as exemplified by the ARTICO Republican Centre for Children and Youth, reflects a profound shift in the approach to education as an inclusive, creative process centred on the needs of children and young people, and open to collaboration and partnerships. The ARTICO Republican Centre for Children and Youth is a model of institutional synergy and educational innovation in the national context.

Figure 2 presents the results of the case study on the institutionalisation of non-formal education for children within the ARTICO Republican Centre for Children and Youth, structured around the five elements of the FAPA Pedagogical Model of Institutionalisation:

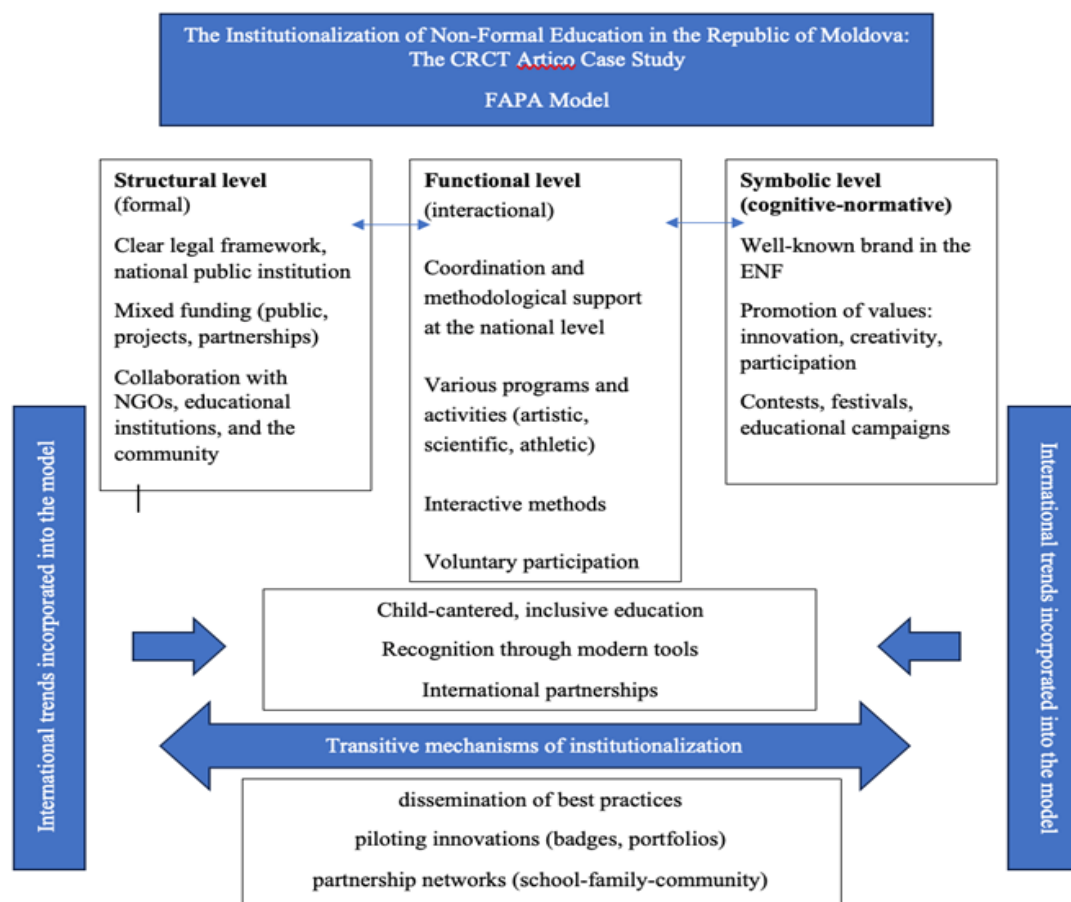


Figure 2. Results of the case study on the institutionalisation of non-formal education for children at the ARTICO Republican Centre for Children and Youth

Within the children’s out-of-school education institution (ENF), there is a mosaic of logics that influence the actions of educational actors. The institutional logic essentially sets the ‘rules of the game’ within the out-of-school education institution / ENF for children, whilst the ‘ ’ establishes the principles of interaction and the conduct of activities, thereby bridging the gap between the institution and its beneficiaries.

Analysis of the experimental data, obtained by applying the ENF institutionalisation assessment tool—developed on the basis of the FAPA pedagogical model—which comprises four dimensions for assessing institutionalisation, with three indicators for each dimension, rated on a scale of 1 to 5, a description of the indicators, and assessment scores from 1 to 5, highlight a high degree of institutionalisation and consistent implementation of the principles of this model, with remarkable performance in most of the dimensions analysed (Figure 3):

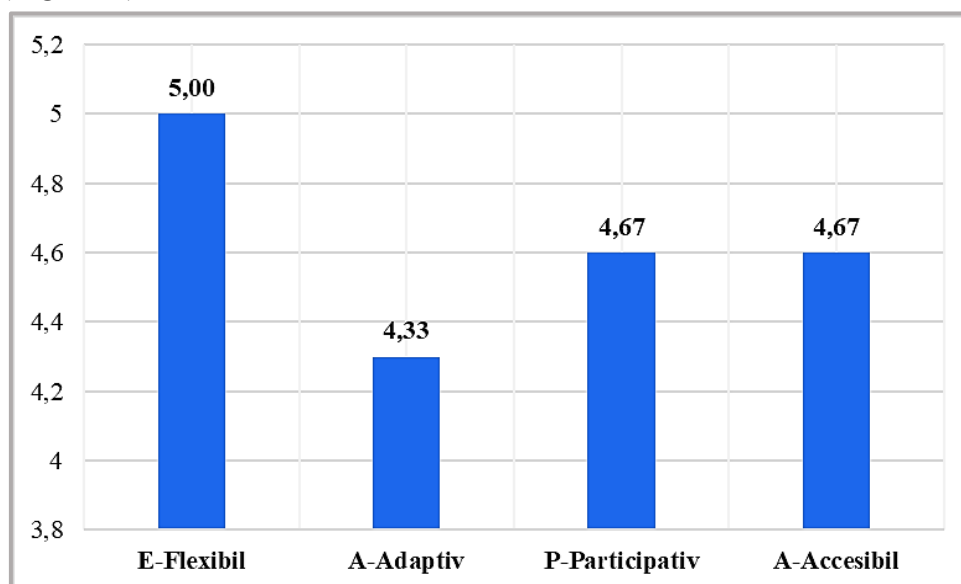


Figure 3. Results of the ENF institutionalisation assessment tool – FAPA Model

1. Dimension ‘F – Flexible’ (Average score: 5.00/5) – Excellent performance:

- Programme flexibility (5): Indicates the centre’s exceptional ability to respond dynamically to the needs and interests of children and young people, ensuring that the educational provision remains relevant and appealing.
- Diversity of engagement methods (5): Highlights an inclusive approach, offering multiple avenues for participation tailored to different levels of readiness, which maximises the chances of beneficiary engagement and partner recruitment.
- Flexible timetable (5): The ability to offer programmes at various times (afternoons, days off, holidays) demonstrates a strong focus on the needs of participants and their families, facilitating access.

This dimension is fully integrated into the centre’s work, demonstrating a strong focus on the needs and availability of beneficiaries, a key element of non-formal education. The flexibility of institutional processes and the educational provision constitutes a competitive advantage for collaboration and partnerships.

2. Dimension ‘A – Adaptive’ (Average score: 4.33/5) – Good performance, with potential for improvement:

- Response to social and technological changes (5): The centre demonstrates excellent agility in updating methods and content, indicating a focus on innovation and relevance in the context of rapid changes in society.
- Continuing professional development for staff (3): This is the only indicator with a score below the maximum, suggesting that, although professional development programmes do exist, they could be less frequent, less comprehensive or less accessible than would be ideal. This represents the main area for improvement for the ARTICO Republican Centre for Children and Youth, given the importance of teaching staff in delivering high-quality early childhood education and in the effective implementation of the methodology.
- Adjustment of methodologies (5): The use of interactive and experiential methods, tailored to the context, is of an excellent standard, which contributes significantly to the effectiveness of the learning process.

The *Adaptive* dimension is continuously being strengthened, but the ‘Continuous staff training’ indicator requires greater attention. Improving this aspect would further strengthen the centre’s ability to respond dynamically to educational challenges and ensure consistent programme quality.

3. The ‘P – Participatory’ dimension (Average score: 4.67/5) – Excellent Performance:

- Involvement of beneficiaries in decision-making (5): Demonstrates a learner-centred approach, in which children’s voices are valued and integrated into the decision-making process, contributing to the relevance of activities.
- Collaboration with the community and partners (4): Although at a very good level, there is scope for expanding or deepening active partnerships with other non-formal education institutions, NGOs, parents, local authorities, international organisations, etc. This is essential for enhancing the effectiveness of non-formal education, in line with the research objectives.
- Promoting a culture of dialogue (5): The ability to encourage the free exchange of views and the active involvement of all parties indicates an open and democratic environment.

The ‘*Participatory*’ dimension is well integrated, with a strong emphasis on co-creation and internal collaboration. Continuing efforts to strengthen external partnerships (indicator 8) could yield further benefits.

4. The ‘A – Accessible’ dimension (Average score: 4.67/5) – Excellent performance:

- Physical and financial accessibility (5): The fact that the venue is easily accessible and participation is free or at reduced cost is a fundamental pillar of inclusive and equitable non-formal education.
- Social inclusion (4): A good score, but one that suggests there may still be challenges or opportunities for improvement in ensuring optimal facilities and conditions for all

categories of children/beneficiaries, including those with special needs. Ongoing efforts in this regard are crucial, a point also noted in the conclusions of Chapter 2 of the research.

- Friendly and safe atmosphere (5): A welcoming, safe environment that encourages free expression is essential for the well-being and holistic development of children and young people.

The *Accessibility* dimension has been excellently implemented, with the Republican Organisation for Children and Youth (ARTICO) succeeding in creating an environment conducive to learning and development for a wide range of beneficiaries. It is recommended that continuous attention be paid to improving aspects related to social inclusion in order to realise the full potential.

Conclusions

In the Republic of Moldova, there is not yet an explicit model for the institutionalisation of non-formal education (NFE), but a trend towards greater formalisation is emerging, highlighted in particular by the documents adopted in 2020. These contribute to the structuring of the sector, but also indicate a risk of limiting the freedom and creativity specific to NFE.

The theoretical framework for institutionalisation is provided by neo-institutionalism, which enables us to understand ENF as a dynamic social process shaped by norms, practices and mechanisms of legitimacy. In this context, the proposed pedagogical model, designed as a flexible, adaptive, participatory and accessible (FAPA) framework, integrates the structural, functional and symbolic levels, alongside transitional mechanisms and international trends.

The ARTICO case study highlights the practical functioning of the institutionalisation of non-formal education for children, based on flexibility, adaptability, participation and accessibility.

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