

FUNCTIONS OF EDUCATIONAL ACTIVITIES IN CULTURAL CENTERS FROM THE COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT PERSPECTIVE

Aistė Urbonienė

Virginija Jurėnienė
Vilnius University, Lithuania

***Abstract.** This paper aims to analyse the role that cultural centres in Lithuania and Lithuanian cultural organisations in the Kaliningrad region and Belarus play in organizing educational activities for the local communities. The aim of this article is to identify functions of the educational activities of cultural centres and Lithuanian cultural organisations revealing their impact on the local community development. Semi-structured interviews were conducted in 4 Lithuanian cultural centres and 6 Lithuanian cultural organisations of border regions in Lithuania, Belarus, and Russia, the Kaliningrad region. The sample consists of 55 informants from Lithuanian cultural communities and cultural centres. The content analysis and comparative analysis methods were applied for the data analysis. The study revealed that educational activities would lead to active participation of members in community development. The following functions of educational activities were identified: dissemination of knowledge, empowerment, self-realization, enlightenment, value development, recreation, communication, national identity strengthening, and community mobilization.*

***Keywords:** cultural centres, community development, educational activities, Lithuania.*

Introduction

Cultural centres are unique cultural organizations which are developed on the national basis and have few analogues in other countries. Cultural centres have been operating in Lithuania since the Soviet period, but they were reformed, and their network was optimised in 1993. Most of the cultural centres are multifunctional and providing cultural, educational, and social services for the residents. According to the Ministry of Culture, there were 181 cultural centres, 152 branches, and 279 territorial subdivisions in Lithuania in 2013. Each municipality has a network of cultural centres.

Some authors have indicated that cultural centres play a significant role in the provision of cultural-educational activities in the local communities (Jurėnienė et al., 2013). Thus, these cultural organisations become very important in creating opportunities to study, learn, and grow for the people from different age groups. Still, it remains unclear what impact does the educational activities have on the local community development? The aim of this article is to identify functions of the educational activities of cultural centres and Lithuanian

cultural organisations in the Kaliningrad region and Belarus revealing their impact on the local community development.

Educational Activities for Community Development

The constant educational processes have become a lifestyle involving people in the learning networks and environments in the rapidly changing societies. Besides the formal training and education, the non-formal and informal learning takes an important place in personal and community development as well.

Education is defined as a constant lifelong process that leads to personal development, vocational, spiritual, and intellectual improvement, which is based on the acquired knowledge and practical skills in a particular social and physical environment. Usually, it is a motivated activity aiming to achieve self-realisation, new knowledge or develop skills in a chosen field (Jurėnienė & Urbonienė, 2014). Educational activities contain three main areas: 1) learning that encompasses acquired knowledge and new experiences; 2) training that involves building competences and skills; 3) education that is displayed on personal, professional, valuable, and spiritual planes (Jovaiša, 1993).

According to the Law of Cultural Centres (Lietuvos Respublikos Seimas, 2004), there is a wide field of the activities that cultural centres are expected to provide for the residents. Cultural centres are responsible for the organization of cultural events and leisure activities focusing on the cultural needs of the local population. They promote ethnical culture and aim to raise interest in ethnic traditions and customs. Those organizations are as well contributing to the protection of cultural heritage in the area. Important part of their activities encompass project work and collaboration with the local authorities, other educational and cultural institutions (Jurėnienė et al., 2013; Jurėnienė & Urbonienė, 2012; Navasaitienė & Perkumienė, 2010).

It should be stressed that educational activities are only mentioned as insignificant in the laws regulating the activities of cultural centres in Lithuania. More emphasis is put on the children and youth education, while adults have fewer opportunities for non-formal learning in little towns and rural areas. Still, cultural centres create conditions for children, youth, and adults to participate in non-formal learning. Thus, they not only increase the availability of learning spaces, but also reduce the social exclusion in the society increasing the access to a variety of educational services. In this sense, cultural centres are very important as they organize various educational activities during the realization of lifelong learning strategy (Lietuvos Respublikos Seimas, 2008). Cultural centres organize various cultural events that are as well deeply educational in their nature, i.e., calendar festivals, exhibitions and workshops, special training, seminars, courses, and even conferences (Jurėnienė & Urbonienė, 2014).

There is a lack of detailed analysis on how the educational activities of cultural centres influence the development of local communities in Lithuania. However, the impact of cultural centres in the communities was analysed by some authors. First, cultural centres enable a dynamic development of art and culture because they are acting as modern cultural centres, as catalysts for creative practitioners; thus, their activities have an impact on the overall socio-cultural development. Second, cultural centres activate the processes of communication and information exchange through active socio-cultural activities and encourage creative collaboration, which generates constructive dialogues and innovative ideas. Third, cultural centres promote positive socio-cultural processes because very often they operate not only in cultural, but also in the social sphere, thus, creating a full rate social environment. Fourth, cultural centres create an attractive image of city, region, and country refreshing its landscape and formulating a positive image of the region. In addition, the creative activities that are encouraged and developed by these centres not only attract local residents, business representatives, but also draw the attention of foreign tourists and investors (Gulbinas, 2006; Jurėnienė & Urbonienė, 2012).

The educational services that are provided by cultural centres make an impact on the local community development. Community development involves strengthening the capacity of individuals within the community in order to accomplish the goals set by the community. It motivates people to plan a common community and act together in order to bring about the satisfaction of their needs and improve their conditions of living (Adedokun et al., 2010).

According to Bhattacharyya (2004), the three main principles - self-help, felt needs, and participation - provide the necessary guidance for the community development. The practice of self-help includes active role of the residents in community, abilities to reciprocate and be productive, and collective effort to take care of each other. The principle of felt needs recognizes and fosters people's capacities to define and prioritize their problems. Participation means that they are included in the processes of defining problems, which have to be solved, and finding solutions.

It is indicated that the main aim of the local communities in Lithuania is to motivate residents to improve their living conditions, education, and cultural self-expression; to strengthen solidarity and communal manifestations; and to prevent outspread of social isolation (Aleksandravičius & Žukovskis, 2011). Since the goal of the community development is solidarity and agency, the learning activities make a significant contribution. Cultural sector effectively contributes to the lifelong learning in the local community: it enhances social inclusion, active citizenship, and personal development and in this way contributes to the employability (Varbanova, 2011). Still, the confusion appears when the cultural organisations create learning activities as a part of non-formal education; it is often approached as "leisure", or "entertainment", and is not taken seriously by the decision-makers.

Thus, it may be stated that there is a lack of structural attitude towards the influence of educational activities on the local community development. This is especially relevant in border regions, where it is important for the local communities to make collective effort and be active.

Methodology

Research instrument. An authorised questionnaire with 22 open questions was developed on the basis of local community. There were 2 open questions aiming to identify the role of educational activities on the local community: 1) “Please describe what impact does the educational activities of the cultural centre make on the local community” and “What role do the educational activities play in making local residents more active/ participating and solidary?” This paper introduces the analysis of these data.

Data analysis. Qualitative content analysis was applied on the cultural centre employees’ interview data (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Qualitative analysis of the content was based on the systemic step performance: 1) identifying the manifest categories while referring to the ‘key’ words; 2) dividing the content of categories into subcategories; 3) identifying intersecting elements in the category/subcategory contents; 4) interpreting the content data. A comparative analysis was applied analysing data from three subsamples, i.e., representing cultural centres from the Lithuanian, Belarussian, and Russian border regions.

Data gathering. The qualitative research data were gathered in January-March of 2013. Semi-structured interviews were used for data gathering from cultural centres’ staff and leaders of Lithuanian ethnic communities. Semi-structured interviews were carried out at the premises of the cultural centres, and their average duration was 45 min.

Sample characteristics. In this research participated:

- 4 cultural centres in Lithuania that are located in the border regions with Belarus and Russia (in Švenčionys, Lazdijai, Kybartai, and Pagėgiai);
- 2 Lithuanian cultural centres in the Belarusborder region (Pelesa and Rimdžiūnai) and Lithuanian cultural organisation “Vytis” that coordinates their activities;
- 2 Lithuanian cultural organisations (“Birutė” and Lithuanian autonomous community) and 2 cultural centres in the border region of Kaliningrad, Russia (Gusev and Sovetsk).

The sample contains 55 informants that are managers and active members of these cultural organisations (Table 1).

The empirical study was performed by implementing project “Educational Activity of Culture Centres in Terms of Intercultural Mobilisation” (Research Council of Lithuania, 2012-2014, No. MIP-12157).

Table 1. Sample characteristics

Characteristics	Lithuanian subsample	Belarus subsample	Russian subsample
<i>Total amount</i>			
	35	9	11
<i>Gender</i>			
Women	24	7	10
Men	11	2	1
<i>Professional experience in cultural field</i>			
More than 20 years	13	1	3
10-20 years	9	5	2
Under 10 years	13	3	6

Results

According to the interview material, the following functions of educational activities, which Lithuanian cultural centres perform in the local communities, were identified: dissemination of knowledge, empowerment, self-realization, value development, recreation, national identity strengthening, and community mobilization.

Dissemination of knowledge. The informants from Lithuanian cultural centres highlighted the importance of educational events and activities for the local residents. One informant said that: “*every year a celebration, a folk festival, during which storks set off, takes place. An ornithologist comes and tells about storks’ life; people show interest and come with children*”. Another informant from the Lithuanian cultural centre noted that here “*various exhibitions are held, e.g., exhibition of drawing on water (during which people can learn how to do it), exhibitions of different handicrafts, blacksmith exhibition*” or “*people learn more about their land, gain more knowledge, expand their horizons*”. Thus, local residents that participate in educational events of cultural centres have an opportunity to learn and obtain information about things and phenomena of their interest.

Informants as well pointed out that the activities based on international cooperation also take place, for example, attending events in foreign countries and receiving guests at their events, implementing the projects together, during such projects both participants of artistic activities and local viewers of the events are involved in the educational process. Thus, the benefits are manifested through expanding the viewpoint and improving the knowledge about other

cultures. It has been noticed that the cultural centres that participated in the research perceived educational activities as one of the most important missions in the community. Therefore, they organize various events for the local residents in a structured way. The educational events can be meant for the masses or target groups according to the age.

Only one informant from Belarus out of all the Lithuanian communities in Belarus and Russia that participated in the research has mentioned that an important function of educational activity is to provide knowledge: “*Some people find out the truth. For example, when we showed a documentary film on the siege of Parliament created by a Swedish director, many Belarusians called me and said that they were shocked by the truth they found out...*” Thus, the most important of all is to provide knowledge for educational purposes in the cultural centres in Lithuania, whereas the role of providing educational activities in other border regions is different.

Empowerment. Cultural centres organize various educational events, such as, workshops, artistic activities, meetings with interesting and famous people, project activities, etc., that are closely related to self-development of participants. After reviewing the data it is clear that the educational activities help the local residents to develop their personal, social, cognitive, teamwork, and creative skills. One informant from the cultural centre in Lithuania noticed that participation in educational activities helps “children to become more communicative” and teaches them “*besides the musical skills, responsibility, time management, and teamwork skills as well*”. Another informant stated that “*introducing innovations to the elder people, helping them to get accustomed and teaching how to use it (e.g., development of computer literacy skills) is a constantly ongoing process*”.

However, a dominating attitude among the informants from the Lithuanian cultural centres was that the educational activities are mostly directed towards children and young people striving to empower them for the life-career. The impact of educational activities on the empowerment of adults was more clearly expressed by the informants from Russia and Belarus subsamples.

Self-realization. Cultural centres play an important role in local communities allowing personal growth and self-fulfilment. The data revealed that by offering a number of artistic and creative activities they allow local residents to realize their artistic skills and talents. The range of offered artistic activities is often wide: some choose to play, sing, dance, and paint, or express themselves in another way. This is particularly true for the adults and the elderly, because children and young people find similar opportunities at schools or other educational institutions. The cultural centres play even a more important role in the rural areas, where the network of educational art institutions is undeveloped. An informant from Belarus similarly stated that “*a person*

expresses oneself through participation, through cultural or aesthetic activity: someone carves, someone else reads, yet another one dances". None significant differences were observed between the subsamples concerning this issue.

Development of values. Educational activities are always closely related to the development of values, and this tendency was expressed by all the informants from cultural centres and Lithuanian cultural organizations in Lithuania, Russia, and Belarus. Cultural centres foster principles of democracy and teach peace and solidarity by the means of educational activities. This helps to develop tolerance and respect for otherness and dismiss xenophobia. This is revealed in the analysis of the activities of cultural centres and their descriptions and yearly plans. One female informant from Lazdijai cultural centre stated that *“educational events and celebrations are a major contributor to the fact that people are tolerant and friendly, ready to help one another”*. Another informant from Pagėgiai claimed that educational activities have a big impact on *“the community to become united. People are more tolerant and friendly, ready to help each other, learning to respect and foster our culture as well as to be tolerant and respectful towards the elderly persons”*. Similarly an informant from the Russian subsample told that cultural knowledge *“fosters respect for other cultures and people become more emphatic”*.

Recreation. Cultural centres have an opportunity to offer recreational activities for those groups of people who can choose from fewer leisure organization services. The organization of leisure provides opportunities for the local residents to communicate and share experiences as well as learn folk trades and participate in artistic activities and celebrate festivals together. Recreational activities in cultural centres usually are partly educational, and it is difficult to differentiate them. For example, as one informant from the Belarusian subsample told *“Lithuanian provincial centres are almost the only place where those who wish can gather and spend their leisure time and most importantly rest among their own and share information. Thematic meetings provide an opportunity to express oneself for any visitor. It is essential to have a place that a person can constantly visit”*.

Communication. This function of educational activities was stressed in all the three subsamples as important for the community strengthening. Creating spaces for the communication, sharing and dealing experiences allows different people and generations to learn and do things together. It as well develops unity and understanding, reduces social exclusion, and raises awareness. Communication with others as a virtue is inseparable from the recreation, which is perfectly illustrated by this quote of one Lithuanian informant: *“sometimes members of our music group meet even if the rehearsal is not scheduled; they sit and talk, and laugh”*. Educational activities motivate local residents to come and meet others despite the age. The data from the interviews revealed that the

cultural centres/ Lithuanian cultural organizations in Russia and Belarus help local residents to spend their free time, communicate more, and have the opportunity to find like-minded people, to get to know their land, culture, and others. For example, as one informant from the Lithuanian subsample expressed herself: *“education takes place in the ensemble, for instance, before starting to learn a song or a dance, we always discuss its origin, how it is performed in other places, etc. People learn about their own country, get more knowledge, and broaden their outlook...”*

Strengthening national identity. Informants from Belarusian and Russian subsamples stressed the impact of educational activities on strengthening the sense of national identity, responsibility, and citizenship for the community members. In their words, fostering national culture and traditions, acquisition of knowledge about folk crafts, celebration of most important public and calendar holidays allows local communities to experience the unifying pride of national identity. According to the informant from Belarus, *“our organization, providing educational services, allows here living Lithuanians to grow as individuals in terms of their nationality”*. A similar idea was expressed by the informant from the Kaliningrad region: *“Lithuanian parents that live here want their children to understand the Lithuanian language better, so these children already show a greater interest in Lithuanian culture, because this is associated with their identity”*. However, the informants from cultural centres in Lithuanian border regions missed this aspect of educational activities.

Community mobilization. It is important to enable cooperation of its members and strengthen mutual trust to mobilize the local community. This brings local people to solve common problems together, particularly when reducing social exclusion. Cultural centres help to mobilize communities by carrying out educational activities because they create spaces for communication where people exchange their ideas, solve problems, and learn to give and take. Still, this function was just fragmentally mentioned in the answers of the informants from all the three subsamples. An informant from the cultural centre in Lithuania noted that: *“educational activities make a huge contribution to a greater unification of the community, especially during various events and celebrations. People are really friendly, willing to help each other”*. An informant from Belarus expressed the idea that by participating *“people find close friends, socialize more. The community provides opportunities for people of different social backgrounds to communicate beyond social, age, and ethnic boundaries”*.

To sum up, it can be stated that educational activities perform different functions in the local community. The participation in educational activities enriches local residents with new competences and empowers the professional and life career due to the non-formal learning. Although most of the educational

events are mass events; however, sometimes it is more purposeful to direct them to ascertain target group, not only children or youth. Considering such functions as the development of national identity and empowerment, it is essential to change the view towards education as an activity intended only for children and youth. Including various age groups in education would allow cultural centres to organize purposeful leisure for them and would help to carry out socialization and integration into the community. It would as well create collaboration and partnership networks that are essential for the local community mobilization and development.

Conclusions

After evaluating what influence does the cultural centres' educational activities have on the community development, it has to be noted that the performed functions of educational activities make a different impact corresponding to the predominant needs. Cultural centres contribute to the growing knowledge about the ethnic or high culture by means of educational activities; the impact is as well reflected in other important aspects of the society, such as, the development of national identity, decreasing manifestations of xenophobia, and development of tolerance for the other cultures.

Thus, the managers of cultural centres in Lithuanian border regions highlighted such functions of educational activities as dissemination of knowledge, empowerment, self-realization, value development, recreation, communication, and community mobilization. However, it should be emphasized that not enough attention is given to the educational activities directed to the development of national identity, tolerance, respect for otherness, which are extremely important for the processes of social integration in the community, in the cultural centres in Lithuania. This essential difference was observed while comparing data of cultural centres in Lithuania and Lithuanian cultural organizations in Russia and Belarus.

Informants from the Lithuanian cultural centres and organisations in Russia and Belarus almost forgot that the function of knowledge dissemination is significant for the community development. Thus, the importance of strengthening national identity was especially stressed in these subsamples, while this function was underestimated in the Lithuanian subsample.

Yet, it is clear that cultural centres as the agents of community development play an important role in the local communities through the educational activities. However, cultural centres do not see their role in their local communities as influential in the processes of community development and mobilization. One of the most important missions of cultural centres in Lithuania should be to include community member groups into the educational activities, in such way decreasing the social exclusion, increasing active participation, and developing communal awareness.

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