

**Focus-Group Interviewing for Curricula Analysis  
Related to Nutrition, Health, and Food Safety in the  
Romanian Educational System**

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## Abstract

This case study presents some of the practical aspects of focus-group interviews used in the frame of a broader research accomplished through Erasmus+ Project *Let's make it better! Raising the awareness of the triad nutrition-health-food safety in school education (EDU FOR HEALTH)*. The interviews were conducted within the activity project titled "Critical analysis of the national curricula related to nutrition, health, and food safety." The analysis was needed in order to design the most suitable training process for teachers in preschool, primary, and secondary education regarding the relation among nutrition, eating habits, and health status. The knowledge teachers acquired through the trainings constitutes the basis for an innovative approach to the integration of food science education and related subjects within the curricula. In this case study, we discuss the issues that researchers face in preparing and conducting a focus-group interview and reveal some methodological problems we faced, including the following: why this research method rather than another, how to establish focus groups that will work, how to mitigate any possible animosity between participants, how to overcome the silences during the interviewing, how to assure a comfortable ambiance for discussions, and how to make sure that all the information needed is obtained before ending the interview. This case study also shows the importance of thorough preparation before conducting the interview, the need for spontaneity and good discussion management skills, and the advantages of this research method.

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## Learning Outcomes

By the end of this case, students should be able to

- Have a better understanding of the methodological challenges involved in using focus-group interviewing in order to analyze school management interventions for curriculum development in Health Education
- Identify the main stages needed to conduct a focus-group interview
- Explain the moderator's role in focusing the interview
- Understand how to construct and ask questions in order to obtain relevant information
- Understand how to use group interaction to produce data and insights that would be less accessible without such interaction

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## Project Overview and Context

A healthy diet is an important part of a healthy lifestyle, and teaching children, even from an early age, about healthy eating habits represents an essential prerequisite for developing a healthy lifestyle and for ensuring an optimal state of health for students. The "Strategic

Research Agenda for the period 2011-2020 and beyond ...,” described in the Joint Programming Initiative *A Healthy Diet for a Healthy Life* (2011), underlines the importance of nutrition and the incidence of the diet-related diseases nowadays. Also, the Special Eurobarometer 389 *Europeans’ Attitudes Towards Food Security, Food Quality and the Countryside* (July 2012) highlights the negative impact of lower education level of teenagers (15-24 years of age; almost 58% of the respondents) on checking for quality labels on food products, as well as that only a minority of European Union (EU) citizens recognize logos of EU food quality assurance schemes.

In the context of numerous researches conducted on the correlation between youth education, health, and food science, Erasmus + Project *Let’s make it better! Raising the awareness of the triad nutrition-health-food safety in school education (EDU FOR HEALTH)* was born. The project involved five European countries (Romania, Spain, Greece, Lithuania, and Croatia), with a general objective to restore the place of the life sciences (oriented on nutrition and food safety education) in the culture of young people, encouraging their appetite for careers in science and in entrepreneurship, respectively, and to develop networks between various actors from the scientific world: universities, schools, research institutions, scientific laboratories, associations, and centers of culture.

Our experiences and strong ties with the pre-university levels of education led us to notice that Health Education is poorly presented in the Romanian curricula. We acknowledged that Health Education is important for the life of a community and recognized that education is marginalized in the national curriculum, which led us to inquire, what is the level of Health Education Curriculum implementation and which factors influence the development and implementation of Health Education Curriculum? So, we tried to answer these questions using different research methods, one of which was the focus-group interview.

Our research activities were part of project activity titled “Critical analysis of the national curricula related to nutrition, health and food safety” (this was just one of the many activities from the project), oriented on reporting the state of art in the field of health and food science education. This analysis was needed in order to design the most suitable training process for teachers in preschool, primary, and secondary education regarding the relation among nutrition, eating habits, and health status. The knowledge teachers acquired through the trainings constitutes the basis for an innovative approach to the integration of food science education and related subjects within the curricula.

### **Our Research Methods**

Our research on curricula related to nutrition, health, and food safety used a mixed methodology, including quantitative and qualitative methods. First, we needed to have a clear understanding of the content and forms of education related to nutrition, health, and food security for every educational level, so we used content analysis to evaluate the existing Health Education curriculum, targeting topics related to nutrition, health, and food safety. The results allowed us to map the curricular areas (disciplines) having specific content of Health Education and to identify the themes related to nutrition, health, and food security for every educational level.

Then, we had to find out which factors influence curriculum implementation and the teaching practices used for Health Education classes. This involved consulting a large number of participants involved in the education process in a short time (we only had 2 months for this part of the project). We decided that the method best suited for these conditions was a questionnaire-based survey. By using this method, we could identify teachers' perceptions regarding factors that might influence design practices and application of the curriculum. The questionnaires would also help us to identify the best practices of the teaching-learning-assessment process used in Health Education classes from preschool to the high-school level.

But we still needed information on curriculum implementation issues, such as those that were dependent on school management. In Romania, school managers are responsible for implementing the national curriculum in each school, including determining the disciplines that make up the School Decision Curriculum (almost one quarter of the curricula taught for every school level). Thus, our research needed to target a specific group (school managers) to obtain more in-depth information. For this, we decided to use focus-group interviews because we believed that the data obtained through this method would allow us to draw a SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats) analysis of curriculum implementation and development related to nutrition, health, and food safety.

#### **A Brief Background of Health Education in Romania**

The structure of the education system in Romania includes four main levels for pre-university education (preschool, primary school, inferior secondary education, superior secondary education) and three main levels for university education (Bologna model—Bachelor program, Master program, and Doctoral program).

The National Health Education Program was inaugurated in 2001, and in 2002, an implementation strategy for Health Education was developed. Between 2003 and 2004, there was intense activity with regard to curriculum development: curricula and informative guidelines were printed and education inspectors and biology teachers were trained. However, the

teachers from preschool and primary school were relatively neglected. Currently, the Health Education Program is conducted at the national level in almost two-thirds of schools and colleges in Romania. The National Program, “Health Education in Romanian Schools” (Ministerul Educației și Cercetării, 2004) aims to

1. Promote the health and well-being of the student, namely, optimal functioning in terms of somatic, physiological, mental, emotional, social and spiritual domains, and the development of a healthy lifestyle;
2. The student’s personal development, namely, self-knowledge and building a positive image of oneself, communication and interpersonal skills, stress management, and personal career development;
3. Prevention, namely, preventing accidents and health risk behaviors, as well as preventing negative attitudes toward oneself and life.

Health Education can be taught as an optional subject (full quote) and/or integrated into other discipline. It can also be taught as an extracurricular activity, mainly in preschool and elementary school. The main goal of Health Education is to develop a responsible attitude and behavior among students toward their own health and the health of others.

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### Research Practicalities

We carried out our research between October 2014 and December 2014. We designed the research—objectives, steps, instruments (questionnaire and interview guide)—and conducted the focus-group interviews. For the survey, the questionnaires were self-administrated by the teacher participants. Prior to the administration of the questionnaires, we informed the teacher participants and their coordinators about the project and research objectives and assured them of the confidentiality of their responses (the questionnaires did not ask for the respondents’ name, only facts relevant for the research, such as residential area, educational level they are teaching, and their degree level and specialization)

### Research Population

The research population consisted of individuals involved in the Health Education implementation: a *teachers group* comprising teachers from kindergartens, primary schools, secondary inferior schools (middle schools), secondary superior schools (high schools); and a *managers group* comprising individuals involved with the management team. For secondary schools, we were interested only in teachers who could teach Health Education classes or themes, that is, teachers who specialize in disciplines such as Natural Science, Biology, Chemistry, Technology, or master class (this type of class content can include topics on

personal development and health).

For the teachers group, the research sample was established through *stratified sampling* so as to be representative of the total number of school units at the national level for preschool, primary, and secondary education. Stratified sampling involves establishing groups (“strata”) from the research population, so we created “strata” of teachers for each educational level: kindergarten teachers (*educatori*), elementary school teachers (*învățători*), and secondary school teachers (*profesori*) and aimed for representativeness of rural and urban schools from each county.

For the managers group, with which we conducted focus-group interviews, we used *purposeful sampling*, gathering three groups of 10 members. Choosing this sample was more difficult than the teachers group sample because we needed different type of participants—teachers, parents, students—all of whom were involved in school management (being members of a management team), but we didn’t want them all from the same team because we needed answers about Health Education implementation in different schools. We started the selection with the teachers we knew from a previous research project (the criteria for inclusion being membership on a management team), and asked them to invite other members, including parents and students (over 14 years of age). Participants were assigned to focus groups on the basis of geographic location; that is, participants from schools located near each other were assigned to the focus group that was most accessible for them. We established 10 persons per group, considering that this is the best number for the focus-group interview to include at least five types of participants from the various management team categories (directors of schools, teachers representing the evaluation committee for the quality of the education institutions, methodological commission representatives, class masters, municipal representatives, students, and parents). We formed three groups, one for each school level (preschool, elementary school, and secondary school).

### Sampling Challenges

When designing the focus-group interviews, we had to think about who would participate in each group. In our case, the common factor for the participants was their involvement in school management, but they could have different agendas. For example, the school director might be focused on “triple E” (economy, effectiveness, efficiency), the teacher representatives might try to defend their positions (and their teaching loads), and the master class representatives and the students might be the only ones interested in the pupils’ best interest. So we had to pay attention to creating an atmosphere relaxed enough to make the participants feel comfortable and focused on the subject—that is, to understand the factors that could affect the

implementation of Health Education, and particularly education related to nutrition, health, and food security.

Because focus-group interviews are an interactive activity, we were attentive to the participants' temperament, trying to obtain a relatively balanced group to facilitate communication. This was possible because we had met most of the participants in previous research activities (not only within this project).

#### **Access and Informed Consent**

All the participants were volunteers, participating of their own free will. From the beginning of the interviews, we explained the ethical issues: confidentiality can't be guaranteed, each of them would be speaking in front of everyone, but the information would be used only for the research purpose; and the data and analysis would be used in some scientific or didactic publications. Their verbal agreement to pursue the interview was considered informed consent. In addition, at the outset, we announced that they could leave the room at any time if they wanted, or felt uncomfortable with the rules/issues.

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#### **Designing the Focus-Group Interview**

The school management team has among its duties deciding which subjects, in addition to those in mandatory core curriculum, are to be taught in each school. Health Education, if taught as an optional discipline, is a class within this School Decision Curriculum. The focus-group interviews helped us to better understand the process of including and implementing Health Education classes in the curriculum and to identify the factors that could influence relevant decision making.

We choose focus-group interviewing because the topic of research was new, unexplored and we wanted a face-to-face exchange of opinions on the subject to gain information. School managers are a heterogeneous group (different ages, different specialties, different backgrounds, maybe different agenda), and group interactions and dynamics can stimulate discussion (and, thus, produce answers to our research questions). Also, focus-group interviews allow for "reading between the lines" (i.e., getting information from other means than spoken words). Another reason for choosing this method was economical: time was short and we were few.

#### **The Focused and Structured Character of the Interviews**

To make sure that the main issues we needed to investigate were covered, before conducting the interviews, we determined topics on which to focus the group discussions:

- What were the interventions/roles of the school directors for the facilitation and implementation of Health Education (e.g., procedural arrangements, accreditation process); what were the strengths or weaknesses of their institution in this direction?
- What factors could support the successful implementation of Health Education in general and the curriculum related to nutrition, health, and food safety, in particular?
- What were the participants' perceptions about teacher capacity and availability for education related to nutrition, health, and food safety?
- How could community (especially parents) or other stakeholders be involved in Health Education programs?
- What was the share or percentage of representativeness of Health Education courses, in each level of study, and what do they think about this problem?
- What are their opinions about the topics in the curriculum?

These themes were determined in accordance with the purpose of our research and were based on the information we had gathered from previous research activities (“in the field” discussions with a few teachers, principals and students). It is very important to be well prepared on the subject of the interview (i.e., to have a clear understanding of the subject and what you need to investigate), especially for an interview with a group, in order to be able to focus the discussions; otherwise, the discussion may digress too much and you won't obtain relevant information.

#### **The Constructed Aspect of the Interviews**

The “constructed aspect” of focus-group interviews refers to the social context in which data are collected (Stănculescu, 2007, p. 4), and includes three aspects:

- *Construction of the focus group.* This means that the participants do not necessarily know each other in advance and they are selected according to criteria which ensure homogeneity (in this case, the involvement in Health Education curricula implementation); also, they know they are there for research.
- *Construction of the space.* Members of the focus group are convened in a special space, like “round table” rooms, or rooms with chairs arranged in a semicircle, allowing everyone to see each other, or rooms endowed with recording and/or observation equipment. For our research, we used classrooms that were familiar, comfortable for participants, and allowed the furniture to be arranged (i.e., table in the back with refreshments, and the chairs positioned in a circle in the middle of room). Teachers were placed in the space by the researcher, depending on interview purpose or participant's characteristics.
- *Time is built.* Participants are called for a certain date and at a specific time, for a fixed,



known-in-advance duration (1-2 hr). The interview session itself is preceded by a pre-session of 15-20 min for familiarizing the participants with the space and with the others.

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## Conducting the Interviews

### Stages

The interviews were conducted one time with each of the three groups, in three different locations (their schools). Each interview session was preceded by a *preparation stage*, for participant selection (involving many phone calls) and logistics (e.g., arrangement for the space, refreshments, researchers' traveling arrangements, recording).

For every group interview, we had a *pre-session*. In this stage, the researcher or research assistant welcomes the participants and invites them to make themselves comfortable and have a refreshment. In these pre-sessions, 10-20 min was allotted for participants to familiarize themselves with the area and with others. During this time, we discreetly observed the participants: who is more willing to talk, who does not; who spontaneously associates with others, who avoids such associations. We used these observations later to position participants in the circle of chairs for discussion and, also, for discussion moderation. For example, we placed the "talkative" person near the moderator (so he or she could be controlled more easily if needed), and the "silent" one in front of the moderator (so he or she could be encouraged by non-verbal communication: for example, eyes, gestures).

The third stage, the interviews themselves, had several phases:

1. *The introduction*. In this phase, we introduced ourselves and made a brief presentation of the institution we represented, our research project, and the purpose of the meeting. After our presentation, we asked participants to introduce themselves one at a time. After the introductions, we provided participants with information about recording the interviews, what happens with the recorded material, and other ethical concerns such as reiterating that participants could leave at any time (none did). In addition, we presented the rules for the focus group:

- Anything related to the topic can be said; there is no restriction, there must be no restraint.
- All experiences or opinions are valuable for research purposes; there are no more "better" or more "interesting" experiences or opinions than others.
- We do not want to reach a consensus; we are interested in knowing when someone has an experience or opinion similar to another, but we care just as much to know when someone has a different opinion or experience, or even opposed.

- Nobody judges another; do not laugh at each other, as participants must respect each other.
- This is not the time for discussions of personal problems, nor are we entitled to expect others to help us solve our problems (there are other contexts in which these things can be done).
- It is important for everyone to feel free to be himself or herself and to describe his or her experiences, thoughts, and feelings.
- It is important for everyone to speak in his or her own way, to say what he or she has to say in his or her own words. But it is equally important to avoid interrupting others and to avoid talking while others are talking. When someone wants to intervene, he or she can do so, without asking permission, but only after assuring that the other person has finished speaking or by signing to the moderator (with slightly raised hand).

2. *The discussion.* The first minutes after announcing the first question/topic are almost always awkward, as frequently no one has the courage to speak first (“to break the ice”). To avoid this, we directly invited the participant whom we identified in the pre-session as “talkative” or “brave” to have “the first word.” We have also used the strategy of asking, “Does anyone have any questions before we start?” to help transition to the actual questions.

We addressed each subtopic in turn, after exhausting the discussion of the previous subtopic. One of us, as the moderator, would announce the subsequent subtheme—“Now I want to talk about ...”—and then follows the same route for moderating the discussions: intervenes from time to time, not to say what is right or what is true, or to do justice to someone, but just to make sure that the group covers the needed information and that each participant has the opportunity to present his or her point of view.

We were attentive to the interview questions, making sure they followed a logical sequence, appeared to be spontaneous and natural, and covered all objectives. In addition, we ensured that we left enough time to obtain complete information. We asked open-ended questions so that the participants had the opportunity to report, to tell something (an experience, an opinion), and to explain an attitude or a behavior. For example,

- What can you tell us about the decision process regarding which disciplines should be introduced as optional?
- What do you think about the process; how can it be improved?
- What can you tell us about the teaching process in Health Education classes?
- What kind of topics do you usually focus on in Health Education?
- How do you feel about the following topics ...?

- Do you think that the project method is efficient for the educational level you teach?

We also used some hypothetical questions: Suppose you could change one thing about the way you teach Health Education, what would this be? What else would you change?

3. *The end of the session.* When all the questions about the topics introduced are answered, it is time to end the interview. In doing so, we summarized the overall theme, emphasized some conclusions drawn, requested feedback (“Does anyone have additions/corrections?”), expressed satisfaction, and asked for a final feedback about participants’ feelings. At the end, we thanked the participants and invited them to remain in the room for 10-15 min for refreshments, to exchange views among themselves, and possibly to share a thought that remained untold.

### Moderator Role in Interviews

As professor Elisabeta Stănciulescu (2007) showed in one of her courses, the moderator has five important roles in focus-group interviews. The first role refers to *topic management*. The moderator should ensure that the discussion focuses on the identified themes and to bring back participants who depart from the topic. The moderator also checks the consistency of each speaker narration by asking for breakdowns, details, clarification, if necessary.

The second role consists of *interaction management*. Because focus groups involve several participants, the moderator is tasked with balancing participants’ interaction. In our interviews, this meant that the “talkative” were tempered (“It helps us very much what you say, but I must interrupt, to have time to talk to everyone”) and that the shy ones were encouraged or invited to speak (“Some people think in this way, others disagree with us; what about you, what are you thinking about this?”). In two sessions, we had to mitigate the competitive aspect of communication: we encouraged participants to listen to each other and recognize others’ point of views. We also encouraged direct communication among participants and monitored non-verbal interactions to assess the group dynamics, intervening when appropriate.

Another role of the moderator involves *questions management*. Besides open-ended question and hypothetical questions, we sometimes needed to ask for clarification, for example, when a participant’s expression or gesture contradicted his or her words, or when one participant contradicted another. In addition, if a participant was talking in generalities, we asked for him or her to recount more concrete experiences; if a participant’s story seemed implausible, we asked for more details and clarifications. When the participants used phrases whose meaning was not clear, we tried to clarify the meaning. We also tried to establish the intended meaning of very common Romanian expressions, or when an expression could be used by different participants with different meanings.

The fourth moderator's role is to summarize the finding on each subtopic. Each sequence of questions on each subtopic was concluded with a summary of the discussions:

I would like to summarize, to ensure that I remember the essentials and make sure I understand. Some of you think the procedures are too complicated and time consuming and others are more concerned with the less respected stages of the procedures. Have I forgotten something? Did I garbled anything?

Sometimes, we asked a member of the group to summarize.

The last, perhaps most important, role of the moderator is *to offer feedback on the discussions*. To ensure the focus-group discussion runs smoothly, it is important to express satisfaction with the discussion participation and to provide relevant feedback:

Before moving further, I would like to say that I am very satisfied about how our discussion is running. I learned many interesting things that will help us understand better what are the procedures needed to be respected in order to introduce an optional class. I would like to know how you feel, if everyone is well. Please let me know if you want to make any change to the way the interviewing is done.

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#### **Focus-Group Interviewing: Challenges and Practical Lessons Learned**

Although all three school managers focus-group interviews were conducted with individuals with similar positions and functions in school management, each group was different and challenging to conduct. However, the moderator is responsible for the success of the focus-group interview. As such, the moderator must be able to relate easily with individuals from different social and educational backgrounds and ages, and must effectively deal with difficult situations should they arise (e.g., groups of silent, passive persons; or, conversely, active, exuberant, or aggressive groups). We interviewed individuals who did not understand the questions well, responded off-topic, or provided inconsistent, incomplete answers.

So, the personality of the moderator is an important variable for group dynamics and discussions. The moderator's attitudes toward the participants are key to the success of the interview. We learned that using a soft voice can help calm down those who express themselves loudly; being empathetic can encourage others to talk more and openly about what is important to them. Although the moderator must respect participants' opinions, he or she needs to be firm with those who disrupt the discussion. It is also helpful for the moderator to have a good sense of humor and to be attentive to all participants.

Preparing an interview guide can help the moderator allot time for each issue to be discussed. In addition, the moderator has to pay attention not to repeat questions and to know at all times what points of discussion have been achieved and what else has to be explored. In this way, he or she is prepared for new ideas that may occur. In addition, the moderator should be attentive to participant preferences (e.g., calling them by their preferred name), as this can create the impression of knowing individuals better and can increase their confidence in the moderator.

The moderator also has to be impartial: not express personal opinions about a topic of discussion or any participant's opinions, and give equal consideration and equal time for all participants. But, at the same time, the moderator must not appear to be off-topic but progress easily, logically, and naturally from one question to another and from one theme to another and then summarize the exchange of ideas.

Finally, being a good host with a relaxed, friendly attitude is especially helpful. In some situations, acting skills (such as acting naive, doubtful, curious, or with a lack of understanding) can help to stimulate the participants to respond or to supplement answers. For the focus-group discussion to flow smoothly, it is important for the moderator to be flexible, adaptable, and organized. Of course, the moderator should not forget to thank participants.

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### Conclusion

Through this case study, we provided a brief reference guide about designing a research focus group. We tried to capture specific details to remove any mystery associated with this method. The success of the focus-group method depends on the researcher's adherence to methodological rigors and on his or her experience, moderation skills, and analytical abilities. The focus group might prove useful for educational sciences in areas such as analysis of curriculum, implementation of different disciplines (as showed), educational policy, teaching process analysis, and quality management.

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### Exercises and Discussion Questions

1. What are the challenges associated with designing a focus-group interview? What strategies can you think of to overcome each?
2. Explain why we considered the focus-group interview to be "constructed."
3. What characteristics do you consider the most important for a moderator to have in order to conduct successful focus-group interviews? Explain your answer.
4. What strategies would you recommend to ensure participants are comfortable and that their interaction in the focus-group discussion is balanced? How would you handle a "talkative"

participant? A “silent” participant?

5.If you were to conduct a focus-group interview tomorrow, what would you do to ensure its success?

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### Further Reading

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### Web Resources

Overview of the Process of Conducting Focus Groups: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-27WjZVDIbk>

Fundamentals of Qualitative Research Methods: Focus Groups: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cCAPz14yjd4>

What Make a Good Focus Group? Advanced Qualitative Methods: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XA2Eo1ggkjc>

The Focus Group Interview and Other Kinds of Group Activities: [http://ppa.aces.uiuc.edu/pdf\\_files/Focus.pdf](http://ppa.aces.uiuc.edu/pdf_files/Focus.pdf)

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