

OUTDOOR EDUCATION FOR SCHOOL INCLUSION IN ITALY: AN OVERVIEW OF THEORETICAL CONCEPTS, FEATURES AND BENEFITS

OUTDOOR EDUCATION PER L'INCLUSIONE IN ITALIA: UNA PANORAMICA SU CONCETTI TEORICI, CARATTERISTICHE E BENEFICI

Lucia Valentino

Pegaso University

lucia.valentino@unipegaso.it



Generoso Romano

University of Naples Parthenope

generoso.romano@uniparthenope.it



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ABSTRACT

Throughout our lives we learn in different types of contexts, whether social or physical, allowing us to develop under different aspects. The same goes for school: not only we learn within a classroom, but we develop skills and knowledge in the school garden too. In today's education, Outdoor Education contributes to respond to the needs and skills required by today's society (resilience, empathy, conflict resolution, inclusiveness, and so on).

Nell'arco della nostra vita apprendiamo in diversi tipi di contesti, siano essi sociali o fisici, consentendoci di svilupparci sotto diversi aspetti. Lo stesso vale per la scuola: non solo impariamo in un'aula, ma sviluppiamo competenze e conoscenze anche nel giardino della scuola. Nella scuola di oggi, l'Outdoor Education contribuisce a rispondere alle esigenze e alle competenze richieste dalla società odierna (resilienza, empatia, risoluzione dei conflitti, inclusività e così via).

KEYWORDS

Outdoor Education; Natural Environment; Inclusion; Special Educational Needs.

Outdoor Education; Ambiente Naturale; Inclusione; Bisogni Educativi Speciali.

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Introduction

Throughout our lives we learn in different types of contexts, whether social or physical, allowing us to develop under different aspects. The same goes for school: not only we learn within a classroom, but we develop skills and knowledge when in the school garden too. The human being feels the need to be in contact with natural spaces, for it is his habitat; moreover, the human body itself is nature, as indicated by Heike Freire (2011) in her book "*Educar en verde*" (Freire, 2018). Traditional teaching-learning methods are gradually being left behind, leading to the need for a constant search for alternatives capable of responding to the emerging educational needs of the new generations. In this way, the idea of working outdoors becomes a key element in the development of the educational process (Remmen & Iversen, 2022) and translates into the expression "*Outdoor Education*". Values of respect, equality, inclusion and tolerance are promoted thanks to it. Therefore, educating outdoors provides benefits for sustainable development, contributes to peace, promotes an ecocentric ethic and improves the world's well-being and health state (UNESCO, 2015).

In the school context, outdoor learning should be regarded as a valuable experiential learning tool, which may help students develop social and personal skills (Mann, 2018). This experiential learning will grant educational benefits to students in different contexts, such as improved academic performance, developed processing skills, or increased collaborative work to support students with disabilities. Improvements may also be obtained in terms of reconnecting young people with nature, encouraging a better approach to the natural environment and reporting benefits for students (Barrable & Booth, 2020), thus supporting an education that contributes to the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals set out in the 2030 Agenda (Alkire & Jahan, 2018). In terms of contemporary education, Outdoor Education helps respond to the needs and skills required by today's society (resilience, empathy, conflict resolution, and so on). This educational methodology aims to deal with the abandonment and carelessness of nature and to turn it into the children's main learning resource. Being the vital experience a key pillar in this type of education, it is employed as a learning space, a source of didactic materials, a support and the driving force of the teaching-learning process. The use of outdoor spaces overcomes the classical conception of the school space, which is considered as a confined, exclusive and inaccessible area, leaving it open to an interplay of indoor and outdoor activities (Angelucci et al., 2016).

1. Outdoor Education In Italy

The Italian educational system promotes the development of each person's individual skills at all educational stages, emphasizing creativity, reflection, and the desire to experiment and investigate. Within this educational system a great concern for self-esteem, as well as for the care of others and of nature, predominates. For the Italian school system, one of the main goals emerged in recent times is to create spaces within which to develop a sense of collaboration and reflection, as well as knowledge construction and sharing (Ladiana, 2019) through sensory, exploratory, environmental and technological activities defined according to the context within which students are immersed (Indire, 2021). The 2022 intervention by the Italian Ministry of Education to promote the creation of educational architectures envisioning a school outside the classroom walls was born based on these ideologies. "*Progettare, costruire e abitare la scuola*" ("Designing, building and living in the school" in English) is the title of the document developed to provide a new cultural horizon on the Italian educational institution, as well as practical indications for the creation of tomorrow's educational institutions. According to Patrizio Bianchi, former Italian Minister of Education, it is "...a new way of conceiving school buildings that brings with it a new way of 'doing school'. The document outlines principles that guide the design and construction of new schools, but also the behaviors of those who live within them, including students, school staff, families and communities." Here are the guidelines of the document:

- A quality school, with an architecture allowing everyone to recognize his or her civic role in the area.
- A low-consumption school, designed with the lowest possible environmental impact and limited maintenance requirements.
- A sustainable school, built with eco-friendly, locally sourced or recycled materials.
- An open school, an accessible place with welcoming spaces for the community even beyond school hours.
- A school providing education both inside and outside, in which outdoor spaces, such as courtyards, terraces, or roof gardens, are learning environments as well.
- A school for better learning, in which the classroom is the hub of a flexible system capable of accommodating different setups and expanding to neighboring spaces, depending on the didactic needs.

- A school for all the ones who work there, in which staff environments are rethought as resources for the educational action and encourage co-design.
- A school for the five senses, to foster learning that intentionally involves body and movement, which is both effective and inclusive.
- An equipped school, where furniture can be made functional according to different needs from time to time.
- A connected school, with new, stable, fast, safe, secure and ubiquitous technologies in all rooms.

In particular, the document highlights the urgency of creating an open school providing concrete educational experiences outside the actual physical classroom. As reflected in the text of the Guidelines, "Doing school outdoors, in the open air, getting out not only of classrooms but of all covered environments, is a still underexplored path for Italian schools. Many schoolyards are underexploited today, even though they represent a great resource for educational action. The pandemic, with the search for more spaces -- including outdoor spaces -- for carrying out school activities, has made their inclusion even more urgent among learning environments. The outdoor environment is the place of choice for making experiences not only related to the natural context (contact with the earth, observation of weather phenomena, cultivation), but also as an extension of indoor environments. Outdoor spaces should be easily accessible from classrooms."

In Italy, we have seen the spread of kindergartens in the woods only in recent years. In 2014, a residential kindergarten was opened in Ostia Antica, in the province of Rome: throughout the whole school year, students can experience didactic activities in full contact with the nature and can choose the lessons to be carried out among a variety of proposals, including music, dance, theater, sports, science lessons and so on. Another example is the "Scuola nel bosco" (School in the Woods) in Trento, which has been offering kindergarten and primary school children residential experiences in the woods, in close contact with nature, since 2006.

2. Outdoor education: between history, features and benefits

Jean Jacques Rousseau (1779), in his book about the young boy *Emile*, showed how children learn by exploring the nature surrounding them instead of reading books and through formal learning. He stated that they learn best when they are given the possibilities to follow their curiosity and make their own experiences. In this

way, they become confident and self-reliant and learn by directly experiencing the immediate environment. According to the philosopher, nature is the first teacher of any child, of any citizen of the world. It is also worth recalling F. Froebel, founder of the first kindergartens created with the intention of providing an inclusive natural education in an organized and open school space, in which children could develop freely. Later on, Maria Montessori, in those schools called "Case dei Bambini" (Children's Homes), focused attention on the environment to ensure that it was child-friendly, welcoming and proportionate to their needs. It is thanks to John Dewey that the environment takes a central part in the educational process: learning must be based on direct experience with the environment, no longer considered as the background of education, but rather as an "educational tool". Experiences, a fundamental aspect on which the methodology of outdoor education is based, become the element to be preserved and fostered in educational terms since "...according to Dewey, it is both the fruit and the mirror of a unitary reality generated by a continuous series of mutual relationships between the subject and the object, between the individual and the environment" (Pezzano, 2016). Thanks to Howard Gardner and his theory of multiple intelligences, the value of naturalistic intelligence takes on fundamental significance; this type of intelligence is referred to as the ability to classify and manipulate elements of the natural environment and is closely related to existential intelligence; man is understood as a system of relationships between the physical and natural realms.

The close connection between nature and man was also addressed in a quite revolutionary paradigm devised by the writer Daniel B. Smith; within one of his articles for the New York Times, he outlined a parallelism that we might define as original: "Just as Freud believed that neuroses were the consequences of dismissing our deep-rooted sexual and aggressive instincts, ecopsychologists believe that grief, despair and anxiety are the consequences of dismissing equally deep-rooted ecological instincts" (Smith, 2010). According to this assumption, the distance between modern man and the natural world could cause many malaises. In fact, it has been investigated how progressive alienation from the natural environment may have negative effects on each person's lifestyle. Despite the myriad of data demonstrating the effects of nature on our quality of life, this close link has become increasingly fragile in recent years and this has marked a gradual distancing from it. In addition to the data demonstrating the psychophysical and cognitive benefits of prolonged exposure to a natural environment, the emotional implications are not to be underestimated as well. In fact, the influence of the green world on human beings would also improve emotional well-being. In a meta-analytic review of 32

studies carried out by McMahan and Estes in 2015, it was confirmed how even just a short contact with nature would be able to improve our emotional well-being: "across these studies, exposure to natural environments was associated with a moderate increase in positive affect and a smaller, yet consistent, decrease in negative affect relative to comparison conditions." (McMahan & Estes, 2015). Contrary to what Descartes thought, mind and body are not separate and distinct, but are mutually affecting entities. Therefore, by taking care of both of these aspects, an optimal inner synergy and balance will be achieved. By devoting oneself to healthy soul time, particularly in places rich in plants, one will be able to reconnect with oneself, thereby glorifying one's existence and entering a "soul time where one will lose track of time and become one with the environment." (McGreeney, 2023)

Moving on to the benefits that this type of education can bring at the school level, from the first years of kindergarten (a very fundamental educational stage for development) children begin to learn about their surrounding world, the natural environment and all the living beings around them. It is a time for discovery, investigation and exploration. This is because they need to understand what the world is and what it is made up of. Thanks to this type of education, it is possible to work at different levels. One of this is attention, an aspect that is greatly favored when educating in contact with nature. Normally, any prolonged mental effort leads to attentional fatigue or fascination, as Kaplan(1995) describes it, and to what we could call curiosity, a restorative component of this experience. This fascination occurs more easily if the environment is rich enough to provide a world with unusual stimuli, allowing us to observe and experiment with it. Basically, according to the author, when we are in nature it seems easier to reset our attention as we are not assaulted by constant information, while in a natural environment all the sounds, all the different phenomena constantly attract our attention and keep us on alert. Children who have access to nature, and to the outdoor world in general, learn better, behave more adequately, are calmer, more creative and more proficient in critical thinking. Spending time in nature addresses their physical, emotional and spiritual deficits. One of the benefits of outdoor education is precisely that of experiencing the passage of time and appreciating slowness and silence. In fact, when children are in contact with nature, they rediscover their own rhythm, which is much closer to the natural one, compared to that imposed by today's society. Nowadays, it is more and more important to help children rediscover the value of silence and time, which is becoming increasingly hectic: only by rediscovering slowness can we get in harmony with the natural world. In addition, as children explore the environment, they discover the different motor

possibilities that the body offers them and learn all by themselves through the trial-and-error process. While being in nature, children have all the richness of stimuli they need to develop in a concrete sensory experience involving all their senses and offering them awareness of the environment. Being outdoors, in an environment that keeps constantly changing, makes them more alert, develops their observation and concentration skills, and makes them more flexible with themselves and others than when they are within the classroom walls. Finally, another crucial aspect is the interdisciplinary nature of the Outdoor Education approach: for instance, students attending a math lesson in the nature will also learn about the forest, the weather conditions, the cardinal points, the geometric shapes of natural elements, and so on.

Learning outdoors already from an early age has multiple health benefits too: it helps prevent childhood obesity and related diseases, such as diabetes or hypertension, which are increasingly common in this age group. In this respect, in 2010, a report worked out by the White House Task Force on Childhood Obesity (2010) confirmed that children's level of physical activity increases when they are involved in outdoor activity education programs. It also has beneficial effects for children with autism spectrum disorders, attention deficit disorders, children with physical/cognitive/sensory disabilities and those with chronic diseases, making them more relaxed, more focused and more cooperative with their peers. As for example, a study carried out by Andrea Faber Taylor and Frances E. Kuo (2009) of the University of Illinois on children with attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) showed how these children, by taking a simple walk in nature, were able to remember significantly more numbers compared to those exposed to non-natural settings (Taylor, Kuo; 2008). All this happens because the natural environment, especially for people with behavioral problems, has effects on the psycho-emotional sphere and results in increased levels of felt energy, reduced perceived fatigue, as well as lower levels of anxiety, anger and distress (Valentini et al., 2019).

3. Outdoor education and inclusion: a key combination in today's schools

Many students who are unsuccessful in the classroom experience success in an outdoor learning situation. (Gilbertson, 2006)

The inclusion process grants everyone the chance to enjoy equal benefits in the educational world. According to Gair (1997) nature supports children in their total development, because it stimulates their senses and is an ongoing process where

mutual support is basic. Therefore, learning and cooperating outdoors increases their social skills - in nature, boys and girls work as equals and each one's abilities stand out - and increases their motivation. Based on all this, we can assume that outdoor education has the potential to promote inclusion in social contexts and impede exclusion. The outdoor space can become a key partner in educating children with disabilities and typical development to take care for themselves and for others. Gair also states that positive support by peers may stimulate self-esteem and self-confidence, proving that outdoor education plays a fundamental role in the psychological dimension of all children, especially of those with special educational needs. As Guerra (2020) states, "Educating children in relationships, promoting peer socialization, means first of all cultivating the individual's emotional skills, a kind of prerequisite for subsequently developing social skills. In other words, it means taking the child into an emotional education journey that enables him or her to be able to listen, accept and express his or her emotions while supporting him or her in understanding and managing them." (Guerra,2020) With its wide range of methods and tools, Outdoor Education makes learning funnier and helps children apply more correct behaviors towards others. This methodology activates various learning styles, and this is another reason for which it is favourable for children with special needs, who tend to show negative attitudes towards learning and school in general for they often experience failure (R. Wilson, 1994). According to Bortolotti & al., it brings countless benefits in interpersonal and intrapersonal relationships and dynamics. Indeed, in Outdoor Education, children have the opportunity to discover their inner world and activate cooperative dynamics to achieve a common goal, even in the case of children with disability (Bortolotti, Schenetti, Talese, 2020).

In Italy, as mentioned earlier, many schools have begun to adopt the Outdoor Education methodology within their classrooms, making use of school gardens to carry out laboratory experiences. The laboratory activity is an opportunity to put "cooperative learning" into practice: thanks to practical engagement, in fact, children can collaborate and bring out their skills and intelligences. Very popular examples of activities carried out in groups in today's school setting are the well-known nature-based labs: in fact, the basic principle of these activities is that in order for plants to grow healthy it requires cooperation, and every child, whether affected by disability or not, can become a resource for the common goal to be reached. These activities demand increased social interaction with peers and enhance the learning outcome of each child (Brodin & Lindstrand, 2006). Just think, for example, of a child who struggles with socialization: such activities can help him or her share what he or she knows and his or her skills with others.

Conclusions

Today more than ever, especially in the school context, there is a growing need to develop more and more direct contact with nature, acknowledging its educational and regenerative power actually. Educating outdoors is the simplest and most direct way to realize that we are nature and have the duty and responsibility to take care of it, both for present and future generations and for our students to carry out meaningful educational experiences. The Outdoor Education perspective aims at increasingly making the environment the ultimate space for meaningful educational experiences. The benefits of contact with nature are countless, especially in cases of children with special educational needs, for whom the performance of stimulating and rewarding activities outside the classroom walls leads to positive results at the level of physical and mental well-being. For this very reason, the natural environment should become "the laboratory of life and learning of human beings from the earliest years of age, as the foundation of our being in the world." (Persi, 2012) Schools adopting the Outdoor Education approach can offer children with disabilities the opportunity to develop in a context within which equality reigns, their potential is brought to light and any differences are turned into a valuable resource for the educational action.

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