TOWARDS SUSTAINABLE CITIZENSHIP: THE EDUCATIONAL ROLE OF *OUTDOOR LEARNING*

VERSO UNA CITTADINANZA SOSTENIBILE: IL RUOLO DELL'*OUTDOOR EDUCATION*

Maria Tiso
University of Salerno
mtiso@unisa.it
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1046-498X

Concetta Ferrantino
University of Salerno
cferrantino@unisa.it
https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3533-269X

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ABSTRACT

The history of educational pathways reveals, over time, a close connection with cultural, social, and economic changes. Pedagogy must recognize the interrelation between education, the environment, and society. In this direction, the present contribution aims to highlight the educational value of Outdoor Education, with the goal of fostering the development of transversal competencies, particularly those that are equitable and sustainable.

ABSTRACT

La storia dei percorsi formativi legge, nell'avvicendarsi del tempo, il suo stretto legame con i cambiamenti culturali, sociali ed economici. La pedagogia deve cogliere la connessione tra educazione, ambiente e società. In tale direzione, il presente contributo si pone l'obiettivo di attenzionare l'importanza formativa dell'*Outdoor Education*, al fine di incoraggiare lo sviluppo di competenze trasversali, in particolar modo, eque e sostenibili.

KEYWORDS

Active methodologies; Outdoor Education; Sustainability; Soft Skill; 2030 Agenda

Metodologie attive; Outdoor Education; Sostenibilità; Competenze trasversali; Agenda 2030

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Introduction

In current pedagogical reflection, the relationship between education, the environment, and society emerges as one of the most urgent and complex issues. Educational processes are profoundly intertwined with ongoing cultural, social, and economic transformations; they must confront unprecedented conditions: the accelerating pace of daily life, the growing pervasiveness of digital technologies, changing lifestyles in urban areas, and, finally, the impact of ecological crises on existential and community levels.

Social acceleration (Rosa, 2015; Jaeggi, 2017), a phenomenon deeply rooted in modernity, is having significant repercussions on various aspects of individuals' daily experience, including economics, politics, and education. It has become a defining characteristic of today's Western societies and represents a key to understanding the processes of change unfolding throughout our time. It requires individuals, on the one hand, to develop a complex, flexible, and consistently performance-oriented self; on the other, to consolidate their position in relational networks through a constant process of optimizing and enhancing their capabilities. Rosa (2015) argues that social acceleration is a key factor in the emergence of profound forms of social alienation, which, in his view, represent the main obstacle to achieving a fully meaningful life, as they compromise the individual's ability to live authentically and consciously within contemporary society.

Individuals organize their existence according to rhythms that are now unsustainable, since, as the German sociologist observes, «modernity is centered on the acceleration of time» (p. 6), which, however, does not guarantee quality of life. Specifically, he identifies three areas in which acceleration manifests its effects: technology, social change, and the pace of life.

Technological acceleration is easily measured by the speed with which we are now able to move, communicate, process data, and so on. All this has radically changed the space-time coordinates of which we tend to have very different perceptions, space becomes less physical and more abstract, if not virtual, in the same way time seems to have dilated, thus losing the sense of beginning and end of actions, pervaded by the anxiety of being more productive and efficient.

Bauman (2007) observes that contemporary existence is intrinsically characterized by an incessant rush: even when the individual remains physically immobile, he or she is pervaded by a sort of impatience syndrome, whereby even the most basic

actions, such as chewing, take on a burdensome connotation. The predominant sensation is that of an eternal lack of time, a consequence of the incessant acceleration of social time. This structural tension between social and personal rhythms generates a widespread sense of inadequacy, reflecting the growing alienation of the individual in the context of accelerated modernity.

The *acceleration of social change*, the second identified by Rosa, manifests itself through a sort of social anxiety that pushes individuals to be increasingly high-performing and competitive, which negatively impacts the nature of the social relationships they can establish. «The underlying idea is that the very rhythms of change are changing. Thus, attitudes and values, but also fashions and lifestyles, relationships and social obligations, groups, classes, social environments and languages, and even behaviors and habits appear to be constantly changing» (Rosa, 2015, p. 11). Therefore, according to this perspective, society itself is accelerating through the transformation of its founding elements: attitudes and values, fashions and lifestyles, environments, languages, behaviors and habits; the founding institutions, such as family, work, emotional relationships, political and social affiliations, are changing in the same way. According to Palmieri (2012), the speed with which we face everyday life and with which the world is changing leads us to form quick, superficial relationships, not projected in favor of others, but solely towards ourselves.

The third category Rosa examines is the *of acceleration of lifestyles*, which he defines as «an increase in the number of individual actions or experiences in a unit of time, that is, the consequence of the perceived desire or need to do more things in less time» (Rosa, 2015, p. 16). Modern man experiences the pressure of having to perform ever more activities, and technological evolution allows this, to the detriment of his quality of life. Time takes on the role of a limited resource, «it seems that time is perceived as a raw material to be consumed like oil and, like it, is becoming increasingly rare and expensive» (p. 16).

The three forms of acceleration just mentioned converge in what the German sociologist defines as *social acceleration*, which then leads to individual alienation. «Who we are and how we feel depends on the contexts in which we operate, and on our degree of integration of these contexts into our experience. When this integration fails, the self risks crisis: this results in widespread phenomena of ego exhaustion (burnout), depression, and a sense of emptiness» (p. 116). In the educational field, this dynamic translates into a truly accelerated education,

conceived as a response to the increasing speed of technological, economic, and cultural change, which, however, is not always adequately managed.
How can this condition be remedied? What alternative is there to the risk of burnout?
These are legitimate questions that, due to their complexity, do not allow for a single solution, but rather require in-depth reflection, including philosophical ones. From this perspective, the notion of *resonance* (Rosa, 2015, 2020) emerges as a possible answer: it designates the ability to re-establish authentic relationships between the subject and reality, in which both are transformed by their mutual interaction. Alienation from the self and the world emerges, in fact, when the axes of resonance between the self and the world weaken to the point of becoming almost imperceptible.
This relationship, however, should not be interpreted according to a dichotomous logic of individual-world opposition, but rather considering a perspective of reciprocity, understood as a continuous and mutual questioning. As Paparella (2023) states, «we would like to be able to say, even at the cost of schematizing and simplifying, that reality is given neither by the Self nor by the World, but by that range of exchanges, messages, actions and reactions […] that mark the life of things and the history of men. Both inextricably linked» (pp. 10-11).

1. The main educational prerequisites of Outdoor Education

Based on the above, this paper aims to present the main potential offered by the *Outdoor Education* (OE) method in terms of what could be described as a true *social deceleration*. This method differs from traditional teaching methods due to its approach focused on the fusion of indoor and outdoor environments, fostering concrete experiences and authentic contexts. Rooted in the reflections of thinkers such as Rousseau and Fröbel, it is not limited to an outdoor educational practice, but represents a real opportunity to develop autonomy, critical thinking, and active participation among students (Tiso, Ferrantino, & Notti, 2025).

OE, conceived as a context that fosters relational experiences and cannot be reduced to a simple transposition of teaching outside the classroom, has long been neglected. The prevailing orientation, aimed at exclusively indoor practices, has effectively overlooked the real educational potential that the *outdoors* can offer (Xodo, 2019). Indeed, the outdoors allows for direct contact with everyday life, which not only stimulates and guides the student's learning experience but also

offers adults the opportunity to provide support and mediation. Outdoor learning therefore emerges as an authentic form of social learning, through which children assimilate models and skills from adults, receiving encouragement, recognition, and support (Paparella, 2023).

Outdoor learning is a natural process deeply rooted in the individual. The educational experience in external environments, in fact, favors the understanding and assimilation of contexts, which constitute the primary and natural framework through which the subject gives meaning to the reality that surrounds him. Only at a later stage, in fact, does attention become oriented towards symbolic constructs, such as language, which ranges from the acquisition of phonemes to syllables, up to the formation of words (Bruner, 1964).

In informal contexts where OE takes place, students can develop learning that responds not only to *knowledge*, but also to will, through the *ability to make decisions*, and ultimately to *power*, that is, the responsibility that leads students to implement previously made decisions (Paparella, 2012). «This awareness struggles to emerge from habitual school experience, where, more often than not, the subject is put in a position to know, but not to effectively transfer what has been learned into everyday life» (Paparella, 2023, p. 36). In informal contexts, therefore, learning is closely connected to action: those who participate tend to immediately use what they have learned, without leaving it in a space of mere theory. The acquisition of new knowledge and skills occurs as a need to respond to a specific event, because the need to act and not simply to store information emerges. As already underlined, the high educational value of OE does not simply reside in the physical environment in which it takes place, indeed, it is best to stay away from this association so as not to trivialize this teaching practice, but rather in the «ability of orientation and appropriateness that it provides» (Del Gottardo, 2023, p.51).

Farné and Agostini (2014) recently drew attention to a peculiar temporal dimension promoted by OE: slowness and lightness, which enrich the learning process. In this sense, it is a synthesis between the times usually dedicated to the acquisition of knowledge and those connected to the possibility of having meaningful experiences. Slow education, in fact, represents a process that in recent years has significantly influenced the search for alternative educational models to traditional ones, often characterized by accelerated pace, standardization of practices, and the centrality of performance.

According to Claxton (2007), knowledge has an intrinsically slow pace; in fact, some cognitive functions cannot be anticipated in any way, and these very functions are responsible for managing the learning process.

From this perspective, outdoor learning becomes a privileged context for promoting slow learning: the connection with the outdoors fosters relaxed learning, the ability to repeatedly return to one's own and others' experiences, as well as to attribute meaning to them. Far from the logic of achieving the best performance at all costs and unsustainable speed, this method promotes an educational path in which gradualness, slowness, and naturalness become essential conditions for meaningful and lasting learning.

2. Outdoor Learning: potential and limitations in educational processes

Starting from contemporary educational challenges, as outlined in the first part of this article, outdoor learning, as a constantly evolving pedagogical paradigm, is emerging as a significant theoretical and practical response. This methodology, which emphasizes the experiential dimension of learning and draws on major active learning theories, such as Dewey's learning by doing, aims to bridge the gap between traditional education and the needs of an ever-changing society, as it offers students and teachers the opportunity to learn through concrete observations in real, authentic situations (Chen et al., 2020).

The theoretical dimension and founding principles of OE describe a way of understanding concepts and principles in terms of sustainable education, and, therefore, environmental, social and civil education, with the aim of stimulating the development of skills and mental attitudes within the Green Competence framework (Urbani & Guaran, 2024).

At the European level, particular attention is being paid to the concept of the environment, understood in its holistic and value-based sustainability, and the shift in teaching and learning practices is being highlighted at the systemic level in economic and planning terms. In fact, the Ministry of Education and Merit, through the *RiGenerazione Scuola Plan*, has aimed to regenerate the educational function of schools by teaching that development is sustainable if it responds to the needs of present generations without compromising the needs of future generations. The Plan aims to renew the curriculum at all levels of education, enabling younger generations to inhabit the world in a new and sustainable way, in line with the goals of the UN 2030 Agenda, in whose implementation the European Union plays a leading role, including globally. The Plan aimed to enhance, systematize, and

implement existing projects and activities in schools and offer a broad range of tools and resources that schools can use to develop projects on sustainable development issues.

With article 10 of Legislative Decree N°. 196 of 8 November 2021, the Plan became part of the educational offering of schools. During the development of the Educational Plan for the 2022–2025 three-year period, schools effectively incorporated into their curricula activities related to ecological and cultural transition, linking them to the four pillars and the objectives of *Rigenerazione*. The Plan's objectives are social, environmental, and economic.

Sustainability coincides with the intention of investing in the development of skills and behaviors aimed at innovating economic, political, social, and environmental contexts to support the development and well-being of future generations. The concept of sustainability has expanded from an exclusive focus on ecological and environmental issues to a more integrated vision that encompasses social inclusion and economic growth to build an active citizenry capable of acting effectively for global change (Urbani & Guaran, 2024). Despite the centrality of these concepts at the systemic level, Italy, among all developed countries, has invested far less in early childhood education services, schools, universities, continuing education, and research and development (Di Bari, 2023). This leads to the discussion of developing skills for sustainability, or GreenComp, as a sort of sustainable utopia (Giovannini, 2018).

But why talk about OE in relation to sustainability? It certainly isn't the only existing methodology for promoting equitable and, indeed, sustainable development. However, it represents one of the possibilities that transcends the classic theoretical and methodological conception of laboratory-based activities alone, instead fully enhancing the meaning of *learning by doing* and the application and discovery of knowledge as a way of living and making sense of experience and reality. Through questioning reality, each child or young person becomes aware of themselves and the world and becomes capable of developing, with increasingly greater levels of awareness and autonomy, the ideas, actions, and relationships that exist between themselves and reality (Giovannini, 2018).

Taking part in an experiential context does not automatically generate knowledge but «presupposes the intervention of reflective reason, that is, being thoughtfully present with respect to experience [and] starting from experience means replacing the top-down logic, that is, the one that believes there is always a theory available within which to subsume experience, with the logic of from the ground up, which

aims to make practice the place where knowledge is elaborated» (Mortari, 2013, p. 13). Knowledge cannot be encapsulated within disciplines but must generate from real contexts and return to them, «in a recursive relationship between experience and knowledge, theory and practice» (Castoldi, 2015, p. 50) to be usable in addressing real-life problems. A 'constructed' knowledge will be capable of guiding the person to intertwine the learning experience with the construction of personality and social life.

Delving into the specifics of OE, numerous studies (Cottrell & Cottrell, 2020; Mann et al., 2021; Becker et al., 2017) have documented benefits across multiple aspects of student development, from performance levels in various subjects to greater personal and social development, with increased self-esteem, self-confidence, and social skills. Furthermore, the benefits of OE activities also impact physical and mental health, with reduced stress, increased creativity, and improved overall well-being. Ewert Mitten and Overholt (2014) note among the positive effects an increase in self-efficacy through learning new skills, knowledge in and through nature, and, above all, improved coping strategies.

Active teaching, like the OE experience, requires a high level of involvement and participation on the part of the students, who are not only tasked with immersing themselves in a specific problem-situation, but, even more complexly, are required to assume responsibility towards the group with which they interact, to adequately verify and evaluate their own hypotheses, to cross-reference them with those of others and to translate everything into an appropriate and competent solution. This leads to improved prosocial behavior and interpersonal relationship management (Pirchio et al., 2021).

OE offers numerous opportunities for inter and multidisciplinary learning. This can be significant, for example, for the teaching of civic education, reintroduced at all levels by Law n° 92 of August 20, 2019.

As a result, the teacher's role also evolves, becoming less central to the student learning dynamic and increasingly acting as a catalyst for the resources offered by the surrounding context.

The implementation of OE also presents common barriers, particularly time constraints, curricular pressures, lack of financial resources, resistance to change, and a lack of policy support (Valero, 2022; Torkos & Egerau, 2022; Liu, 2023). This leads us to question a vision of education that, pervaded by political-economic aspirations, often fails to benefit from practical implementation conditions. There is no doubt that individuals cannot act without mastering specific technical skills,

but for these to become a resource for themselves and for the context in which they operate, they must be reflected in a broader process, which is the educational one. It is only in this dimension, in fact, that they will be able to measure the specificities, aptitudes and ideals that they most feel are their own (Sen, 2001).

Conclusions

Despite the clearly reductive benefits of outdoor learning in relation to the educational, inclusive, social, and sustainable dimensions of the learner, effectively integrating outdoor learning into instructional design can be challenging, even more so if it doesn't appear to be truly reflected at a systemic level.

This educational methodology should be aligned with existing learning objectives, ensuring that the outdoor experience is not seen as an afterthought, but rather as an integral part of the curriculum and, therefore, of the learning process (Cottrell & Cottrell, 2020).

Schools are called upon to listen to contextual needs to make organizational structures more flexible. Only by promoting teaching activities based on heuristic and participatory methodologies can we focus on developing not only cognitive but also transversal skills aimed at cultivating proximity, availability, and participation in real-life dynamics. These skills support the construction of an agency capable of expressing a different and original vision, aimed at transformation in an ecological, sustainable and generative sense (Urbani & Guaran, 2024).

This means investing existing efforts and resources primarily in developing sustainability practices capable of activating currently available situations and scenarios, converting them into concrete opportunities.

Starting from these assumptions, without any claim to resolve the existing complexity, the authors' idea is that to bring about systemic change, it is necessary to begin with significant experiences, case studies, that can determine and broaden the horizon of meaning, in broader and more longitudinal terms. To this end, in agreement with the University of Salerno, local institutions, and participating schools, the aim is to launch a training program that aims to rethink learning environments and practices in an inclusive, sensitive, and flexible way.

OE will be used as the primary educational methodology to promote the development of GreenComps, useful for determining processes and relationships that qualify human development, providing them with *empowerment*. Sustainability education cannot be limited to the mere transfer of knowledge: it

becomes an education that looks to the future and seeks to contribute to its construction through a complex, global and systemic perspective (Albe, 2013).

Aware that ensuring transversal educational processes does not simply mean designing specific sustainability courses, but also requires the adoption of innovative and interdisciplinary pedagogical practices, aimed at promoting skills for living in an increasingly complex and interconnected world, and thus training future professionals engaged in the social design of sustainable environments and active global citizenship (Baumber, 2022), we hope to create experiences that bridge the gap between the institutional world and the broader society.

To achieve this development, the latter cannot be understood as the objective or subject of a single course, but rather as a dimension collegially and ethically shared by those working in education at all levels.

Author contributions

The article is the result of a collaboration between the authors, who share responsibility for its structure and content. Specifically, the "Introduction" and the section “1. The main educational prerequisites of Outdoor Education” are to be attributed to Maria Tiso; the sections “2. Outdoor Learning: potential and limitations in educational processes” and “Conclusions” are to be credited to Concetta Ferrantino.

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