

WELL-BEING, DIVERSITY AND SUSTAINABILITY: PEDAGOGICAL PARADIGMS FOR TRANSFORMATIVE EDUCATION

BENESSERE, DIVERSITÀ E SOSTENIBILITÀ: PARADIGMI PEDAGOGICI PER UN'EDUCAZIONE TRASFORMATIVA



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ABSTRACT

This contribution explores the urgent need for a pedagogical rethink based on an ecological and inclusive perspective, capable of restoring education's generative and transformative function. The analysis intertwines three strands: the ecology of emotions and knowledge, narrative warm-ups in nature as a biophilic device for cognitive-emotional activation, and outdoor education as a holistic paradigm promoting wellbeing, ecological citizenship and the appreciation of differences. From these trajectories emerges a training model that takes complexity as its epistemological key and care as its ethical-political principle, outlining a school capable of regenerating itself as a democratic and sustainable educational community.

Il contributo indaga l'urgenza di un ripensamento pedagogico fondato su una prospettiva ecologica e inclusiva, capace di restituire all'educazione la sua funzione generativa e trasformativa. L'analisi intreccia tre direttrici: l'ecologia degli affetti e della conoscenza, il warm-up narrativo in natura come dispositivo biofilico di attivazione cognitivo-emotiva, e l'outdoor education quale paradigma olistico promotore di benessere, cittadinanza ecologica e valorizzazione delle differenze. Da tali traiettorie emerge un modello formativo che assume la complessità come cifra epistemologica e la cura come principio etico-politico, delineando una scuola capace di rigenerarsi quale comunità educante democratica e sostenibile.

KEYWORDS

Well-being, ecology of affections and knowledge, narrative warm-up, outdoor education, inclusion

Benessere, ecologia degli affetti e della conoscenza, warm-up narrativo, Outdoor education, inclusione

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Introduction: Recovering ancient frameworks of meaning. Towards an ecology of affections and knowledge

In the preface to his essay 'Ecological knowledge. The relevance of Gregory Bateson', S. Manghi (2004) hoped that in the transition to the third millennium, our species would benefit from a qualitative leap forward if it understood in time the usefulness of governing, with a good degree of awareness, the disorientation and possible new learning faced by individuals in postmodernity.

In this 'transition of an era', governance has increasingly become an exercise in survival for the human species due to multiple, complex, interconnected and unexpected challenges, in most cases linked to a natural environment disrupted by pollution and excessive urbanisation (Melucci, 1994).

Within this ecological framework, which is not exclusively naturalistic as it is capable of going beyond the ingrained and sometimes oppositional dualism of mind/culture-nature/matter, emotions-intellect, and even individual-society, it is now necessary to rethink educational, training and teaching processes and broader cultural processes.

In our school classrooms, other educational institutions and universities, it is therefore risky to feel out of place (Bateson, 2002), i.e. alienated from a time that can only be social if we want to build contexts of shared meaning and sense. From this perspective, the emotional availability of a teacher who actively participates in a student's learning process is essential. The student, in turn, sees in the folds of their teacher's face and gaze the instructions for understanding knowledge, study and assessments as opportunities for cultural enrichment and personal emancipation, even when faced with a bad mark. It is the school of the face and of value, not the anti-pedagogical school of grades and existential voids (Romeo, 2021; 2022; Barca, Liverano & Romeo, in press). Furthermore, learning to suspend judgement in the face of the current complexity of the family is a fundamental criterion for social and justice workers to free it from hardship and, perhaps, at the same time become better professionals from an existential point of view (Romeo, 2024a). Similarly, schools cannot simply complain about the fruitless protagonism of contemporary parents, because if they do not genuinely know them, given the resources they can always express when placed in the pedagogical conditions to enable them, they do nothing but crystallise this position of exclusion and therefore of failure to ally themselves with the legally established logic of the school (Romeo, 2024b). Therefore, to quote G. Bateson, we should strive to be a structure that certainly distinguishes, but above all connects.

At a certain point in human history, however, despite all the theoretical and technical means that modernity had given us to shape the world according to our plans following linear thinking, something did not work; it was observed, especially

during the evolutionary arc and in the years of youth (18-35), that millions of people also suffered from the already existing fragility of our systems, especially the health and education systems (Vertecchi, 2020). The current 'zombification' of the youthful soul (Romeo, 2024c; 2025), in other words, the difficulty young and very young people have in restarting their plans for independent living by freeing themselves from a mental condition focused on the present, which can still be seen today in multiple symptoms and dysfunctional reactions (anxiety, depression, social isolation, suicide attempts, etc.), is the result of a society that no longer knows how to offer spaces for listening, but also spaces for storytelling and planning designed to liberate the imagination, which has been tamed by a certainly frightening start to the millennium, in the useful direction of 'doing'.

Like Bateson, Z. Bauman (2002) also noticed how, in the transition from modern to postmodern, the concept of the 'common good' was gradually being lost; that is, a shared feeling and an extended affectivity that allowed the feeling of trust to be the substance of places and relationships and truth to become ethical fertiliser between people, even authorising 'wet nurses' to feed the children of those who could not do so without being bound by a family relationship.

It is probably then that the intangible asset represented by 'diffuse' parenting, social parenting if you will, which is discussed today, finds its purest origins, serving future generations even in the absence of biological fathers and mothers (Agrati, Beri & Romeo, 2025).

Bauman soon realised that the categories he had used to interpret Western society, namely 'solidity' and 'liquidity' in emotional relationships in particular, were probably the most suitable for interpreting circumstances and themes such as learning, which Bateson would later elaborate on through his successful distinction between proto-learning, deutero-learning and tertiary learning (Manghi, p. 19).

But just as Bauman reflects on contemporary 'liquidity' in all its forms (institutional, work-related, identity-related, consumption-related, etc.), roughly in the middle of the 20th century, while the dynamics of building trust begin to 'reverse' as people place less and less trust in each other a priori, believing instead that it is better to earn it gradually (Paparella, Romeo & Tarantino, 2022), a strong need for what I would call an epoch-making paradigm shift began to be felt.

In order to talk about an ecology of affections and knowledge, capable of building the person from multiple points of view, even if the challenges of postmodernism seem unprecedented, we need to abandon the anti-ecological ways of thinking, knowing and communicating inherited from modernity and adopt the perspective that Bateson, Bauman and Bruner agreed on the opportunity to consider the unexpected as the most welcome of guests, provided it is welcomed within a choral dialogue between actors with different professional and personal histories who persevere in trusting and relying on each other.

2. Improving students' attitude to teaching: narrative warm-ups in nature as a preparatory biophilic pedagogical activity

The Italian school system faces daily challenges posed by a global context undergoing constant and rapid change. These challenges are increasingly complex and occur in rapid succession, raising critical issues regarding students' emotional and cognitive preparedness. This situation makes it difficult to analyse, integrate and connect these stimuli to one's own existential plans and new horizons of meaning and significance, leading to zombifying (Romeo, 2024) and necrodidactic (Liverano, 2025) drifts, i.e. a condition of planning paralysis and cognitive and emotional alienation, or in those critical issues affecting young people that Elsa Maria Bruni (2018, pp. 684-685) recognises in a manifesto as 'emotional illiteracy and the struggle to achieve authentic existential fulfilment', induced by both intrinsic and extrinsic factors. Added to this is the tendency of some teachers not to consider the emotional experience of students as a complex phenomenon, influenced by personal experiences, family and friendship dynamics, environmental stimuli, and as a predictive factor for motivation and willingness to learn (Immordino-Yang & Damasio, 2007; Pekrun, 2014).

To overcome this impasse, educational research proposes strategies known as initial activation and emotional, cognitive and behavioural warm-up, defined in Anglo-Saxon literature as warm-up (Velandia, 2008; Le & Nguyen, 2022). From an educational point of view, warm-ups could be effective in helping students transition from a state of educational apathy to one in which they reach the heart of the educational proposal through a gradual cognitive load, acting as an inclusive factor. The preparatory warm-up is characterised by a repertoire of activities with high engagement potential in view of the educational action that can be carried out in formal or non-formal contexts. These actions, which are heterogeneous in type, affect the students' psychophysical and emotional condition, indirectly producing positive effects on the socio-relational level and on the classroom climate. Once an improvement in the students' general condition has been recorded - evidenced by greater emotional and relational stability - the warm-up can evolve by anticipating, in a low-profile manner, the content that will be covered in the actual lesson. Warm-ups, especially those with a narrative focus, i.e. those that use storytelling as the central pedagogical device of the warm-up activity, have an impact on creativity and imagination and prove to be fruitful in terms of regulating emotions, seeking emotional order, giving meaning to and correctly interpreting events and what happens in one's life (Bruner, 1991; 1996), in an educational perspective that recognises the greater centrality of the individual.

This recomposition of the order of one's own experience, just like putting a jigsaw puzzle back together, also has important repercussions in terms of social

relationships and behaviour (Kong & Chen, 2024; Ardoin & Bowers, 2020), which thus become decisive ecosystemic factors for developing a spirit of community and a sense of inclusiveness within the group. Within a synecological perspective - where learning is conceived as a dynamic and relational process, arising from the interaction between people, environments, events and situations, and which, by influencing each other, generates interdependence and learning as a spiral of development (Liverano, 2019) in continuous evolution (Paparella, 2023) - the narrative warm-up in nature is configured as a bio-didactic device (Liverano, 2025) functional to triggering processes of cognitive, emotional and behavioural reactivation with greater ethical awareness and social responsibility. This type of warm-up meets three complementary needs: pedagogical, ensuring continuity between personal experience and the school context, facilitating authentic learning; neuroscientific, preparing the body and mind for optimal emotional regulation and cognitive and socio-relational processing (Liparoti, 2023), strengthening the connection with nature, stimulating sustainable behaviour and promoting active citizenship. Its effectiveness lies in its ability to deconstruct obsolete teaching patterns and generate new learning conditions, as a result of the influence that nature produces as an open and polysemic text capable of reverberating sensory and symbolic stimuli useful for overcoming those emotional and cognitive resistances that, in standardised teaching contexts, become insurmountable walls. The narrative warm-up in nature, therefore, is proposed as a strategy that opens up a new educational vitality capable of activating all the faculties of the subject and, therefore, attributing new momentum, new liveliness, resourcefulness and creative strength, dynamism and flexibility. From this perspective, it is no longer merely a preparatory tool, but a liturgy of relational acts of a subject with himself and with others, which, by promoting authentic and situated learning, transforms the relationship into a communal experience 'of encounter, correspondence and mutual recognition' (Reato and Fedeli, 2023, p. 54).

Scientific evidence in pedagogical literature, which investigates the connections between educational processes in nature, linked to meditation and autobiographical storytelling, and the implications at the neural, biological, physical, psychological and emotional levels, demonstrates the positive effects of this type of warm-up on cognitive functions, on the psycho-emotional well-being of subjects and on the development of socio-relational skills (Pasqualetto et al., 2025; Vasilaki et al., 2025; Deng & Legge, 2023) to the extent that it makes an important contribution to a new approach to teaching with greater ecosystemic knowledge and more mature wisdom and inclusive awareness.

3. Outdoor education, psycho-physical wellbeing and the valorisation of differences

The current educational scenario, marked by a multitude of ecological, social and cultural crises, urgently calls for a rethinking of educational paradigms, so that education can truly become an experience of meaning and emancipation. As highlighted by the most recent pedagogical reflections, recovering ancient frameworks of meaning is equivalent to adopting an ecological perspective of affections and knowledge, capable of overcoming modern dichotomies – mind/body, nature/culture, individual/society – and reinterpreting knowledge as a communal and dialogical practice (Bateson, 2002; Manghi, 2002). In this framework, the emotional availability of the teacher and the ability of the school to act as a 'connecting structure' (Bateson, 2002) are essential conditions for building an educational community that can resist the disorientation of postmodernism.

This perspective finds its essence in the enhancement of teaching practices such as narrative warm-ups in nature. This device, intended as a cognitive, emotional and relational 'warm-up ritual', allows obsolete teaching patterns to be deconstructed and prepares students for authentic and situated learning. In this sense, storytelling is not simply a vehicle for content, but an epistemological tool that allows us to attribute meaning to experience, reorganise emotions and generate a community dimension based on mutual recognition (Reato & Fedeli, 2023).

It is within this context that reflection on outdoor education fits in well, as it emerges as a hermeneutic-didactic paradigm of extraordinary significance, capable of combining the promotion of psycho-physical well-being, the overall growth of the individual and the enhancement of individual differences in a single theoretical and practical framework. This is not a mere transposition of curricular activities outside the school walls, but rather an educational *kairòs* capable of radically reformulating the very concept of education as an integral and multifaceted experience, in which physical, emotional, cognitive and relational dimensions are intertwined in a dynamic and synergistic fabric (Bortolotti, 2019; Farné, Bortolotti, & Terrusi, 2018). From this perspective, nature ceases to be a mere backdrop and becomes a symbolic interlocutor, a privileged mediator of authentic learning processes, identity development and the acquisition of civic and environmental skills (Carpi, 2017; Riva, 2018).

The theoretical framework within which outdoor education is situated is that of a holistic pedagogy that aims to restore the existential density of the educational experience. The well-being promoted is not limited to a health or performance dimension, but is configured as the flourishing of the person in all their components, in a continuous harmonisation between body and psyche, between interiority and community, between individual and environment (Morin, 2015; Ceruti & Belluschi, 2020). This vision recovers Dewey's lesson (1990), according to which education must coincide with lived experience, and reiterates the urgency of countering disciplinary fragmentation and scholastic hyper-rationalism, which

generate alienation and disconnection from reality. Direct contact with the natural environment activates forms of bodily-sensory, motor and aesthetic learning, which constitute embodied knowledge, an antidote to the cognitive and relational disintegration produced by overly abstract educational models (Robertson, 2018; Manes, 2018; Barca, Liverano & Romeo, 2025).

The second defining feature of outdoor education is its intrinsic inclusive nature. Nature, with its fluid and non-hierarchical structure, offers a space in which every individual can exercise educational agency, regardless of their abilities or starting conditions. Open spaces become de-hierarchised places that allow architectural, cultural and symbolic barriers typical of traditional schools to be overcome (Antonietti, 2019). In this way, outdoor education is a radically democratic experience, allowing everyone to participate in different and personalised ways (Booth & Ainscow, 2014; Pavone, 2014). This inclusive nature is even more important today, in light of the complex challenges of postmodern society, which is called upon to rethink itself in terms of resilience, solidarity and a renewed educational pact (Cambi, 2020; Zappaterra, 2020; Barca, 2024).

Empirical studies confirm that learning in nature has tangible benefits on a psycho-physical and cognitive level: stress reduction, increased attention span, enhanced motor skills, consolidation of socio-relational skills and a strengthened sense of responsibility and ecological awareness (Guerra, 2019; Negro, 2019; Crudeli, 2021). Nature, understood as a formative habitus, stimulates curiosity, wonder and reflective thinking, fuelling the circularity between experience and thought that is the hallmark of pedagogical constructivism (Birbes, 2018). In this light, outdoor education takes the form of a practice of care – for oneself, others and the world – understood as an ethical-political principle of democratic coexistence (Mortari, 2008).

Finally, it is inextricably linked to the demands of sustainability. Outdoor education is equivalent to educating people about ecological awareness, recognising their interdependence with the natural environment and their responsibility towards future generations (Pannikar, 1993; Zavalloni, 2008). It is a form of ecological literacy that goes beyond the cognitive level to translate into a community ethos and the practice of global citizenship, in line with the goals of Agenda 2030 (UNESCO, 2015). Far from being an ancillary practice, outdoor education now appears to be an essential tool for building a democratic, inclusive and sustainable school system, geared towards training resilient, creative and aware citizens (Bertagna, 2020).

Conclusions

The intertwining of the three theoretical and practical paths – the ecology of emotions and knowledge, narrative warm-ups in nature and outdoor education –

reveals a unified and generative pedagogical framework based on the need to build a school capable of resisting the excesses of contemporary society and restoring the possibility of integral development to the individual. This perspective takes complexity as its epistemological key (Morin, 2015), narrative as a device of meaning (Bruner, 1991) and nature as a privileged educational space (Bortolotti, 2019), configuring an educational model that is not limited to transmitting knowledge, but becomes a transformative experience of care and coexistence (Barca et al., 2024).

The challenge we face is therefore to promote an authentically ecological and inclusive education, capable of combining attention to the individual with responsibility towards the collective, respect for diversity with the search for cohesion, individual planning with the horizon of global and sustainable citizenship. Only an education that acts as a 'connecting structure' (Bateson, 2002) can offer generative responses to the challenges of the present and the future, giving students the opportunity to inhabit the world with responsibility, imagination and hope.

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