

EXPERIMENTAL PEDAGOGICAL PATH TO STIMULATE TRAINING IN YOUNG PEOPLE IN CONDITIONS OF SOCIAL DISCOMFORT

PERCORSO PEDAGOGICO SPERIMENTALE PER STIMOLARE LA FORMAZIONE NEI GIOVANI CON CONDIZIONI DI DISAGIO SOCIALE

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Abstract

Situations of youth discomfort represent a constant threat to the formative development of future adult generations and, for this reason, pose an important challenge to the entire pedagogical community. This research work intends to propose an innovative and structured training program for these young people, in order to stimulate the construction, or re-construction, of some fundamental educational values that are essential for a comprehensive and proper growth of the individual in society. The innovative didactic activities will be based on the Outdoor Training approach and will also make use of the motor and sport dimension, which has always been an essential key for an effective educational development for everyone, especially for young people.

Le situazioni di disagio giovanile rappresentano una costante minaccia per lo sviluppo formativo delle future generazioni di adulti e, a ragion di ciò, costituiscono una sfida importante per tutta la comunità pedagogica. Il presente lavoro di ricerca intende proporre un innovativo e strutturato percorso formativo per questi giovani, tale da stimolare la costruzione, o ri-costruzione, di alcuni fondamentali valori educativi indispensabile per una completa e corretta crescita dell'individuo nella società. Le attività educative, di matrice didattica innovativa, si baseranno sull'approccio dell'Outdoor Training e si avvarranno anche della dimensione motoria e sportiva, da sempre un'imprescindibile chiave di volta per un efficace sviluppo formativo per tutti, giovani in primis.

Keywords

Experimental Pedagogical Path, Outdoor Training, Learning by Doing, Educational Values, Disadvantaged Young People.

Percorso Pedagogico Sperimentale, Outdoor Training, Learning by Doing, Valori Educativi, Giovani Disagiati.

Introduction

In modern society, in almost all formal and non-formal educational contexts, the younger generation is given less and less space for free outdoor games, for motor activities and all the different fields of experience which are carried out in direct contact with the external environment. However, with the progress of technology, both static and single-player virtual games are continuously on the rise, with pre-established dynamics that leave little room for the children's imagination and their ability to express themselves both physically and mentally. This criticality is emphasized even more with regard to all those young people who live in situations of social discomfort and are forced to suffer marginalization and isolation from society (Furlong & Cartmel, 2006; Ingrassia & Marino, 2019; Mascaro, 2019; Maulini, Migliorati, & Isidori, 2017; Simone, 2020). Hence the need for outdoor movement, outdoor experiences, physical and sensory contact with nature, stimulation of the senses and creativity, which can compensate for virtual reality. Outdoor Education can be considered a real educational process, through the richness of the stimuli that outdoor environments can provide and the countless connections they offer at interdisciplinary level. In fact, there are many skills that children can develop by coming into direct contact with the outdoor environment, in real places where they live their daily lives; these include, for example, exploratory, observational and cognitive (attention and memory) skills (Asfeldt et al, 2020; Braun & Dierkes, 2017; Donaldson & Donaldson, 1958; Ford, 1986; Gilbertson et al, 2006; James & Williams, 2017; Roberts, 2018; Watchow & Brown, 2011). This educational approach, in its broadest sense, can generate a number of benefits from a bodily point of view too, because it helps develop motor skills by strengthening muscles and bones, helps burn more calories by preventing overweight and obesity, and allows storing vitamin D and strengthening the immune system (Agostini, F., Minelli, M., & Mandolesi, 2018; Bunting, 1989; Cooper, 1996; Eigenschenk et al, 2019; Finn, Yan & McInnis, 2018). Moreover, performing outdoor activities makes children happier and less anxious, enhances their confidence, fosters imagination and curiosity, and promotes the perception of reality through all the senses, expanding the range of experience beyond the visual and auditory channels. This educational philosophy follows the pedagogical idea of "Learning by Doing" proposed by John Dewey; in this approach based on the concept of "I learn because I do", the child is the active protagonist of the educational process and not just a passive recipient of the adult's action. The child, in fact, does not learn by simply doing an action, but the actions he or she performs are complemented by reflection and thoughts so as to gain awareness of the actions performed themselves; this leads us to take a further step towards a form of learning guided by a reasoned action, which is what we call "Learning by Thinking" (Di Stefano et al, 2014; Lombrozo, 2019; Nyberg et al, 2006; Sternberg & Zhang, 2014). However, there is no action - and especially there is no thought - without motivations, interests and passions, so we can say that action and thought are always coupled with affectivity; as a result, we can speak of "Learning by Loving" (Liston & Garrison, 2004; Semetsky, 2012; O'Connor, 2017). In this regard, the experimental project discussed in this research work focuses on Outdoor Education applied in an educational community for young people living in situations of personal and / or family discomfort, damaging to their peaceful educational and psycho-physical growth. This work, carried out within a community and with the support of various associations - which made available spaces and tools essential for the success of the whole project - concerned an innovative intervention on subjects in conditions of discomfort, aimed not only at improving their ability to be with others (integration in the group) and in the world (social integration), but also at making them acquire greater physical-sensory sensitivity, improving their motor, conditional-coordination, and psycho-pedagogical skills (body-mind integration).

1. Structure of the Experimental Pedagogical Project

Below is the structure of the experimental project implemented within a community for young people going through situations of personal, social and family discomfort, who were proposed to undertake a series of educational activities, often of motor and sports nature, and

based on an Outdoor Education-oriented approach.

Context:

- Community for disadvantaged youth aged between 8 and 12 years.
- Environments and spaces made available by Non-Profit Associations.

Duration:

- 6 Months (4 meetings per week).

Subjects Involved:

- 36 Young people, of which 10 were female and 26 were male - average age: 10,42 years.
- 4 Community Educators.
- 4 carefully selected Tutors with educational, motor and sports know-how.
- 1 University Researcher of the Department of Pedagogy, with the role of project coordinator.
- 6 non-profit associations that made spaces, tools and materials available to carry out the educational-didactic activities.

Educational-Didactic Activities Program

- Monday: Pet Therapy;
- Wednesday: Game-Sports;
- Friday: Horticultural therapy - taking care of a vegetable garden, from seed to harvest;
- Sunday: Trips, Excursions and Playful-Motor Activities.

Evaluation Process

The evaluation process consisted of 2 perspectives:

1. Measuring the educational progress of the young people who took part in the experimental training proposal, on the basis of a specifically structured docimological form. The first evaluation was made after the first month of activity, while the second and final evaluation was made at the end of the project.
2. Analyzing the perception degree of the efficacy of the educational proposal by members of the educational associations, school teachers and university professors operating in the field of pedagogy, through a specifically designed questionnaire administered after the presentation of the project at a dedicated event.

2. Description of the Innovative Educational-Didactic Activities

As already mentioned, the didactic-educational activities were based on the Outdoor Education approach and were strongly determined by a motor and sports nature, in order to pursue a comprehensive educational growth for these young disadvantaged students, aiming to develop the construction - or re-construction - of both the fundamental pedagogical values for life, and of the essential elements for motor training.

Below, we will describe and analyze the activities that have characterized the experimental training program, from an educational and pedagogical point of view.

PET THERAPY

The young people hosted in the Community showed various personal problems due to deep relational and emotional wounds caused by abandonment and violence, aggression, very low self-esteem, learning difficulties, lack of self-control, and personality disorders.

In order to work on all these elements, in addition to the classic tools always present in an educational community, we considered it useful to activate a Pet Therapy project, and in particular, a program of Assisted Activities with Horses and Dogs.

One of the objectives of the project is to facilitate the child-animal encounter, working on the integration of the child, his/her progressive empowerment and respect for rules, trying to stimulate the achievement of good self-esteem and facilitate daily life in order to promote a change

process. The most well-known effects of this type of activity range from the implementation of empathetic dynamics, to focusing on the outside by shifting the attention from oneself to another living being, as well as to having fun with the animal, socializing, experiencing the physical contact, and to the sense of responsibility that a contact with an animal to take care of implies. Pet Therapy aims to help these children improve their ability to adapt, to learn to deal positively with new situations, to improve and refine some practical-motor skills, to develop their autonomy starting from specific situations related to activities involving contact with nature, up to gradually learn to generalize what they have acquired and transfer it all into everyday life.

One of the proposals of this project is hippotherapy: the benefits derived from this therapy are both psychological and physical, related to the specific position assumed in the saddle and the characteristics of the horse's movement, which produces positive effects on muscles, balance, rhythm and also on the cardiac and respiratory systems. The acoustic, visual, olfactory, but especially tactile and vestibular stimuli, coupled with the serenity of the environment surrounding the riding school and the stables, facilitate the action carried out by the horse during therapy.

Hippotherapy acts at neuromotor and neuropsychological level, and is therefore able to provide powerful stimuli to both the motor and psychological dimension.

Objectives:

- Encouraging children to enjoy experiences that develop their curiosity about the secrets of nature;
- Children identify the outdoor environment as a place of adventure where they can engage in a variety of explorations and games;
- Such experiences increase their sense of responsibility for nature and all elements of the outdoor environment, and intensify their social awareness;
- Through information and its implementation, strong bonds are created between living beings and natural habitats, thus gaining fundamental experiences;
- Constant interaction with the environment and peer group encourages them to find forms of mutual respect, support and confidence.

Considering the first aspect, we can see how children are subjected to postural regulation stimuli in the three planes of space useful for achieving an improvement in global postural control (head-trunk). The horse's back can be compared to a mobile oscillating plane on the three planes of space that can provide the rider with tactile, proprioceptive and vestibular inputs, used both for gaining a correct postural control and for acquiring balance and righting reactions. Moreover, from a coordination point of view, the stimuli provided by the horse are many, and there is a complete range of exercises for developing coordination skills that can be performed while sitting in the saddle. Through hippotherapy, children achieve:

- Fine-tuned muscle tone and balance: the movement of the horse while walking radiates from the pelvis of the subject towards the back of the neck and the lower and upper limbs which, being no longer influenced by the gravity load, undergo a progressive muscle relaxation. During starts, stops, changes of direction and speed, the subject is forced to a series of adjustments of the different parts of his or her body on the trunk, and the gaze lines up in parallel with the ground;
- Global motor skills development: the subject is involved in a global motor activity that requires greater coordination of movements for riding the horse, and contextual attitudes aimed at maintaining proper balance;
- Spatial-temporal organization: the subject is provided with correct information about the proprioceptive field, since the horse allows for adaptive postures and movements, which facilitate both the analysis of the idea of space and the realization of gestural movements aimed at integrating a new body scheme;
- Body scheme: through the many sensory stimuli (proprioceptive, exteroceptive, interoceptive) arising from the activity, a correct development of the body scheme can be achieved, which in turn results in correct motor acts for a subsequent development of the child's motor scheme.

Pet Therapy – Didactic Activity n. 1: Pony Games

Activity Description:

The Pony Games activity is aimed at children riding ponies who compete in teams, in pairs or individually; the aim is to complete a defined course making as few mistakes as possible and in as little time as possible. It develops on three focal points:

- Presentation of a pony, the various parts of a human body, and the senses;
- Communication and relationship with the animal;
- Riding, orientation and psychomotor exercises, equestrian exercises associated with musical rhythms.

Through this discipline, children learn all the basics of horseback riding within a playful dimension of the team; it is a sport of dexterity, which provides a postural and directional muscle engagement.

Among the main games we propose:

The cups - four stakes are arranged, on which two cups are alternately placed. The jockey takes the first cup and puts it on the second stake, and the same does for the third and fourth stake. The second jockey does the same thing only in a different direction.

Slalom - 1 baton, 5 slalom stakes placed in a straight line and spaced from 7.30 meters to 9.15 meters from one another along the longitudinal line of the field. At the start signal, rider n.1, while holding the baton, slaloms around the stakes both when riding forward and when riding back; once crossed the finish line entirely, he/she gives the baton to rider n. 2. Then riders n.2, n.3 and n.4 do the same thing.

The child will develop:

- *Motor skills*: development of coordination; improved respiratory and cardiovascular system; development of motor patterns consisting of finalized, coordinated and increasingly precise movements; enhanced sense of balance;
- *Cognitive skills*: decision-making, development of spatial and temporal perception skills; increased concentration and memorization skills;
- *Socio-relational skills*: development of solidarity and respect for others;
- *Emotional skills*: increased self-esteem, fear management, increased sensory stimulation that the horse is able to provide, the horse becomes a valuable emotional stimulus and an incentive to communication. The meeting between the child and the animal involves both protagonists in an empathetic exchange of new emotions.

Pet Therapy - Didactic Activity n. 2: 6-legged gymnastics

Another proposal of this project is called DOG FITNESS, which is an outdoor training in the company of your dog. It foresees a run or a walk at a steady pace, combined with a series of free-body exercises. The hypothesis from which this activity starts is related to the benefits that the dog can bring with regard to behavioral aspects (attention, self-regulation), to the strengthening of empathy (communication skills, relational skills, expression of emotions) and to the strengthening of motor skills (coordination).

It is not limited to the affective sphere; in fact, it more globally embraces and promotes the concept of well-being.

The activity of Dog Fitness is composed of cardiovascular work alternated with specific moments for improving the muscle components, in a work session that is carried out in an active way for both the dog and the child.

The entire fitness session has a maximum duration of one hour to avoid excessive stress.

It is an activity designed to increase the moments of sharing with one's dog, through a sports and educational activity that encourages greater complicity and sharing of experiences. In fact, the central role of this proposal is the motor practice carried out actively by both protagonists, mainly in a natural environment and in the open air.

VOLLEY-GAME

Mini-volley is a situational game-sport, characterized by unpredictability or limited predictability, and by variability that requires a constant adaptation of the techniques to the game situation. For a child who is seeking gratification in the game of mini-volleyball, individual technique (set, bump, smash), the reading of trajectories, the mastery of the playing space and the relationship with his/her teammates can be difficult. To satisfy this gratification for the game, it needs to break down the individual game techniques into basic motor schemes by simplifying the technical variables. These schemes are already part of the genetic heritage that every child possesses, but the lack of motor opportunities determines their slow but inexorable regression from the motor point of view. The “awakening” of these structures and the learning of new patterns will become part of the motor memory. These motor skills are important as they facilitate the acquisition of sports techniques, thus improving the quality of learning. However, these structures are often underestimated. It is mistakenly thought that they are simple and immediate to acquire. The child begins to structure them already with his/her first movements after birth, but he/she can develop them correctly and thoroughly between 6 and 12 years of age. Until thirty years ago, children would walk and move almost exclusively on foot or by bicycle, they would run and chase each other, climb trees, throw stones, and so on. All these daily and spontaneous activities were intensely training situations. Today, the sphere of human movement is drastically diminished because most of the stimuli come from virtual sources, unrelated to movement, which favor only the use of optical and acoustic analyzers, excluding other information reception channels (vestibular, proprioceptive, tactile). The street games that used to enliven the days of many generations of children have been replaced by increasingly static games and video games. Personal means of transportation have almost eliminated any remaining opportunities for movement. Manual skills such as throwing and grasping have now been replaced by the ability to quickly use the keyboard of a computer or of a smartphone. Therefore, the task of motor educators is to help students who are approaching sports practice recover that vast heritage of lost experiences. Great importance must be given to forms of movement that favor the structuring and consolidation of general motor skills and of motor schemes. Moreover, the motor schemes learning process is complex and constantly evolving. It needs to be revisited, as the physiological growth (variation in anthropometric indexes in primis) requires continuous adaptations. Sometimes what seemed to have been acquired at 8 years of age may seem forgotten at 11 years of age. To conclude this short premise, we can undoubtedly say that the building of motor skills is always a priority over the building of technical gestures, especially in the initial phase of learning. The proposed games were chosen by taking into consideration:

- The age of the children (Volley game);
- The spaces available to play several games at the same time, switching from one game to another, at the end of the game itself or at the end of a set period of time.

Volley-Game - Didactic Activity n. 1: Pallapugno

- Description: 2 teams with a maximum of 6 players each are in their respective mini-volley court (with a 1 m-high net). The game starts with a member of the white team throwing the ball into the opponent’s half court with his/her fist. The members of the black team must always hit the ball with a fist and throw it in the other half court, after it has bounced in their half court.
- Rules: the ball must be hit with the fist. Up to three players per team can touch the ball, but the latter can touch the ground into one’s half court no more than once per each player’s touch. The hit is made with the fist from anywhere on the court.
- Materials: a net or a beam/balance board, 1 ball.
- Basic motor schemes covered by the didactic activity: throwing, running.
- Conditional skills covered by the didactic activity: Dexterity; Speed.
- Coordination skills covered by the didactic activity: Motor combination and coupling skills; Space-time and dynamic differentiation skills; Motor anticipation skills.

- Pedagogical goals of the didactic activity: Group Spirit and Team Working; Spirit of competition aimed at the acceptance of the result while respecting the opponent; Respect for the rules and training of the discipline; Stimulus for the development of self-esteem; Stimulus for the development of autonomy.

Volley-Game - Didactic Activity n. 2: 1vs1 with slalom

- Description: One player for each team is placed in one of the mini-volley half courts with a net that is about 1.60 mt (about 5 ft) high. The game starts by performing a throw that simulates the bump, therefore from above the forehead, or a real set over the net. The child who catches the throw can stop it and then send it back to the other half court, always with a throw or a set, according to his/her skills. At each action that ends with a point, both children leave the court and are replaced by a teammate, who in the meantime has performed a slalom (zig-zag) between the ropes placed outside the court.
- Materials: 8x4-meter (about 26x13 ft) court, paper tape to divide the court into two halves, 1 ball for each half court, 4 marker cones per team.
- Basic motor patterns covered by the didactic activity: Throwing, running, catching.
- Conditional skills covered by the didactic activity: Quickness; Speed; Endurance
- Coordination skills covered by the didactic activity: Coupling and combination skills; Motor anticipation and reaction skills.
- Pedagogical goals of the didactic activity: Spirit of competition oriented to the acceptance of the result while respecting the opponent; Respect for the rules; Sense of responsibility towards oneself and the peer group; Vocation to the commitment as the only way to pursue one's goals.

EDUCATIONAL DANCE

Organized according to rules that provide lots of opportunities for personal and bodily creativity, educational dance aims mainly at the expressive awareness of one's movement, and not at learning pre-established codes. Through dance, the student learns about his/her own body and how to use movement as a means of communication with others. He/she learns to discover that the quality of movement varies according to the emotions and sensations experienced and that it is closely linked to the space used, to the music and rhythm, and - last but not least - to the people surrounding him/her. In this methodological perspective, dance can be defined as the art of using and organizing movement to express oneself, communicate and invent; it mainly means knowing how to move, how to create and observe.

Therefore, outdoor dance should not be considered exclusively as a matter of steps and physical skills, but it should be understood as a valuable tool for the training of each person; the student who dances is both a performer and a creator, and learns to recognize the elements he/she has experienced also by observing and analyzing dance in its various manifestations, be them individual, collective or artistic. Creative dance for children is a form of education to expressive movement capable of communicating inner emotional aspects through body language, and serves to stimulate and lead them to exploring dance movements, refining individual potential through imagination and fantasy. It is a way to educate through dance movement, which contributes to the physical, psychological and social development of the child, as a person capable of expressing, creating, and communicating.

This project includes playful activities aimed not only at creating a simple choreography, but also at increasing the desire of children to approach a new discipline and learn about their body, explore space, and discover the world of sound and music in a natural way. In the first part there will be a quick warm-up with activities able to mobilize the main joints, to stretch and strengthen the muscle structure, so as to warm up and prepare the body to the dance activity which can take on the spot, in the space, in a circle or in a mirror; in the second part, which is more expressive and creative, some basic principles of dance are conveyed (concept of weight, energy, space, time) in a simple form and with the use of stories, fantastic images, and concrete

objects. Educational dance is a term coined in the Anglo-Saxon area and serves to distinguish dance as the education of the artist (the one that is taught in dance schools) from dance as the education of the person. The fundamental objective is to deepen one's own body perception and communication, which, especially in children, means emotional and creative enrichment and a great benefit in the relational sphere. It is therefore an important tool for educating and training, as well as for integrating students with disadvantages and/or social-relational problems, sometimes fulfilling a therapeutic function as it is able to promote the holistic development of the person - in terms of his/her sensitive (physical, emotional), moral (relational and artistic) and intellectual (cognitive) dimensions. Its main objectives are:

- Enhancing the ability to use one's own body to relate to others, developing the exploration of the main founding elements of educational dance: body - space - dynamics - relationship;
- Experiencing dance in its artistic and cultural value, enhancing both individual creativity and cooperation, and observation in group works;
- Enhancing the playful function of dance as a positive experience to achieve inner well-being;
- Facilitating the free expression of movement;
- Promoting a balanced and global growth of the person;
- Promoting the synergistic activity of body/mind;
- Promoting socialization and the integration of students with disadvantages and/or social-relational problems;
- Enriching one's own motor language.

Educational Dance - Didactic Activity n. 1: Stimulus-Reaction

This activity can be very stimulating for children, both from a motor and a sensory point of view. It requires that children are paired up and a music is on the background; one child must give an input to a part of the other child's body, for example by touching his/her hand, head or foot, and this child must respond to this input with an action of that body segment, without moving other parts of his/her body. It is possible to gradually increase the level of difficulty, making sure that the stimulus is followed by a continuous movement occupying a defined part of space (imaginary square); for example, if the child gives a slight push to the other child's head, as a response, in addition to moving it, the latter will have to act accordingly, such as falling down, or turning around by pushing the other child's shoulder. In this way the movement will be continuous, and thanks to the stimuli of the partner, the subject will adapt more and more easily to new stimuli. This exercise is also very useful to increase socialization between all members of the group. Among the main objectives pursued through this educational activity we can find:

- Improving coordination skills, including: the ability to react to stimuli, i.e., the ability to begin to perform motor gestures quickly in relation to an input from the outside; one's adaptation and transformation skills, i.e., the ability of an individual to adapt to and modify his/her motor action as a result of unanticipated external changes; the ability to combine movements, i.e., the ability to properly coordinate body segments, isolated movements or single movement phases;
- Acquiring greater self-awareness;
- Strengthening awareness of one's own body as an expressive tool;
- Learning to occupy space;
- Developing proprioception

Educational Dance - Didactic Activity n. 2: Tip-toeing on a leaf

This very simple and funny activity requires the children to stand in a circle, and each child is given a leaf (all the leaves have different sizes). The game begins as the music starts: each child must dance freely, holding the leaf in his or her hand. When the music stops, all the children will have to put the leaf on the floor and stay balanced with one foot on it. Whoever has

the biggest leaf will obviously have an advantage, which is why at each turn they will exchange leaves, so that everyone can strive to stay balanced even with the smallest leaf. When the music starts back, the dancers will take the leaf in their hands and exchange it with the partner on their right, and then they will start dancing again. If any child loses his/her balance when the music stops and places a foot outside of it, he/she is out of the game. Among the main objectives that can be pursued through this didactic activity we can find:

- Improving balance coordination skills, i.e., the ability to maintain one's body in a balanced condition or to restore balance after different movements/inputs;
- Improving one's ability to coordinate movements;
- Improving concentration.

Educational Dance - Didactic Activity n. 3: The dance of nature

Children will be asked to think of 5 elements found in nature, whether they are plants, animals or natural elements such as water, air, fire or atmospheric agents such as rain, wind and so on. At this point, the child's task is to "transform himself/herself" into these elements and create his/her own movements; each child is therefore the creator of his/her own dance without making any effort, discovers new possibilities to move in space and different qualities (heavy, light, fluid, and so on) through which to relate to the outside world, and expresses his/her own emotional inner life. In this way, children rediscover the pleasure of movement in all its vital expressive richness, by discovering limits, space, rhythms and forms, in the multiple combinations made possible by dance. The path is therefore structured through a guided improvisation, which includes individual and group moments, and from time to time, materials such as leaves, wood, small pebbles, water (and so on) are introduced. Once the child has created his/her short choreography, he/she will have to learn to set it to music, following the rhythm every movement he/she makes. When they become aware of what they are doing, it is possible to increase the level of difficulty by asking them to change the direction of their body, or even reverse the order of the elements in their choreography.

Among the main objectives that can be pursued through this didactic activity we can find:

- Improving coordination skills, including: spatial-temporal orientation skills, i.e., the ability to determine and vary the position and movements of one's own the body in relation to space, time and a defined field of action; rhythmic skills, i.e., the ability to recognize an externally imposed rhythm and to reproduce it in one's own movements, or the ability to reproduce a rhythm based on one's own imagination or memory; ability to match movements; adaptation and transformation skills.
- Developing imagination, creativity and fantasy;
- Improving memorization and concentration skills;
- Gaining greater awareness of one's own body and of space;
- Learning to express emotions creatively.

HORTICULTURAL THERAPY

Horticultural therapy is one of the activities proposed in the educational communities in which children work the land, plant seeds, water plants, care for and cultivate products that they can later consume. Cultivating a piece of land with one's own hands and seeing the fruits of this work grow has positive psycho-physical effects on health, and allows for a harmonious relationship with oneself and with nature.

Contents: The children will have a portion of land to cultivate a small garden to work with, sow and take care of in all its stages of growth until the harvest, so they can recognize the plants of the garden and observe the life of insects and small animals that inhabit it. They will sow the most delicate plants directly in the soil or in pots, and transplant them when they are strong enough. They will create a scarecrow and, using vegetable waste and dry leaves, will make a compost heap.

Materials: Garden tools - hoe, spade, rake, sieve, shovel, shears, watering cans, gloves, rain

boots; soil, seeds, bulbs, small plants; Fertilizer; Plant labels; Camera.

Purpose: “Learning by doing”, developing dexterity and a real and practical relationship with natural and environmental elements, “taking care of” something/someone, learning to wait, grasping the concept of diversity, working in groups.

Among the main objectives pursued through this educational activity we can find:

- Increased *self-perception*: the child acquires skills and competencies that enhance self-perception.
- Improved *learning skills*: learning the name of plants, the cycles of the seasons, the timing of planting and harvesting, and organizing space in the garden, stimulate concentration and memory.
- Strengthened *self-esteem*: the child has an active role and can see and enjoy the results of his/her work.
- Encouraged *socialization*: the child feels part of a group that shares his/her same goals.
- Stimulated *movement*: digging, sowing, watering, pruning and harvesting fruits develops motor skills, eye-hand coordination, strength and endurance of the arms.

PLAYFUL-MOTOR ACTIVITIES

Playful-Motor Activity – Didactic Activity n. 1: Tic-Tac-Toe

- Materials: 2 small balls, two-colored cones, chalk to draw the grid or adhesive tape.
- Description: the game involves playing tic-tac-toe, by placing three cones of the same color vertically, horizontally or diagonally in a grid made up of nine squares. The teams take turns in throwing, trying to hit one of the squares of the grid where they place the yellow or red cone.
- Basic Motor Skills covered by the didactic activity: throwing, jumping, pulling.
- Conditional skills covered by the didactic activity: strength, power.
- Coordination skills covered by the didactic activity: motor, spatial-temporal orientation, and dynamic differentiation skills.
- Pedagogical goals of the didactic activity: problem-solving, sharing, tolerance, loyalty, determination.

Playful-Motor Activity – Didactic Activity n. 2: A Ball in a Scarf

- Materials: one scarf per pair, one tennis ball.
- Description: the children are divided into two teams placed in the two halves of the mini-volleyball court; alternatively, a tightrope can be used as a net. They hold the 4 corners of a scarf in pairs. At the start, a tennis ball is thrown into a half court and the pairs of that team will try to stop it into their scarf, and then they will throw it into the opposite half court. Whenever the ball touches the ground more than twice in the half court of a team, a point is awarded to the other team and the game resumes as the leading team throws the ball to the trailing team.
- Basic Motor Skills covered by the didactic activity: running, throwing.
- Conditional skills covered by the didactic activity: speed, dexterity.
- Coordination skills covered by the didactic activity: kinaesthetic differentiation, space-time orientation, and reaction skills.
- Pedagogical goals of the didactic activity: cooperation, respect for rules, motivation.

Playful-Motor Activity – Didactic Activity n. 3: Obstacles in the Woods

Learning and discovering in nature is not just funny; it also stimulates all the senses, is a source of motivation and improves school performance. Being outdoors is essential for young children, as it enhances their well-being and development.

Children begin this activity by moving freely around a designated perimeter of the woods, climbing over obstacles or crawling under them. After that, groups of four are formed. Each group creates its own path. The children run the path and get timed. Afterwards, the students

test the path of the other groups.

Possible features of the path:

- slaloming around rocks and trees;
- balancing on a fallen tree;
- jumping between obstacles;
- collecting pine cones and use them as path markers;
- carrying a heavy rock for a short distance;
- different ways of walking: backwards, four-legged, on one leg ...;
- sticking tree branches and zigzagging.

At the end of the activity the obstacle course is then put back in order. The main objectives that can be pursued through this educational activity include:

- Encouraging children to have experiences that develop their curiosity about the secrets of nature;
- Children identify the woods as a place of adventure where they can carry out a wide range of research activities and games;
- Such experiences increase their sense of responsibility towards nature and the woods, and intensify their environmental awareness;
- Through information and its implementation, strong links are created between living beings and habitats, thus building up fundamental experiences;
- Constant interaction encourages them to find forms of mutual respect, support and confidence.

TRIPS/EXCURSIONS

These are opportunities for children to explore new places, opportunities for socialization, recreation and physical activity. The proposed places can be beaches, mountains, campsites, or Adventure Parks, in which to walk on trees or perform outdoor climbing; the latter, carried out with due safety and the appropriate equipment, brings benefits not only from a physical point of view, since it is a full-body sport involving all of its parts from the abdominal muscles to the grip of the hands, but it also contributes to safety and self-awareness. It is a way to get out of everyday life, experience something new and find new stimuli. Among the main objectives pursued through this educational activity we can find:

- *Acquiring new knowledge:* moving around, exploring the environment in all directions, allows to become aware of one's own body and movements and, at the same time, is an invitation to be curious about the world around us, to experiment with and learn about it;
- *Improving mood:* being outdoors in contact with fresh air and natural light stimulates the senses and the endorphins, which positively affect the emotional state of the person providing pleasure, happiness and a feeling of joy and gratification;
- *Working out:* by walking, jumping and climbing, the child strengthens his/her leg, foot and arm muscles; improves his/her posture; increases his/her cardiac and respiratory capacity; combats sedentariness and the risk of becoming overweight, and maintains good physical shape; moreover, he/she may be motivated to take up fitwalking or other sports;
- *Stimulating game and sense of sharing:* walking with peers is an opportunity to forge stronger bonds, have fun and play group or dynamic games that stimulate vitality, creativity and free self-expression;
- *Taking care of oneself:* constantly repeating an enjoyable outdoor activity accustoms children to taking care of their health and well-being every day, taking time for and listening to themselves.
- *Respecting nature:* taking children into the woods, up a mountain path or to the seaside teaches them to pay attention to the wonderful world around them, to the trees, water, flowers and animals that live in the same space as they do, and that need the same

respect.

- *Feeling free*: whenever possible, walking barefoot provides many advantages to the child, especially if performed on uneven ground, such as grass and sand, since this movement follows the natural development of the foot, avoiding incorrect postures and consequent back pain, and is free of constraints.

3. Evaluation process

With the aim of satisfying the two perspectives of analysis of the experimental project covered by this research work, it became necessary to draw up, on the one hand, a docimological form capable of measuring the eventual educational progress of the very young participants (Tab. 1) and, on the other, a questionnaire that could evaluate the perception of the effectiveness of what experimented by subjects with specific skills in the field of educational, pedagogical, didactic and social sciences (Tab. 2).

The docimological form referred to the following thematic nuclei, articulated as shown in the following table:

Thematic nuclei	Skills	Learning Objective	Descriptors	Score
THE BODY AND ITS RELATIONSHIP WITH TIME AND SPACE	The child becomes aware of his/her motor skills by understanding both his/her strengths and limitations.	Using acquired motor experience to solve new or unusual situations. Employing and correlating the space-time variables functional to the implementation of the motor act.	Performs and uses skills in a personal, productive way, with excellent ease and effectiveness	10 / 9
			Uses motor skills in a completely safe manner with good ease and confidence	8
	The student uses acquired motor skills by adapting movement to the situation	Orienting oneself in the natural environment, also with specific aids.	Uses motor schemes in a fairly safe way and with some ease	7
			Uses basic motor schemes in structured situations and with sufficient confidence	6
			Not always manages to use basic motor schemes	5
BODY LANGUAGE AS A WAY OF COMMUNICATION AND EXPRESSION	The child uses the communicative-relational aspects of motor language to enter into relationships with others, by actively applying the educational-motor values as a way to relate to others every day, and to respect the rules.	Understanding and applying simple body expression techniques to represent ideas and moods individually, in pairs, or in groups. Decoding gestures of teammates and opponents in game and sport situations.	Optimally uses body expression and communication techniques	10 / 9
			Satisfactorily uses body expression and communication techniques	8
		Mastering coordination skills by adapting them in an original and creative way to various situations.	Appropriately uses body expression and communication techniques	7
			Sufficiently uses body expression and communication techniques	6
			Inadequately uses body expression and communication techniques	5

SOCIALIZATION AND SHARING OF EDUCATIONAL VALUES	The child acquires not only self-awareness, but also the ability to integrate and get along well with his/her peers.	Realizing educational strategies by implementing collaborative behaviors and effectively participating in group choices.	Integrates himself/herself optimally into the group	10 / 9
			Integrates himself/herself very satisfactorily into the group	8
	The child is able to integrate himself/herself into the group, take on responsibilities and strive for the common good.	Managing empathetically the situations of psycho-physical discomfort or difficulty faced by one's companions, being respectful of each other.	Integrates himself/herself satisfactorily into the group	7
			Integrates himself/herself sufficiently into the group	6
			Integrates himself/herself insufficiently into the group	5
HEALTH AND WELL-BEING, PREVENTION AND SAFETY	The child observes basic safety criteria for himself/herself and others.	Managing to distribute the effort in relation to the type of activity faced, by applying breathing control and muscle relaxation techniques at the end of the work.	Implements and makes optimal and responsible use of correct behaviors, spaces and tools	10 / 9
			Implements and uses very satisfactorily correct behaviors, spaces and tools	8
	The child recognizes the risks of injury in the outdoors, applying preventive strategies	Correctly using tools while respecting one's own and others' safety, even in situations of possible danger.	Implements and uses satisfactorily correct behaviors, spaces and tools	7
			Implements and uses correct behaviors, spaces and tools, only when reprimanded	6
			Although reprimanded, not always implements and uses correct behaviors, spaces and tools	5
	Performing movement activities by recognizing their value to improve physical efficiency.			

Table 1 – Docimological Form

As for the questionnaire, it was proposed anonymously to a total of 60 subjects among the members of educational associations, school teachers and university professors working in the field of pedagogy during an event prepared for this purpose, after having described the structure, the activities and the outcomes of the project. Here are the questions with the corresponding answer options.

N.	Questions	Answers
1	Do you think outdoor activity can provide physical and psycho-educational benefits?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="radio"/> Definitely yes <input type="radio"/> Probably yes <input type="radio"/> Probably not <input type="radio"/> Definitely not

2	Do you think outdoor activity can be a worthwhile educational alternative to activities carried out in a sports center?	<input type="radio"/> Definitely yes <input type="radio"/> Probably yes <input type="radio"/> Probably not <input type="radio"/> Definitely not
3	Would you propose these educational-motor activities within a school context?	<input type="radio"/> Definitely yes <input type="radio"/> Probably yes <input type="radio"/> Probably not <input type="radio"/> Definitely not
4	Do you think that contact with nature makes the child free to explore himself/herself and to stimulate the building of self-esteem and autonomy?	<input type="radio"/> Definitely yes <input type="radio"/> Probably yes <input type="radio"/> Probably not <input type="radio"/> Definitely not
5	Do you think that playing sports outdoors can become a moment of social integration?	<input type="radio"/> Definitely yes <input type="radio"/> Probably yes <input type="radio"/> Probably not <input type="radio"/> Definitely not
6	In your opinion, would educational activities involving animals help children increase their self-esteem and foster respect for others?	<input type="radio"/> Definitely yes <input type="radio"/> Probably yes <input type="radio"/> Probably not <input type="radio"/> Definitely not
7	Do you think this proposal is effective for improving motor learning too?	<input type="radio"/> Definitely yes <input type="radio"/> Probably yes <input type="radio"/> Probably not <input type="radio"/> Definitely not
8	Through educational dance, do you think it is also possible to stimulate the creation of pedagogical values useful for the growth of children?	<input type="radio"/> Definitely yes <input type="radio"/> Probably yes <input type="radio"/> Probably not <input type="radio"/> Definitely not
9	Do you think this type of activity could positively affect children's school performance?	<input type="radio"/> Definitely yes <input type="radio"/> Probably yes <input type="radio"/> Probably not <input type="radio"/> Definitely not

Table 2: Questionnaire

4. Outcomes and Concluding Remarks

The experimental project implemented falls within the sphere of pedagogical research addressing the educational and social challenge of ensuring that young people, or very young people in disadvantaged conditions have the opportunity to pursue their educational growth, in order to acquire knowledge and skills useful not only to enrich their culture, but also to cope with life. It was decided to focus on educational activities that were based on the Outdoor Education approach to leverage the relational factor with the peer group and the external environment, and to implement activities that, through the game and the motor-sport experience, could be functional to the development of key educational values.

In this regard, below the outcomes of the educational progress achieved by the 36 young “students” belonging to the Community who undertook this project, evaluated through the specifically-structured docimological form.

Thematic nuclei	Percentage of students who reported a worsened evaluation	Percentage of students who DID NOT report changes in their evaluation	Percentage of students who reported an evaluation improved by 1 “grade”	Percentage of students who reported an evaluation improved by 2 “grades”
THE BODY AND ITS RELATIONSHIP WITH TIME AND SPACE	0%	0%	33,33% (12 students)	66,67 % (24 students)
BODY LANGUAGE AS A WAY OF COMMUNICATION AND EXPRESSION	0%	0%	22,22% (8 students)	77,78% (28 students)
SOCIALIZATION AND SHARING OF EDUCATIONAL VALUES	0%	0%	16,67% (6 students)	83,33% (30 students)
HEALTH AND WELL-BEING, PREVENTION AND SAFETY	0%	1,47% (2 students)	33,33% (12 students)	66,67 % (24 students)

Table 3: Training progresses reported

The table allows us to observe that from the first analysis, made after only one month of didactic activity at the end of the project, all students showed educational progress in the evaluation areas analyzed. This supports the educational quality of the experimental proposal with regard to young people in critical conditions from a social, personal and family point of view; moreover, this allows us to identify it as an effective didactic-pedagogical protocol to face the educational challenge that characterizes this research project. In fact, through the innovative didactic activities designed and implemented, very young people had the opportunity to undertake an educational path capable of building some of the main pedagogical and educational values that should mark the growth of any individual, regardless of his or her starting condition. The opportunity to relate with the peer group, with the environment and especially with themselves, through activities and experiences of recreational-motor type and involving the contact with nature, marked a pleasant rediscovery of the main principles of their existence. The continuous observation, monitoring and comparison process undertaken by all those involved in the children’s education brought to light how much they developed in terms of: acceptance of themselves and their own bodily expression; respect for others, awareness of being able to represent a support for a companion and to ask the latter for help in turn; respect for the environment in which they live and the rules that characterize it; level of self-esteem and autonomy. Furthermore, considerable progress was achieved in terms of motor and sports skills learning, which have always been a fundamental element of the educational growth for each individual.

In addition to this, with regard to the perception of the effectiveness of the experimental pedagogical proposal implemented by leading players in the world of education, training-care of social values and pedagogical research, below the outcomes of the questionnaire administered during the final event of the project.

Question N.	Answer options	Percentage of answers
1	<input type="radio"/> Definitely yes	88%
	<input type="radio"/> Probably yes	12%
	<input type="radio"/> Probably not	0%
	<input type="radio"/> Definitely not	0%
2	<input type="radio"/> Definitely yes	77%
	<input type="radio"/> Probably yes	23%
	<input type="radio"/> Probably not	0%
	<input type="radio"/> Definitely not	0%
3	<input type="radio"/> Definitely yes	76%
	<input type="radio"/> Probably yes	24%
	<input type="radio"/> Probably not	0%
	<input type="radio"/> Definitely not	0%
4	<input type="radio"/> Definitely yes	64%
	<input type="radio"/> Probably yes	36%
	<input type="radio"/> Probably not	0%
	<input type="radio"/> Definitely not	0%
5	<input type="radio"/> Definitely yes	87%
	<input type="radio"/> Probably yes	13%
	<input type="radio"/> Probably not	0%
	<input type="radio"/> Definitely not	0%
6	<input type="radio"/> Definitely yes	91%
	<input type="radio"/> Probably yes	9%
	<input type="radio"/> Probably not	0%
	<input type="radio"/> Definitely not	0%
7	<input type="radio"/> Definitely yes	81%
	<input type="radio"/> Probably yes	19%
	<input type="radio"/> Probably not	0%
	<input type="radio"/> Definitely not	0%
8	<input type="radio"/> Definitely yes	79%
	<input type="radio"/> Probably yes	21%
	<input type="radio"/> Probably not	0%
	<input type="radio"/> Definitely not	0%
9	<input type="radio"/> Definitely yes	62%
	<input type="radio"/> Probably yes	38%
	<input type="radio"/> Probably not	0%
	<input type="radio"/> Definitely not	0%

Table 4: Outcomes of the Questionnaire

The results of the questionnaire have confirmed the validity of the project by experts and workers in both formal and non-formal educational contexts. A clear perception of the effectiveness of the experimental project in pedagogical and didactic terms emerged. Of considerable interest was the interest shown in the opportunity to include such an educational program in formal educational contexts too. It is becoming increasingly clear that there is a strong need to introduce didactic innovations in any training context, especially if dedicated to subjects in critical social, family and personal situations, so as to ensure a complete growth from all points of view. The Outdoor Education approach, characterized by the presence of didactic activities of a sports and motor nature, proved to be a valuable tool to meet this need and any educational challenges as well, such as the one addressed in this paper. Therefore, this contribution aims to be a benchmark and food for thought for future innovative educational paths proposals that, going beyond traditional schemes, aim to improve the educational growth processes and to ensure equal educational/life opportunities to any category of persons.

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