


EXPLORING LEARNING WITH OUTDOOR DANCE: WHERE EMBODIMENT AND ENVIRONMENT UNITE

ESPLORARE L'APPRENDIMENTO CON LA DANZA ALL'APERTO: DOVE CORPOREITÀ E AMBIENTE SI UNISCONO

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ABSTRACT

The article explores the educational potential of Outdoor Dance, a practice that combines bodily movement with the natural environment. The aim of this paper is to illustrate how this fusion enriches learning, promotes physical and mental well-being and fosters personal and social connections. This practice should be integrated into educational programmes to foster greater individual awareness and deeper connection with the world around us.

L'articolo esplora il potenziale educativo dell'Outdoor Dance, una pratica che unisce il movimento corporeo all'ambiente naturale. Scopo di questo lavoro è illustrare come questa fusione arricchisca l'apprendimento, promuova il benessere fisico e mentale e favorisca connessioni personali e sociali. Questa pratica dovrebbe essere integrata nei programmi educativi per favorire una maggiore consapevolezza individuale e una connessione più profonda con il mondo circostante.

KEYWORDS

Outdoor Dance, Education, Outdoor Environment
Danza all'aperto, Educazione, Ambienti all'aperto

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Introduction

In today's educational landscape, learning is seen as a multidimensional process in which knowledge is interwoven with personal and sensory experiences. This perspective reflects an evolution in the approach to education over the decades. From an era when education was rigidly confined to classrooms, there has been a shift to a broader view that embraces the world as a laboratory of learning. In this context, dance emerges as an art that goes beyond mere choreographic performance: it becomes a vehicle for learning and an authentic expression of creativity and individuality. Moreover, its impact is not only limited to the sphere of art, but extends to the world of education in a broader sense.

The significance of shifting the learning experience from conventional classrooms to the great outdoors becomes increasingly apparent when we delve into the numerous advantages that the natural environment can provide. Being in nature awakens our senses, sparks curiosity, and fosters a profound connection with the world around us. When we combine this outdoor experience with the art of dance, we create a unique space where the human body can express itself freely, engaging in a harmonious dialogue with the natural world. It transcends the mere technical aspects of dance, allowing for a deeper connection to emerge.

This harmonious fusion of dance and the outdoor environment has the potential to nurture a profound connection on multiple levels. Firstly, it encourages individuals to connect with themselves on a more profound and authentic level. The unrestricted movement, unburdened by walls, mirrors, and confined spaces, enables a sense of liberation and self-discovery that is transformative and, most of all, educative.

Furthermore, this dynamic combination encourages people to connect with one another. Dancing in the open air promotes a sense of community and shared experience that is unique to the outdoors. The elements of wind, sun, and open spaces create an environment where social barriers can be broken down, and individuals can connect on a more personal level. Most importantly, this synergy promotes a deeper connection with nature itself. The rhythms of our bodies intertwine with the rhythms of nature, creating a profound sense of belonging and ecological awareness. It allows us to connect with ourselves, with others, and with the awe-inspiring beauty of the natural world, making it an invaluable educational tool that transcends the boundaries of traditional classroom learning.

The aim of this article was to explore the importance of dance in outdoor environments as a means to enrich the educational process. In particular, we will

explore how this practice, which involves the movement of the body in natural environments, can amplify the learning experience. Indeed, dance is not just an expressive language, but a deeply bodily experience that connects one's physical being with the surrounding environment. In this sense, it acts as a bridge between the individual's inner world and the outer world, providing a fertile ground for experiential learning. Through this journey, we hope to illuminate the transformative potential of outdoor dance in education, opening the door to an educational approach that celebrates the connection between body, movement and environment.

1. The educational role of dance

Since the beginnings of human civilisation, dance has always been one of the main forms of human expression (Adshead-Lansdale e Layson 2006). Over the centuries it has accompanied populations, changing with the thinking, habits, culture and needs of each era, becoming, in fact, the mirror of society and human behaviour (Pontremoli 2015). Today, it continues to evolve following the development of contemporary society (Goody 1997; Kouroupi 1999). But have we ever asked ourselves "why do we dance?" The reasons why a child, an adult or an elderly person is driven to dance, may be many and may depend on the context, but at the origin of every dance there is always the spontaneity of the act: no man dances to move, because he or she is obliged to do so, but to express himself or herself (Iavarone 2010). Dance is thus given an enormous symbolic value in which movements are not just gestures for their own sake but become a means of representing a collective and individual identity (Fink et al. 2021).

Indeed, movement represents a fundamental educational experience from childhood onwards, since it is through it that the individuals enter into a relationship with themselves and the world around them. Although it is still widely believed that bodily development is separate from cognitive development, the child learns about the world through experience derived from movement and, therefore, from the body (Piaget 1967). Knowledge is linked to motor skills because learning requires action mediated by a constructive process that is active and not passive.

Thus, its ability to convey meaning through bodily movement is a powerful educational vehicle. Through movement, dance enables individuals to communicate, and express emotions, thoughts and complex concepts in a non-verbal manner. But above all, it opens the door to experiential learning, where the

body becomes the primary instrument for acquiring profound and enduring knowledge.

One of the pioneers in this holistic approach to dance was Rudolf Laban, a Hungarian dancer, choreographer, and dance theorist. Laban introduced the concept of "Educational Dance," recognizing that dance encompasses various facets—artistic, social, symbolic, aesthetic, and educational—comprising an interconnected whole (Brooks 1993). His work laid the foundation for a fresh perspective on dance education, emphasizing creativity and the development of each individual's unique creative abilities.

The educational dance, as a pedagogical practice, thrives in school settings, particularly for children in the developmental stage. It goes beyond physical fitness and choreography, delving into self-awareness and using movement as a means of communication (Malkogeorgos et al. 2011). What sets it apart is its inclusivity, welcoming individuals regardless of physical abilities or limitations. It empowers everyone to express themselves creatively through movement, fostering personal growth and interpersonal skills (Hodgson 2016). Research supports the positive impact of Educational Dance on children's development. Studies by Anjos & Ferraro et al. (2018) have demonstrated improvements in motor development among children who engage in Educational Dance, persisting over time (Anjos e Ferraro 2018). Additionally, Burkhardt et al. (2012) found that Recreational Dance benefits children and adolescents by enhancing cardiovascular fitness, bone health, and psychosocial well-being (Burkhardt e Brennan 2012).

Dance educators play a pivotal role in this journey. They must possess not only technical knowledge and motor skills but also a pedagogical approach that fosters positive experiences, celebrates individuality, and discourages competitiveness.

Indeed, learning through movement is not limited to purely academic concepts. Dance also promotes the development of social and empathic skills. Interacting with the movements of others in a collaborative dance context fosters an understanding of the emotions and intentions of others. This process of bodily empathy builds bridges between individuals, facilitating communication and interpersonal connection.

In this context, bodiliness, is the very foundation of learning, as it involves the senses and creates a multi-sensory experience that goes beyond mere conceptual learning. Through the active involvement of the body, learners can touch, feel, see and experience lessons in a deeper and more engaging way. This immersion in bodily experience not only enriches learning, but also creates a deep connection

between the individual and the content of the education. It also encourages creativity and individuality, allowing learners to express themselves in a unique and authentic way.

2. The importance of Outdoor Environment on Learning Process

The outdoor environment, with its vastness and diversity, provides a natural stage for exploring, experiencing and connecting with the world around us. Its positive influence on the mind and body is undeniable and contributes significantly to individual well-being and development. Over the past 20 years there has been a growing interest in the importance of outdoor learning. In fact, numerous studies have been conducted that have demonstrated the numerous positive effects of education in open environments on personal, social, cognitive and physical development in different age groups, particularly in the developmental stages (Miller et al. 2022). Direct contact with the natural environment offers a unique opportunity to explore, experiment and learn in an authentic way.

Outdoor learning is not limited to imparting theoretical knowledge, but rather involves people in practical experiences that foster a deep understanding of concepts. This approach stimulates curiosity and encourages active observation, leading to greater retention of information and the ability to apply knowledge in real situations.

Regarding the numerous positive effects of learning in outdoor locations, it has been shown that open spaces offer an ideal environment for social and emotional development. By interacting with others in outdoor settings, people learn to cooperate, communicate and resolve conflicts constructively. In addition, connecting with nature can generate positive emotions, contributing to emotional well-being and promoting a positive outlook on life. Many studies have demonstrated the importance of outdoor learning in promoting social and emotional development. Among them, a recent study by Miller and colleagues involving 50 South Australian educators revealed a plethora of social and emotional benefits associated with outdoor learning, such as improving mental health, promoting well-being, supporting social development and facilitating emotional growth (Miller et al. 2022). Another study by Molyneux et al. analysed and demonstrated the effectiveness of outdoor learning in Canadian primary schools in promoting children's social and emotional development (Molyneux, Zeni, e Oberle 2022). However, it has been shown that the positive social and emotional effects do not only affect primary school children but extend to all developmental stages.

A review study conducted by Mann et al. examined 147 studies that investigated the effects of outdoor learning in children of different age groups, founding that adolescents also benefit in terms of social and emotional development from the outdoor learning experience, thus further strengthening the case for outdoor learning in all developmental age groups(Mann et al. 2022).

As already mentioned, in addition to the benefits regarding the emotional and social dimensions, the outdoor environment also has beneficial effects with regard to the cognitive and physical aspects. Numerous studies and research have shown significant benefits in both dimensions(Burriss e Burriss 2011; Ward et al. 2016). For example, several studies have shown that outdoor learning can improve cognitive skills, including attention, concentration and problem-solving(Wahyuni et al. 2017). In addition, Interaction with nature and the outdoor environment can stimulate curiosity and active learning, contributing to improved academic performance.

On the physical side, outdoor learning often involves increased physical activity, encouraging students to move more and be more active. This can contribute to improving students' physical health, fitness and general well-being(Nedovic e Morrissey 2013). A study by Fjørtoft et al, on the other hand, showed that children who engage in outdoor activities in natural settings also demonstrate improved motor skills, including better coordination, balance and agility(Fjørtoft 2001). Another review by Eigenschenk et al., on the other hand, highlighted the positive effects of outdoor motor activity for a wide range of outcomes related to physical and mental health as well as personal and social development(Eigenschenk et al. 2019).

In summary, the outdoor environment provides a natural stage for meaningful learning and development. The experience of connecting with nature and exploring the outdoors is invaluable for individual and collective growth and contributes to a deeper understanding of the world around us. Immersion in nature not only enriches our knowledge, but also our physical and mental well-being, offering unique opportunities for learning and discovery. This connection with the outdoors allows us to develop a deeper connection with the natural world and to acquire valuable skills that can enrich our lives and those of our children during the developmental stages in multiple ways.

3. Outdoor Dance: The Art of Body Expression in a Natural Environment

Outdoor dance is an art form that differs from traditional dance performances for several reasons, mainly because of its environment. In fact, this dance form takes place outdoors, in natural locations such as parks, forests, beaches or any other outdoor environment. The choice to perform in these natural locations adds a unique dimension to the performance, as the surroundings become an integral part of the choreography(Stewart 2010).

A distinctive element of outdoor dance is the interaction with the environment. Outdoor dance artists do not just perform choreographed movements, but often incorporate natural elements into their performance. For example, they may dance in trees, on rocks or even in water. This interaction with nature adds a level of unpredictability and adaptability to the dance, as performers must respond to changing environmental conditions. This continuous interaction with environmental conditions, and with elements such as ground, sea, rain, exposes dancers to a profound sensory experience. Kramer and colleagues, in one of their papers, have precisely emphasised the importance of outdoor dance in providing an environment in which one can experience a connection with the natural environment. They highlight how the sensory experience can offer a deeper understanding of materiality, going beyond the simple concept of 'letting go' in nature(Kramer 2012).

Besides the performers, spectators can also perceive sounds, smells, temperatures and surfaces more intensively than in a performance in a theatre, creating a unique sensory experience for all present. Moreover, spectators are often invited to actively participate or experience the performance from different perspectives, creating a sense of shared involvement.

This combination of artistic expression and contact with nature can have highly positive effects on the participants' psycho-physical well-being, helping to create a deeper connection with their surroundings and improving mental and physical wellbeing. A study carried out by Byrka et al., investigated whether dancing in natural environments provided psychological benefits to individuals(Byrka e Ryczko 2018). They observed a significant increase in positive emotions related to exercise and a decrease in the perception of physical tiredness after dancing, compared to before the dance session.

Due to the above-mentioned numerous positive effects of outdoor dance, on a psychophysical and behavioural level, this practice is particularly beneficial for children at all stages of their development.

First, outdoor dance offers a unique opportunity for learning and growth. From a psychophysical point of view, outdoor dance promotes physical and mental well-being. By promoting physical activity, flexibility and motor coordination, this practice contributes to the proper development of children's bodies(Gray et al. 2015; Hustyi et al. 2012). In addition, interaction with the natural environment stimulates the senses and increases body awareness, creating a deeper connection between the body and the world around it, as well as generating ecological awareness and respect for the environment(Parsons 2011).

On a behavioural point of view, outdoor dance can promote self-control, discipline and the ability to work in a group. Working with other dancers, following the choreographer's instructions and adapting to changing environmental conditions teach children important social and emotional skills. Furthermore, this practice can provide a positive channel for the expression of emotions, helping children to manage stress and develop a healthy self-esteem(Steinberg e Steinberg 2016).

In conclusion, outdoor dance, as an activity performed outdoors, presents itself as an extraordinary opportunity for children's learning and growth, positively influencing their cognitive, psychophysical and behavioural spheres. This practice goes far beyond pure enjoyment, offering a powerful means for the formation of more balanced, aware and socially competent individuals.

However, in a context where technology and fast-paced life seem to have relegated the relationship between man and nature to the background, it appears that although there are numerous scientific texts demonstrating the effectiveness of dance and outdoor activities as educational tools, there is still much to be discovered regarding the educational importance of outdoor dance. This practice could make an invaluable contribution not only to the individual growth of children but also to the collective growth of future generations. While scientific evidence accumulates on the positive influence of outdoor dance on aspects such as physical and mental health, cognition and social interaction, we need to go further. We should promote awareness of outdoor dance as an integral part of education, encouraging educational institutions, communities and families to embrace it as a crucial medium of learning.

Conclusions

In a world where education is increasingly geared towards a holistic and comprehensive view of individual development, outdoor dance presents itself as a

valuable ally in the formation of healthy, well-rounded individuals. In this article, we have explored the educational role of dance, highlighting its ability to engage the body and its surroundings as learning tools.

Dance, with its bodily and artistic expression, merges synergistically with the natural environment when practised outdoors. This fusion of movement and nature creates a fertile ground for exploration and learning in unique and effective ways. Through interaction with the natural environment, participants gain a deep awareness of themselves and the world around them, promoting physical and mental well-being.

In the educational context, outdoor dance proves particularly valuable. During the different stages of their development, children can benefit enormously from this practice. From childhood to adolescence, outdoor dance offers opportunities for interdisciplinary learning, promotes physical activity, stimulates the senses and provides tools to deal with behavioural and emotional challenges.

In conclusion, outdoor dance is much more than an art form. It is an educational journey that embraces body and soul, promoting growth at every stage of life. This practice represents an extraordinary opportunity that should be valued and incorporated into educational programmes, helping to form individuals who are aware, balanced and in harmony with the world around them. Outdoor dance is an invitation to dance to the rhythm of nature, discovering the unlimited potential of one's body and mind.

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