

# URBAN SPACES AND LEARNING THROUGH THE BODY: THE ROLE PERFORMATIVE ARTS IN OUTDOOR EDUCATION

## SPAZI URBANI E APPRENDIMENTO ATTRAVERSO IL CORPO: IL RUOLO DELLE ARTI PERFORMATIVE NELL'EDUCAZIONE OUTDOOR

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### ABSTRACT

The work explores the possibility to combine outdoor education with performative arts in order to offer new didactic insights that provide students new holistic learning experiences in an ecological perspective able to deepen the intrinsic relationship between the individual and the surrounding environment. The link between these two elements is represented by the body which, as a constituent element of the individual's identity, becomes both object and subject of the educational process.

Il lavoro esplora la possibilità di combinare l'educazione outdoor con le arti performative per offrire nuovi spunti didattici che forniscano agli studenti nuove esperienze olistiche di apprendimento in una prospettiva ecologica capace di approfondire l'intrinseca relazione tra individuo e ambiente circostante. Il legame tra questi due elementi è rappresentato dal corpo che, in quanto elemento costitutivo dell'identità dell'individuo, è al tempo stesso oggetto e soggetto del processo educativo.

### KEYWORDS

Outdoor Education, Performative Arts, Invisible Theatre, Corporeity  
Educazione all'aperto, Arti Performative, Teatro Invisibile, Corporeità

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## Introduction

Our surrounding environment represents a complex and fascinating stage full of constant stimuli that promote experiential learning. Nowadays, any urban space offers an opportunity for exploration, discovery, and learning. However, in most cases, traditional didactics limits and confines learning processes to static classrooms, neglecting the formative potential that urban spaces and, more generally, the external environment can offer.

The term “*outdoor education*” refers to “*an approach that places learning at the interface between experience and reflection, based on concrete experiences in real situations*” (Crudeli et al., 2012) and it refers to a learning process aimed at the active engagement of the individual and, specifically, the child. The external environment becomes both the place and object of learning and the means through which the child acquires new developmental skills (Mann et al., 2021).

In this perspective of experiential learning, the body constitutes an essential tool able to connect individuals to the environment, it is a source of sensory perception, and a means of exploration. Through our bodies, we interact with the surrounding space, perceive tactile, auditory, and visual sensations, and we experience the world in unique ways. Hence, the human body becomes our vehicle for learning. For developmental psychology theorists, the body represents the first tool to promote child's cognitive development. The body is the first world explored and played by the child, allowing them to recognize their individuality, it represents that part of space where their own self resides (Gattico, 2001). It is a site of instinctual and relational investments, a vector of understanding, a producer and organizer of meaning, the first and only form of psycho-social contact. This understanding of the body as an indispensable means of learning is strengthened when we move from the conception of the body as a physical entity, that allows us to perceive the world through our senses, move in space, and interact with the external environment to the concept of *corporeity* through which the body becomes a fundamental element of an individual's identity (Milella, 2020). In this perspective, the body becomes both the subject and object of education, no longer limited to the technical aspect of motor performance but also extended to the cognitive and emotional sphere (Iavarone et al, 2010). Hence, educating to corporeity means constantly rethinking one's body image, constantly changing the idea that each individual has of himself according to the changing circumstances of life (Coco, 2015).

In this context, performing arts represent an essential element useful for further enriching the educational experience of children. The performing arts encompass a wide range of disciplines, including theatre, dance, and street theatre, which can be creatively integrated into urban environments. They stimulate creative processes and allow individuals to use their bodies as the preferred channel of communication (Baumol, 1991). Artistic performances in public spaces transform the city itself into a stage with an active audience. Performing arts involve the body in motion, voice, bodily expression, and creativity, offering a multisensory educational experience in which outdoor spaces represent the ideal learning stage.

In the present study, the principal aim is to propose insights able to offer a new and innovative idea of didactics which combine outdoor education and performing arts as learning approach that engages children both from a physical and motor point of view, as well as from a cognitive and emotional perspective.

## **1. The Outdoor Education**

For many years, school education and traditional didactics have been characterised by the major constraint of being carried out predominantly indoors. As a consequence, students, from children to adolescents, spent the greatest part of their school time in a closed space and, more importantly, sitting behind their desk. This has several implications for our students, not only from a physical standpoint (e.g., increased sedentary behaviour) but also from a cognitive and academic performance point of view (e.g., reduced attention levels). Outdoor education is characterised by regular curriculum-based experiential teaching activities that involve the use of the body as a means to pedagogical ends (Bentsen et al., 2022). It is oriented towards the cognitive, psychological, emotional and physical development of children through a sensory-experience based approach in a context that enhances their social dimension (Fang et al., 2023, Crudeli et al., 2012). Outdoor education allows students to experience natural environment directly, encouraging a deeper connection with their surroundings and, most importantly, offers a wide range of advantages and benefits for students, contributing significantly to their physical, cognitive and social development. Indeed, in a study conducted by Monti et al., it has been shown that outdoor education significantly improves child development who attend Italian Nursery school. Specifically, the study involved 160 children divided

into an experimental group who practiced outdoor activities and a control group who continued to carry out traditional curricular activities. Results showed that children who performed outdoor activities displayed significant improvement in several skills including cognitive, emotional and fine motor ones with respect to the traditional group (Monti et al., 2019).

In a review conducted Becker et al., the authors analysed the effects that outdoor education programmes have on the dimensions of learning, social interactions and, of course, health. The authors showed that there were several scientific evidence supporting that the integration of an outdoor education curricular programme leads to an improvement into academic performance as well as an enhancement of students' ability to translate the skills acquired during the lesson into real life. At the same time, outdoor education encourages an improvement in the social dimension of children by fostering the development of a sense of self-efficacy, belonging to a group and self-esteem. (Becker et al., 2017). With respect to the students' health and wellbeing, Haugh et al., showed that the presence of outdoor facilities in the school environment significantly promotes the students' engagements in physical activity (Haug et al., 2010). This suggest the idea that enriching the outdoor school environment may be helpful to promote less sedentary behaviour. Similarly, Bentsen et al., showed that students who were involved in Outdoor Education were more prone to participate to more vigorous physical activity programmes demonstrating that outdoor education represents a feasible approach to promote public health and physical activity (Bentsen et al., 2022).

## **2. Performative arts as a pedagogical resource.**

With the term “performative arts”, we refer to a various practices and activities such as dance, theatre, and circus arts, primarily distinguished by the essential use of the body and, of course, movement as a tool of cognitive and emotional communication and expression. (Thomson & Jaque, 2016). Performative arts represent a privileged means to promote the development of corporeality, since the body becomes the tool through which it becomes possible to explore the surrounding environment, connect with others, and also learn how to reach out one's inner resources (Botes, 2016). Consequently, performative arts become an effective educational tool for school-aged children through which the body enriches the learning experience. Indeed, performative arts contribute to the

development of cognitive, social, and emotional skills, enhancing concentration, creativity, self-confidence, and communication abilities (Antonacci et al., 2015).

For example, theatre represents a form of artistic expression that is both comprehensive and intricate which requires significant physical, emotional, and cognitive engagement (Grabowski, 2013). Hence, theatre represent a useful pedagogical device which can serve as a laboratory in which children and adolescents may enhance their communicative skills using verbal and non-verbal languages simultaneously and, at the same time, it can be the ideal tool to represent children's imagery by promoting the development of creativity and imagination (Farnè, 2021) as well as their psychophysiological wellbeing. To this regard, Minino et al., showed that students who practiced theatre and digital storytelling in school settings presented an improvement of their wellbeing and self-esteem as assessed by the Positive Affect and Negative Affect Scale (PANAS) test and the Multidimensional Self-Esteem Test (TMA) (Minino & Liparoti, 2023).

Similarly to the theatre, dance can be considered one of the oldest forms of performative arts in human history, which, as Franca Zagatti would say, represents a "*highly flexible form of human expression that takes place through a wide range of manifestations*" (Iavarone et al., 2010). Dancing is a bodily and emotional experience through which children explore and strengthen communication with themselves and others. The rhythm becomes the privileged tool to express emotions such as anger, joy, fear, and sadness. Moreover, dancing enables children to cultivate their creative expression, awakening a multitude of new sensory experiences, imagination, and thought processes, thus enriching their personal repertoire (Palumbo, 2012). Basing on these assumption and inspired to the theories of Rudolf Laban (Laban, 1993), Franca Zagatti developed the concept of "*Educational dance*" (Zagatti, 2004). The primary objective of educational dance is to allow children to know themselves through the discovery of their own bodies and their corporality (Viti, 2003). In the educational dance, the focus is no longer on the achievement of the perfect technique or the precision of movement, instead the spontaneity of movement is promoted. Indeed, through educational dance, the dancing child is placed at the centre of the learning process, which takes place through movements that are both familiar and spontaneous.

Hence, Performative art can be considered as a multisystemic educational tool in which it is the act of performance itself that assumes pedagogical connotations (Moscato et al., 2022). Using the body as a learning tool, performative arts allows

the psychophysical children' development promoting emotional intelligence and emotional and empathic processes (Moscato et al., 2022).

### **3. Performative arts outdoor: the example of the invisible theatre**

The fusion of performative arts and outdoor education may have a formidable educational power that transcends conventional educational boundaries. By practicing dance theatre, dance, or music outdoors, students are not merely spectators anymore; they become active participants in a holistic learning experience. External environment becomes the stage for their creative expression, invoking a profound connection between the arts and the environment. This synergy not only enhances their understanding of natural landscapes but also fosters teamwork, improvisational and skills, and adaptability to operate in unpredictable outdoor settings. It could encourage students to explore and challenge social norms and environmental issues, using subtle yet thought-provoking performances in public spaces. By combining performative arts with outdoor education, students are not only enriched academically but also empowered to be catalysers for positive change, stimulating awareness and action in the world around them.

In this perspective, one form of artistic expression that is well suited to outdoor spaces is the "invisible theatre". The practice of the Invisible theatre stems from the work of Augusto Boal and is part of the methodology of the Theatre of the Oppressed (Boal, 2000). It favours open spaces and urban spaces and/or common situations as privileged settings, which become the ideal stage for real theatrical performances. One of the main characteristics of the invisible theatre is that the audience is composed by unaware people that happen to be there at the time of the performance. The practice of invisible theatre has multiple educational implications including promoting social awareness and active audience participation. Indeed, one of the primary objectives of invisible theatre is to evoke spontaneous reactions from the audience and to provoke discussion and reflection with important social implications. Furthermore, it stimulates the development of empathy and critical reflection, the promotion of dialogue and change, and the empowerment of communities (Tolomelli, 2008). This approach aims to challenge the audience to think critically and act constructively to address social challenges. In this way, the theatrical experience becomes an educational

approach that looks at the educational process through a social and political lens and place it at the centre of pedagogical research (Aglieri & Aprigliano, 2019).

Although the practice of Invisible Theatre is nowadays performed by trained and experienced actors, its educational value together with that of Theatre of the Oppressed leads to think about and promote new didactic paradigms based on these kinds of practices that are formulated and designed for school contexts.

## **Conclusions**

In today's rapidly evolving world, it is crucial to recognize the potential of our surrounding environment as a hardly used resource for experiential learning. Traditional classroom-based education often constrained learning within four walls, neglecting the rich educational opportunities that urban spaces and the external environment could offer. The aim of the present paper was to propose and deepen the combination of outdoor education and performative arts as a potential and groundbreaking approach to engage children in holistic learning experiences, encompassing physical, cognitive, emotional, and social development. The benefits of outdoor education are manifold. It encourages a deeper connection between students and their natural environment, fostering physical activity, improving cognitive skills, and enhancing social interactions (Becker et al., 2017; Remmen & Iversen, 2023). The synergy between performative arts and outdoor education could create a powerful educational dynamic process which can be considered as the basis for an ecological learning process that is focused on the relationship between the individual and the surrounding environment (Tudge & Rosa, 2020).

Although performative arts and outdoor education are two widely analysed lines of research, their combination in well-structured school projects has not yet been adequately analysed. Hence, future research and investigation are needed to evaluate and gain practical feedback on the didactic contribution that the combination of these two practices can actually make in the educational development of students.

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