


BODY IMAGE AND LEARNING: THE IMPORTANCE OF CREATING OUTDOOR LEARNING SPACES TO PROMOTE WELL-BEING

IMMAGINE CORPOREA E APPRENDIMENTO: L'IMPORTANZA DI CREARE SPAZI FORMATIVI OUTDOOR PER FAVORIRE IL BENESSERE

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ABSTRACT

Body image is a crucial aspect of every individual's identity, and its impact on mental health and well-being cannot be underestimated. In the educational context, where students spend much of their time, it is essential to create environments that promote a healthy body image and contribute to their emotional and mental well-being. This paper, explores how the creation of outdoor educational spaces could play an important role in this process.

L'immagine corporea è un aspetto cruciale dell'identità di ogni individuo e il suo impatto sulla salute mentale e sul benessere non può essere sottovalutato. Nel contesto educativo, dove gli studenti trascorrono gran parte del loro tempo, è essenziale creare ambienti che promuovano un'immagine corporea sana e contribuiscano al loro benessere emotivo e mentale. Questa trattazione, esplora come la creazione di spazi educativi all'aperto potrebbe svolgere un ruolo importante in questo processo.

KEYWORDS

Body image, Education, Spaces, Self-awareness.
Immagine corporea , Educazione, Spazi, Consapevolezza di sé.

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Introduction

Body image, self-esteem and self-awareness are fundamental aspects of mental health and individual well-being (Szabó, 2015). Body image is an individual's subjective perception of his or her own body. It is influenced by cultural, social and personal factors (Cafri, 2005). Modern society often promotes unrealistic ideals of beauty, which can lead to a distorted perception of the body and problems with self-esteem. Self-esteem is the subjective assessment of one's worth and value, while self-awareness is the deep understanding of who one is, one's thoughts, emotions and behaviours (Rosenberg, 2015). These aspects are intimately linked to body image, as low self-esteem can be the result of a negative body perception.

Outdoor spaces offer a unique opportunity to improve body image, self-esteem and self-awareness. Nature provides an environment of unconditional acceptance, where people can feel free to be themselves, without judgment (Mirrahimi et al., 2011). Outdoor spaces engage all the senses, encouraging people to connect with their bodies in a deeper way. Exposure to the sun, the smell of nature, the sound of birds and the feel of the ground underfoot can all contribute to a more positive perception of the body. Outdoor physical activity promotes the release of endorphins, improving mood and self-esteem. In addition, engaging in outdoor sports and activities can help people develop a better body image through the resulting feeling of strength and vitality. Outdoor meditation, for example, allows a deep connection with one's mind and body. This practice helps develop self-awareness, promoting understanding of thoughts and emotions (Lardone et al., 2022).

Body image, self-esteem and self-awareness are deeply interconnected and influenced by one's surroundings. In this essay, we will explore the important role that outdoor spaces play in shaping and improving people's body image, self-esteem and self-awareness.

1. The body image

The body image can be conceptualised as a multidimensional construct characterised by a subjective mental schema of an individual's perception of his or her own bodily functioning (Smolak et al., 2008). Various scholars have tried to give a definition of body image. In 1935, Schilder denified body image as “the image of one's body in one's mind” (Schilder, 1935) and later Slade, described it as “the image we have in our mind of the shape, size, and dimensions of our body and the

feelings we have about these characteristics and about the individual parts of our body” (Slade, 1994). The complexity of this concept lies in the fact that it consists of several dimensions: behavioural, affective, perceptual and attitudinal. It is deduced that body image sees the person as a whole. Cash defines body image as “the set of perceptions and attitudes of each person related to their body, including thoughts, beliefs, feelings and behaviour” (Cash, 2012).

From a cognitive-behavioural perspective, we can identify two important aspects associated with the concept of body image, which are: “body image evaluation” and “body image investment” (Cash, 2012). The term “body image evaluation” refers to the degree of satisfaction/dissatisfaction with one's appearance, which depends on the congruence or discrepancy between the perception of one's physical appearance and internalised aesthetic ideals. On the other hand, “Body image investment” refers to the importance, from a psychological point of view, that individuals give to their physical appearance. The investment can be made in two ways: by valuing the management of one's appearance in order to look one's best or be more attractive (motivational salience); by judging one's appearance as an integral part of one's sense of self or one's worth (self-evaluation salience) (Cash et al., 2004).

The above-mentioned aspects highlight some important concepts, in particular, from a psychological point of view a discrepancy between the ideal body image and the perception of one's own body and appearance can be the basis for the expression of negative feelings and behaviour towards oneself. An unsatisfactory subjective perception of one's body lowers one's self-esteem and constitutes a feeling of dissatisfaction with one's body image that manifests itself through negative behaviour towards one's physical and mental health (Halliwell & Dittmar, 2006).

These negative feelings associated with a distortion of body image are in turn associated with the expression of negative behaviour such as the onset of eating disorders (Sattler et al., 2020). Factors that can affect the distortion of body image can be either perceptual (how I perceive my body, linked to a sense of self-esteem and well-being of my body) or affective (perception of my body as a function of the emotions experienced) (Shriver et al., 2020).

Disorders related to the perception of body image are especially frequent in young Western women. In fact, an analysis of the most recent literature shows a linear relationship between body mass index and body dissatisfaction in the female population, whereby as body weight increases, there is also a linear increase in the level of dissatisfaction with one's own body image (Milano et al., 2020). However, dissatisfaction with one's own body and body image issues are also increasingly

widespread in the male population. This prevalence can be attributed to the discrepancy between one's own body image and the ideal body image of muscular models. A study conducted by Cahill and Mussap showed how exposure to muscular models significantly decreases body satisfaction in males, while exposure to thin models decreases body satisfaction in females (Cahill & Mussap, 2007). Although the incidence of body image distortion is very high in young people, particularly young Western women, several studies have shown changes in body perception affect a wider population ranging from adolescence to adulthood (Gila et al., 1998).

Since body image distortion is an important risk factor for the onset of eating disorders, this topic is being studied by various scientific disciplines that tend to contribute to the explanation of the mechanisms underlying this distortion. In particular, studies in psychology have shown an association between body image dissatisfaction and affective/emotional disorders such as depression, anxiety and low self-esteem (Solomon-Krakus et al., 2017).

2. Analysis of socio-cultural factors related to the perception of body image

Sociocultural variables play a crucial role in the analysis of factors associated with body image development. Markey observed how the increase in body dissatisfaction in adolescence is associated with numerous changes that occur during the developmental period, including biological, social and psychological changes (Markey, 2010). Usually, the period of life when dissatisfaction with one's body image increases is puberty (Klump, 2013), during which physiologically the body tends to change under the action of growth hormones, contributing to an increase in body weight that contrasts with the ideal of thinness. Physical appearance becomes an expression of social status, while at the same time they experience increased self-awareness (Sebastian et al., 2008). The influence of peers, parents and the media becomes instrumental in a perceived discrepancy between the ideal body and one's own body, which in adolescents has been associated with an increase in depressive symptoms and disordered eating behaviour (Vandenbosch et al., 2022). An important contribution to the quest for a perfect, attractive body is rooted in gender differences. Studies on social behaviour argue that the need for high standards of physical beauty in women are motivated by the attempt to maintain a different hierarchical power between men and women (Ramati-Ziber et al., 2020). This suggests that despite the social redemption

of female figures, the role of women's bodies and physical appearance remains central in today's society. Indeed, it has been shown that the characteristic most valued in women is physical appearance, unlike men who are valued for their morals or ambition (Milano et al., 2020). Over the years, various theories have been proposed on how gender-related socio-cultural pressures can affect the perception of one's body image. In particular, the tripartite influence model of body image identifies peers, family and the media as the three sociocultural forces determining the encouragement to internalise the ideal of thinness (Thompson et al., 1999). Another key theory is that of objectification, according to which women engage in self-objectification by learning to observe their bodies and habitually monitor them. A construct of objectified body consciousness has also been proposed, according to which women tend to see their bodies as others see them by internalising cultural standards of beauty and experiencing a sense of body shame when the ideals of appearance are not achieved. It is inferred that certain cultural contexts induce an excessive cognitive, emotional and financial value on the idea of an attractive physique, triggering a sense of shame and anxiety about body image when these standards cannot be achieved (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). Although body image distortion and its behavioural correlates belong to people of all age groups, the pubertal growth period is particularly relevant. The pubertal period is characterised by complex biopsychosocial changes related to identity formation, the onset of loving relationships between peers, the search for sensations, rewards and increased self-awareness (Dahl et al., 2018). During puberty, rapid development of the brain's socio-affective circuits occurs under the control of hormonal fluctuations that accordingly modulate socio-affective experiences (Liparoti et al., 2021). Within the framework of these complex biopsychosocial changes, a culture of appearance develops that manifests itself among adolescents through behaviours aimed at improving physical appearance, encouraging social comparison and exacerbating body dissatisfaction (Jones et al., 2004). In the distortion of body image perception, social media plays a key role. Several scientific evidences suggest that attention to other people's photos is associated with body dissatisfaction in girls, consequently, it is associated with the onset of depressive symptoms and negative behaviour (Saiphoo & Vahedi, 2019). The growing number of influencers (individuals who gather a large following) on social media can influence the internalisation of appearance ideals, causing prevailing social models to influence girls' body image.

3. Body image and self-esteem

Current research is focusing on the identification of possible protective factors with regard to the influence young people have on their perception of their own body image. Specifically, particular attention has been paid to the self-esteem variable. Self-esteem can be defined as the value one gives oneself and the degree of self-appreciation or the way in which a person evaluates him/herself, likes (Blascovich et al., 1991). Rosenberg defined self-esteem as a "positive or negative attitude towards oneself" and as "the set of thoughts and feelings of the individual that have oneself as their object" (Rosenberg, 2015). When talking about self-esteem, two aspects must be taken into consideration: the value that the person assigns to himself and the role that the need for self-esteem plays. The value the person assigns to himself refers to a process of self-evaluation; the role played by the need for self-esteem consists of the tendency to seek positive evaluations and avoid negative ones. Although several studies have been conducted on the relationship between body image and self-esteem, the literature on the subject is conflicting (Mautner et al., 2000; O'Dea & Abraham, 2000; Tomori & Rus-Makovec, 2000). Some studies show a negative relationship between self-esteem and body dissatisfaction in women (Guiney & Furlong, 1999), other studies claim that the relationship between self-esteem and altered body perception is independent of gender (Ricciardelli et al., 2006). Girls with low self-esteem seem to be more vulnerable than people with high levels of self-esteem who are more capable of implementing strategies to cope with possible threats arising from the comparison with models of thinness proposed by the media (Durkin et al., 2007). On the contrary, Tiggemann (2005) suggests that it is not low self-esteem that makes adolescent girls more vulnerable to high body dissatisfaction, but conversely, it is high body dissatisfaction that negatively influences the level of self-esteem possessed (Tiggemann, 2005).

4. Body image education

Body image concerns an individual's perception of his or her own body. Students, particularly those of adolescent age, may be particularly sensitive to body image due to social and cultural pressures to conform to certain standards of beauty. Therefore, the need emerges to build a theoretical-methodological framework and create pedagogical interventions aimed at consolidating the relationship between the changing self and body, through intervention strategies solve problems related to the impact of change on self-concept, especially considering the fragility of body image due to biological and cultural changes. The purpose of such actions should be to professionally and consciously guide adolescents who are in distress caused by sudden changes, helping them reconfigure their identity, body schema and social environment. This requires the construction of emancipatory interventions

aimed at understanding and managing oneself and social relationships, encouraging self-reflection. These are pedagogical approaches geared toward individual change and empowerment through mindfulness and reflective action, which are fundamental to processes of personal and intersubjective reframing of experience. The pedagogical approach should consider the body as a tool for action in the world and a manifestation of individual freedom, it can become a cage if the conditions that support an effective relationship between the self and the environment are compromised. However, each transformation involves the construction of a new thought pattern that gives greater freedom or coherence to the situation. Each individual's cognitive structures are flexible and can incorporate change as an intrinsic part of learning dynamics. Through the pedagogical approach aimed at improving self-awareness, it is possible to work on resolving the discomforts and conflicts arising from adaptation to the environment. However, it is important to perceive transformation as an evolutionary and reconfigurative process rather than as a disruptive and irreversible event. The management of difficulties related to personal and bodily transformations can be addressed through conscious reflection on the relationship between self, the thought patterns used in understanding the world, and the surrounding environment. In order for these changes to be approached with serenity without resulting in disturbances of self-perception and one's body, the guidance of professionals with interdisciplinary skills is necessary. These professionals must help people develop the ability to build a positive view of themselves and interpret reality constructively through social interaction. Each professional brings his or her own perspective on the body and the changes that affect it, thus influencing the type of interventions aimed at addressing the difficulties arising from these changes. Therefore, it is necessary to develop a self-aware theory of psychophysical change that understands its structure, reasons, and potential as a basis for designing targeted interventions. For the self-awareness process to take place properly, professional expertise in the area of psychological coaching and personal change is needed. This process involves specific design that integrates theory (the view of the self and the body), situational and contextual variables (psychological, social, historical, and cultural), and the practitioner's conscious actions. Accompaniment involves the creation of relational contexts in which new categories of thinking and tools can be developed to redefine personal perceptions of one's situation. This process allows individuals to glimpse the possibility of personal growth, development and affirmation. Teachers and educators can play an important role in educating students about the importance of healthy body image. Lessons addressing this topic should focus on promoting self-esteem, critical understanding of media images, and awareness of the effect of

words and actions on others. Teachers and school staff should be trained to recognize signs of body image problems and to provide emotional support when needed. Awareness of the importance of creating a safe and supportive environment is critical to student well-being. Self-image and body image are influenced by the social environment, so the construction of a social context of reference through exchanges, comparisons and relationships allows people to redefine their identity in line with their needs to understand the world. Methodologically, this translates into the design of confrontational pathways within relational contexts, in which personal experience is used as a tool for constructing meanings. Hence, discomforts resulting from changes in the self and body can be addressed through two complementary approaches, both at the cognitive and social levels. The first approach involves mediation work, based on an epistemological view of the mind-body-environment relationship allow people to internalize new cultural tools and interpretive categories. The second approach focuses on confrontation and sharing, creating contexts for encounter, dialogue and exchange. The goal is to activate concrete opportunities to redefine one's social image by better understanding oneself, maintaining balance with one's surroundings and integrating into a larger system of relationships. In essence, the approach suggests a cooperative attitude in dealing with experience, cooperating with the environment to understand its mutability and collaborating with others to define one's role in an interactive social context. This cooperative dimension fosters construction and adaptation, which are essential to overcome the anxieties generated by change, thus avoiding situations of crisis and distress.

5. Promoting a Healthy Body Image in Outdoor Learning Spaces

The design of instructional spaces can play a crucial role in creating supportive environments for students. Spaces should be designed to be inclusive, welcoming and judgment-free. This can help reduce social pressure related to body image and promote self-acceptance. Educational spaces should celebrate diversity in all its forms, including diversity of body size and shape. Classroom walls can be decorated with images and quotes that promote self-acceptance and body diversity. This can help create an environment where each student feels valued for who they are, regardless of their body shape or size.

Among the various training spaces, outdoor training spaces are relevant, offering a number of unique benefits that can positively influence students' body image and well-being.

Outdoor learning spaces are characterized by being designed in a way that encourages contact with nature (Szczepanski, 2009). Being surrounded by nature has been shown to reduce stress, increase concentration, and improve mood. This can help reduce anxiety related to body image and promote an overall sense of well-being. Several scientific evidences have shown that contact with the outdoor environment has innumerable benefits in the area of learning, which include: improving language, cooperation (Johnson, 2007), improving academic achievement (Bell & Dymont, 2008), having opportunities for an experimental learning environment, creating new awareness, skills and values, having potential for sharing awareness, enabling students to practice deeper learning of ecological systems, promotion of awareness, observation skills and reasoning (Szczepanski, 2009).

Outdoor spaces provide opportunities for physical activity and movement. Regular physical activity not only promotes good physical health, but can also improve self-esteem and body perception. Spaces should be adaptable for a variety of physical activities, from yoga to running, so that students can choose the activity that best suits their preferences and goals.

Outdoor spaces can include areas for meditation, relaxation, and reflection. These places can be useful for students to develop better self-awareness and promote a positive body image. Through the art of outdoor meditation, people can experience a deep connection with their inner world and gain a better understanding of who they really are. Meditation invites inner listening. During practice, one focuses on breathing, bodily sensations and thoughts (Lardone et al., 2018, 2022). This process of mindful listening helps to recognize and better understand one's moods, emotions and needs. Meditation promotes acceptance without judgment. Instead of evaluating or condemning thoughts or emotions, one learns to observe them neutrally. This compassionate attitude toward oneself promotes greater self-esteem and self-acceptance. Meditation is effective in reducing stress and anxiety, enabling people to face life's challenges with greater serenity. A calm and centered mind can cope better with daily challenges. During meditation, greater body awareness is developed. This awareness can help recognize and relieve physical tension, improving one's relationship with one's body. Through regular practice, one can discover who one really is, identifying personal values, desires and goals. Meditation helps to manage emotions in a more balanced way. Learning to recognize and understand emotions allows one to react more consciously and less impulsively. Meditation is a vehicle for personal growth. Through the process of self-exploration and development of self-awareness, one can overcome inner obstacles and grow as an individual. Meditation is an inner journey that requires

constant practice and patience. However, the benefits it brings to self-awareness are profound and lasting. When you develop a deeper relationship with your inner being, you become more able to face life with wisdom, compassion and authenticity. Meditation thus becomes a powerful tool for achieving inner harmony and a better understanding of oneself.

Outdoor spaces offer a variety of environments, from gardens to natural areas, that can be used for educational purposes. This diversity can make learning more engaging and challenging. Outdoor spaces are enriched environments (Mathias & Kriegstein, 2023) useful for promoting students' comprehensive development and for creating a stimulating and inclusive learning environment. These spaces and resources stimulate students' creativity and innovation. Conducting hands-on activities in these places fosters deeper self-understanding and promotes problem solving. Enriched environments promote students' independence and autonomy. They provide spaces where students can explore their interests and pursue personal projects. Conducting school activities in a stimulating and enriched environment such as outdoor spaces can increase students' motivation and engagement in learning. Students are more likely to actively participate when they feel inspired by their surroundings. They allow for complex and evolving experiences.

In summary, the outdoor environment is crucial to cultivating a dynamic, challenging and inclusive learning culture. It provides students with the resources and opportunities they need to grow as individuals, acquire life skills, and prepare for an ever-evolving future while maintaining firm self-awareness and self-awareness.

Conclusions

Body image is a challenge faced by many people, but it is important to remember that each of us has the power to develop a healthier perception of ourselves. Accepting one's body and promoting a healthy body image is an act of self-love that can significantly improve quality of life and overall well-being. It is a personal journey that takes time, but can lead to greater self-confidence and better mental health. Creating educational spaces that foster a healthy body image is critical to students' well-being and the creation of a positive educational environment. Students need to feel accepted and valued for who they are, regardless of their physical appearance. The design of instructional spaces, body image education, and emotional support are all key to promoting a positive relationship with the body and creating a solid foundation for learning and personal development. Ultimately,

the goal is to create educational spaces that nurture not only students' minds, but also their bodies and souls. Designing outdoor educational spaces that promote a healthy body image is essential for student well-being. These spaces can provide a supportive environment, promote physical activity, allow contact with nature, and provide places for reflection and meditation. Ultimately, the goal is to create an educational environment in which students feel accepted, valued and inspired to develop a positive relationship with their bodies. Only through judicious design of outdoor learning spaces and a commitment to body image education can we hope to achieve this goal and promote student well-being.

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