

## OUTDOOR EDUCATION AND GEOGRAPHICAL EDUCATION

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### **ABSTRACT**

*This paper focuses on the reflection on the relationship between values and methodological principles of Outdoor Education and spatial and geographical education perspectives, especially in pre-school and primary school, which relates to the age between 3 and 10 years. Outdoor Education is an educational practice that is already rooted in the philosophical thought of the 16<sup>th</sup> and the 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, from John Locke to Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and in the pedagogical thought, in particular Friedrich Fröbel, and it has now a quite stable tradition in Northern Europe countries. In Italy, however, there are still few experiences and they usually do not have a systematic and structural modality, but rather a temporarily and experimentally outdoor organization. In the first part, this paper focuses on the reasons that justify a particular attention to educational paths that favour outdoors activities, providing also a definition of outdoor education and highlighting its values. It is also essential to understand that educational programs in open spaces, such as a forest or simply the schoolyard, surely offers the possibility to learn geographical situations. Therefore, the question that arises is how to finalize the best stimulus that the spatial location guarantees for the acquisition of knowledge, skills and abilities about space and geography.*

**Keywords:** *outdoor education, geographical education, teaching and learning geography*

## **INTRODUCTION**

“Outdoor education is a response to the natural attraction that children feel towards nature; it means to fulfil their right to explore and discover, it means to learn in an active way by means of the five senses; to live your creativity taking inspiration from what nature has to offer; exploring your capacity to move and thus also your confidence.” ([www.sabatoseira.it/ciucci-ribelli/progetto-outdoor/2015](http://www.sabatoseira.it/ciucci-ribelli/progetto-outdoor/2015)). These words about an educational proposal in the outdoors that benefits children attending kindergarten and primary schools in Imola, Emilia Romagna (Italia), sum up in a pragmatic way and with evident operational consequences, in a very efficient way, the meaning of Outdoor education. Furthermore, they are the starting point of this paper, which wants to clarify the main characteristics of outdoor educational practices, in particular reflecting on the virtuous connection between outdoor and geographical education, that is surely one of the most involved branches of learning and that can benefit a lot from the spreading of this practice.

In fact, the shortage or lack of educational experiences in the outdoor, in the Italian context, within the school time, but also afterschool, poses an important preliminary question. The belief that the outdoor educational paths, particularly those with a high natural degree, but not only in a natural space, have become stronger and stronger. They are a necessity, overcoming the concept of mere and recommendable opportunity. In fact, to think about it as a mere opportunity implies the possibility to choose among different options: to organize regular outdoor experiences, to carry them out only occasionally, especially when weather conditions allow them, or not to consider them at all. Since we are firmly convinced that this educational practice is valuable and necessary, we consider only the first two options, moving progressively toward a unique choice, the one that implies outdoor educational activity on a regular basis, and confines indoor activities only to brief moments in the school schedule.

It has to be said that all the following considerations refer especially to pre-school and primary school, that in Italy is addressed to children from 3 years old to 10 years old, but it is known that in some important educational contexts, such as playschool, this approach has already taken place, and probably it would be recommendable to use it also for older students.

## **HISTORICAL REFERENCES IN LITERATURE**

Outdoor education is certainly not an idea which popped up out of nowhere in the last decades, especially in Northern European schools. It has its origin in previous philosophical and pedagogical thinking, in particular from the late 17<sup>th</sup> century to the 20<sup>th</sup> century (D'Ascenzo, 2014). For instance, referring only to the most important figures in the worldwide scene, it is

possible to trace some significant basis already in John Locke's thinking, in the late 17<sup>th</sup> century. In fact, in his work *Some Thoughts concerning Education* (1693), Locke underlined the importance of spending some time in the open, even in winter. Only by acting in accordance with this indication, children would have grown well, and not only on a physical development level. "By this, he [the child] will accustom himself to heat and cold, shine and rain; all which if a man's body will not endure, it will serve him to very little purpose in this world: and when he is grown up, it is too late to begin to get him used to it" (Locke, 2013, p. 26). In the second half of 18<sup>th</sup> century, Jean Jacques Rousseau and Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi, respectively their works on education – *Emile or On Education* (1762) and *Diary on the Child Education* (1774) – insist on the role of Outside schools, on how nature is an essential teacher, and how the sensory organs, the organs of touch and movement could represent some invaluable means for learning. So "You will bring your child in the classroom free of nature, by the hand, and will you do a lesson on the mountain and in the valley. In this outside school his ear will also open to teachings which you intend to give him. He must feel completely here is nature that teaches and that you almost limit yourself, tacitly and quietly, to follow it step by step with your art" (Pestalozzi, 1970, p. 65).

In this short review of famous precursors, we must include also Friedrich Fröbel. In 1826, the inventor of the kindergarten published *The Man Education*, where he asserts that the observation of nature is fundamental in achieving solid knowledge, surely in geographical terms, and in developing respectful and aware behaviours, behaviours of responsible and active citizenship, as we would call them nowadays. In fact, the child "must first of all, during his long strolls, learn to understand his valley, from where it begins to where it ends. He must walk through the side valleys in their ramifications. He must follow the flow of the brook and the little river from their source to their mouth, and understand why they acquire different aspects according to the places. He must walk on the ridge of the mountains, to have a clear glimpse of their ramification. [...] He must observe in place, where the products of mountains, valleys and plains, of earth and water have their origins. [...] In their strolls and trips, the young men must see animals and plants almost in their usual living conditions watch them in their places, where they usually live, how some are constantly exposed to the sun and almost suck light and heat, while other seek darkness and shadows, the chill and humidity" (Fröbel, 1967, pp. 218-219). Finally, what we call Outdoor education finds its origin also in John Dewey's thinking, who highlighted how the traditional spaces of education, constituted by school desks, blackboards and schoolyards, seem sufficient and effective for learning, but freedom of movement and some occasions to have first-hand experiences would prove to be essential and invaluable (*Experience and Education*, 1938).

## **OUTDOOR EDUCATION: CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK, FEATURES AND ADVANTAGES**

The most significant experiences of Outdoor education, and consequently some of the most important theoretical reflections on this peculiar layout of school, take place in a much more organized and widespread way in Northern Europe and some places in the English-speaking countries. In particular, we mention the Centre for Environmental and Outdoor Education (Linköping University, Sweden) and the European Institute for Outdoor Adventure Education and Experiential Learning, in the University of Edinburgh, Scotland. In recent years, also in Italy, in the University of Bologna and some schools in the region Emilia Romagna (especially in the province of Modena), a complex group has developed around these subjects, with a rather rich scientific literature and a quite widespread educational action of popularization addressed to educators and teachers. Consequently, in this paper there will be constant references to the authors belonging to those centres of theoretical formulation (Bortolotti, 2014; Ceciliani, 2014; Farné, 2014; Szczepanski, 2009; Szczepanski, 2006; Higgins and Nicol, 2002).

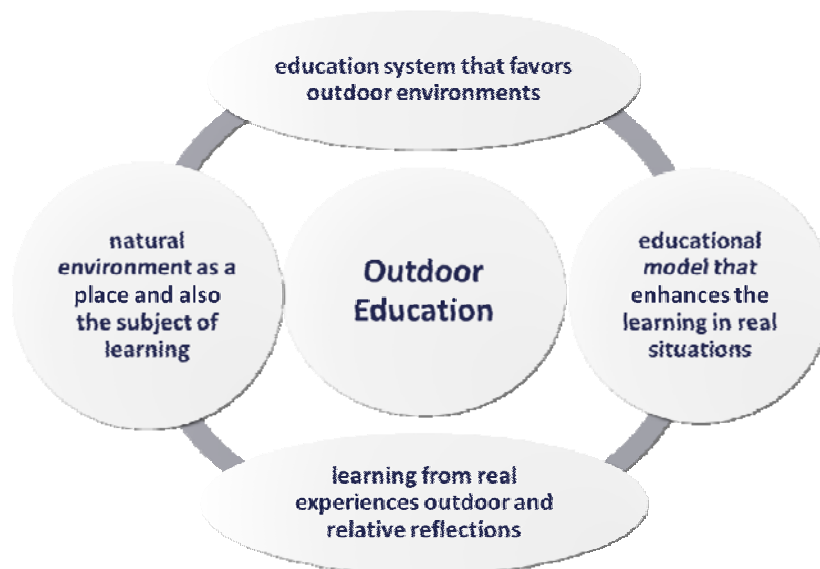
As we have anticipated in the introduction, nowadays, outdoor education is a necessity. Somehow schools must make up for the lacks of modern lifestyle. Recreational activities often take place indoor, or in little schoolyards, and the rare moments that the children spend outside, if we can use that term, are usually devoted to the trips from home to school, from school to their grandparents' home, from their grandparents' home to the gym or swimming pool, and then back home.

The effort to provide some occasions of highly educational experience is consequently very important. It has to be said that the aim is not to suggest or promote extraordinary adventures, but rather the open spaces as stimulating places of learning, those that once hosted our parents and our generation, those places that surely younger generations, and the latest generation even more, have seen less often (Farné, 2014).

If we want to provide a possible definition of Outdoor education, it is worth referring to the one proposed by the National Centre for Outdoor Environmental Education and Health in the University of Linköping, in 2004. We have chosen this definition because it underlines how the learning environment is not strictly the natural environment (in Swedish schools, it is the case of the woods, as in Sweden and Northern countries this is where most outdoor activities take place), but also the complexity of socio-cultural and environmental contexts peculiar to every territory where a community lives and has an active school. In fact, Fröbel, almost predicting the possible core of geographical knowledge, i.e. the strict relationship between nature and man's culture, emphasized that: "in these excursions he should see man, too, in his unity with nature: first in his daily life, his occupations and callings, later in his social circumstances, his character, his way of thinking and action, his manners, customs, and language" (Fröbel, 1967, p. 220). The outdoor practice could allow and promote to plunge in the complex and variegated daily reality, thus preventing schools from opening to outside

spaces only in an indirect way by using educational intermediaries who, however, are effective and important figures, sometime irreplaceable.

This implies that we can associate multiple meanings to the suggestion of the Outdoor school, and it is considered adequate to underline the validity of all those that will follow. In fact, Outdoor education presents itself as an essential value in an educational system that enables and favours experiences in natural environments, but at the same time also as an educational model that promotes learning within real contexts that must be conceived as actual activators of experiences and effective reflections on them. As a consequence, outdoor activities turn out to be the very driving force of learning paths. Furthermore, with the outdoor practice, nature becomes the favourite space – the container – where educational and formative activities can be carried out, but at the same time the object itself – the content – of teaching and learning propositions (Fig. 1).



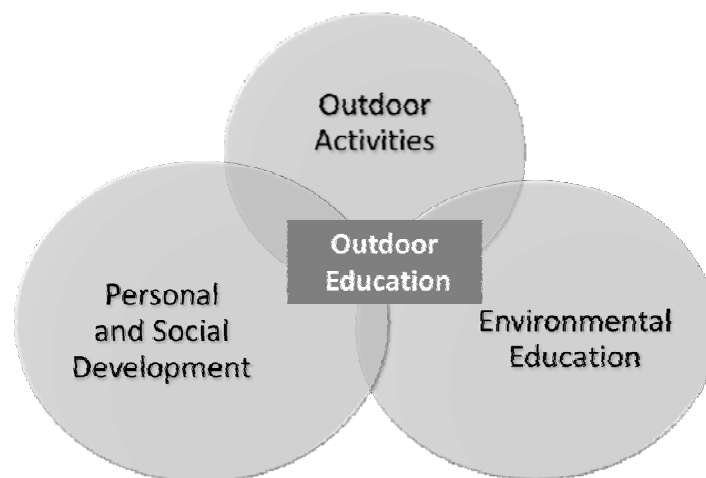
**Fig. 1.** Meanings of Outdoor education

By taking inspiration from the method that can be called *learning by doing* suggested by Dewey (1974) essentially from the principles of the active school, it has to be said that in those situations where the practice of Outdoor education is not referred to with that label, that does not imply that its values are not evident: they are present, functional and effective, only concealed under a different name. For instance, the assumptive work within the *learning by doing* model or in the British educational model, that is based on the open air education, the reflection on sensism, use and development of pluri-sensorial modalities, or the recourse to natural environment with educational aims, even if rarely (D'Ascenzo, 2014).

What could be the values and the possible advantages of Outdoor education? First of all, the variety of learning opportunity that the open spaces provide, with the possibility to carry out free and/or planned

activities and to improve the use of pluri-sensoriality. The second benefit refers to the development of adaptability and respect concerning the elements, natural or not, that open spaces provide. An important result refers also to the development of children's independence, which does not mean a complete independence, that would be impossible and even not desired, but the development of a progressive ability to become aware of what rules are, of why, how and when we need to respect them; plus, the development of active and lively thinking, suitable for understanding the situations where one can freely express oneself. Finally, outdoor experiences hold undoubted opportunities to strengthen the collaboration with teachers and educators, as well as with other people that can interact in the outside places, and this guarantees also a development on a sociability level.

In fact, we cannot forget that outdoor educational experiences take place mainly in a three dimensional field, helping to achieve basic competences connected to the independence degree (personal, orientation, judgement). The first field is related to outdoor activity, with all the probable advantages that have already been discussed, the second one refers to the possibility to put into practice environmental education in the field, the third one refers to the great opportunity of students' personal and social development (Fig. 2).



**Fig. 2.** Three dimensions of Outdoor education

Source: European Institute for Outdoor Adventure Education and Experiential Learning – Higgins and Nicol model, 2002

Taking into account the strengthening of independence, together with overcoming one's limits, it is worth underlining that putting into practice outdoor activities implies the simultaneous involvement of the outer and objective reality (physical field) and of the inner and subjective reality (psychic field). Referring to the example of the Italian school, it is essential to underline that the main goals of pre-school and primary school focus on the achievement of independence, which, together with identity (personal and territorial) and competence (achieved through the exploration and

reflection of what has been explored), lead to the effective use of citizenship, that in this context can be defined as the ability of taking care of everyday living places (Mortari, 2006).

### **OUTDOOR EDUCATION FOR GEOGRAPHICAL EDUCATION**

In the last part of this paper we will highlight, in reference to the Italian school, what could be the network connecting outdoor and geographical education, and how they could be manifested. Fröbel clearly suggested that the acquisition of substantial geographical knowledge could come from first-hand experiences of observation. Examining the student's role, he stated that he needed direct observation of the main phenomena of the geographical space, and try to understand its dynamism on geomorphological and naturalist-environment levels (Fröbel, 1967).

Some methodological principles of the discipline, or rather of geographical teaching, are certainly consistent with what has been said about the practice of Outdoor education. In fact, observation, experimentation/experience (direct contact with various territorial contexts), comparison and research of the interconnections, besides the role of the playful part, represent the basis of the geographical method and, at the same time, can be put into practice in a valid and suitable way by means of first-hand approach in open spaces. Better still, the outdoor practice could definitely guarantee a more solid and efficient geographical learning.

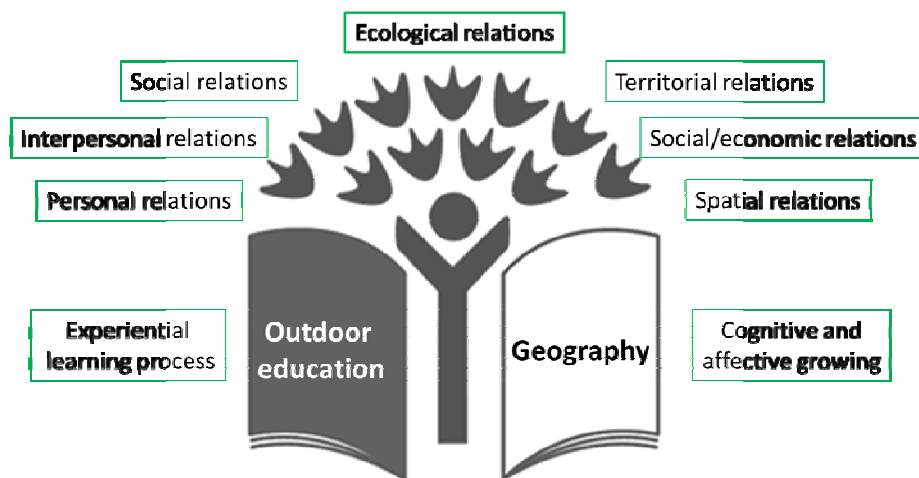
Referring again to the example of the Italian school, we can notice that among the different goals of competence to be achieved and the objectives for the development of the competences indicated in the normative documents, included both in pre-school and in primary school, most are ascribable to pre-geographical and geographical knowledge. Thus, in the Italian school context, among the several main goals to be achieve, there is the observation of natural phenomena and of the life cycles that set them in motion (field of competence: the self and the other), outdoor activity (field of competence: the body and movement) and the first-hand observation of living beings in their environment (field of competence: the discovery of the world). All these indicate some competences, and, for their achievement, the objectives of geographical learning highly contribute.

Moving to pre-school and primary school (6-10 year old children), the promotion of significant experiences in order to develop some behaviours suitable for taking care of the environment, planning and developing proper actions, for learning how to relate and use in an adequate way the different spatial contexts, and the awareness that the territory is an important resource, are goals consistent with geographical competences. They are objectives that could be more easily and profoundly achieved by enlarging and intensifying the outdoor activities or by applying some of the principles of outdoor activity even within educational paths organized in a "more traditional" way. In fact, the strengthening of those objectives can only, or

above all, come from a systematic outdoor practice, able to address them in an adequate way within the process of citizenship education.

## CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, deciding to take inspiration on a graphic level from the tree metaphor, which is very important in the school of thought of Outdoor education (Priest, 1986), we want to underline that the proposal of outdoor education can prove to be particularly functional and can agree with geographical learning and teaching (Fig. 3). But we must conceive geography starting from a holistic interpretation, overcoming a strictly disciplinary vision. We could argue that the actions and values that distinguish the outdoor practice and the primary values in spatial education and geographical science can represent the part of the trunk and the luxuriant foliage, constantly revived by the lymph that earns its livelihood from a radical apparatus of motor and sensory activity, with the idea of one living system rich in flowers and fruits (Bortolotti, 2014).



**Fig. 3.** Outdoor education and geographical education

Source: elaboration on Priest and Gilwern Outdoor Centre

In short, there can be two conclusive messages that it is worth emphasizing. On the one hand, referring to school education, we confirm the strict relationship between the choice to favour outdoor spaces and the subjects and methods in spatial-geographical education. On the other, by virtue of the same relationship, we need to assign to geography a big role of interdisciplinary, and somehow a central role in the variety of the formative offer proposed by schools. From the considerations set out above,



it appears an idea of geography at school in contrast with what, at least for the Italian example, the existing legislation and subsequently the didactic practice seem to record in most situations.

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