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Introduction

Outdoor Education – Between Experience, Place, and New Challenges for Pedagogy

For many years, direct human contact with nature has been a subject of interest for scholars across various disciplines, who highlight its impact on the multifaceted development, well-being, and quality of functioning of the individual. This relationship is of particular importance for children and young people, whose understanding of the world is shaped primarily through activity, experience, and direct engagement with reality. Drawing on the concept of biophilia, Edward O. Wilson (1984) points to the innate human tendency to seek contact with the natural world and derive specific values from it. However, this is not merely a matter of a biological need for contact with nature; the way a person experiences the world is inextricably linked to opportunities for engaging in activities, observing, experimenting, solving problems, and assigning meaning to one's own experiences.

Contact with nature is therefore significant in education not only because it provides children with specific experiences, but also because it alters the conditions under which those experiences arise. Consequently, outdoor education – understood as the purposeful and intentional organization of the learning process outside the traditional classroom setting, in direct engagement with the natural, social, and cultural environment – takes on particular importance. Its essence lies in creating conditions that allow the learner to actively explore reality, engage with it through multiple senses, take independent action, test their own judgments against reality, and construct and

reconstruct meanings through direct contact with the world (Beames et al., 2012; Priest, 1986).

Classic approaches to *outdoor education* emphasize the multidimensional nature of the relationships formed between the individual, other people, and the environment. It is viewed as a field that integrates adventurous, interpersonal, and intrapersonal experiences with an understanding of the relationships within the natural environment (see, e.g., Priest, 1986). This perspective reveals that education outside the classroom cannot be reduced to mere physical activity or nature education; rather, a crucial dimension is the development of relationships – with oneself, with others, and with the world – a concept also grounded in classical pedagogical theories. These theories highlight the role of experience as a key mechanism of learning. The educational value of experience, as noted by Dewey (1938), lies in its power to drive further action, reflection, and the reorganization of one's existing understanding of reality. Kolb (1984), meanwhile, defines learning as a process in which concrete experience, reflective observation, conceptualization, and active experimentation are closely interconnected. Thus, one can posit that the outdoor environment ceases to be merely a setting for activities and instead becomes a source of experiences, issues, and situations that demand cognitive engagement from the learner.

Outdoor education thus offers an opportunity to move away from a transmission-based model of learning in favor of learning through action and direct engagement with reality. A child comes to understand the world when being able to actively relate to it – observing its properties, making changes, and testing the consequences of their own actions. In this sense, education conducted outside the confines of a school or preschool can create particularly favorable conditions for constructing knowledge based not only on the teacher-student relationship but also on the student's interaction with objects, phenomena, and artifacts in the environment. Learning understood in this way is active, exploratory, and mediational, with the opportunity to independently arrive at meanings serving as a key element (Bruner, 2007; Hakkarainen & Paavola, 2009).

The space in which the educational process unfolds can itself hold pedagogical significance, as it never serves merely as a neutral backdrop for student activity. Specific locations – along with their characteristics, accessibility, diversity, and degree of openness – create distinct opportunities for action, observation, communication, and problem-solving. As noted by Waite (2007, 2011) and Wattchow and Brown (2011), the experience of place can be a vital element of the learning process, enabling the integration of knowledge with personal experience, memory, emotions, and specific social and cultural contexts. Thus, *outdoor education* can lead not only to an understanding of the natural world but also to a deeper understanding of one's own place in the world.

In light of the preceding discussion, the question arises as to what “nature” actually is within the context of outdoor education. Is it merely a space where the educational process unfolds? Is it a source of knowledge and experience? Or can it also be regarded as a partner in human educational activity? Attempting to answer these questions requires a non-anthropocentric approach to education. Latour’s (1993) ideas, which challenge the traditional dichotomy between nature and society, offer an important point of reference in this regard. He points out that the social and material worlds form networks of mutual relationships involving people, objects, technologies, and other environmental elements. From this perspective, objects and the environment are not merely a passive backdrop for human action; rather, they actively shape what people do and how they understand reality. Arguments for a non-anthropocentric approach to education can also be found in the philosophy of Albrecht (2019); drawing on the concept of the “Symbiocene,” he highlights the need to reintegrate humanity with other forms of life and to cultivate a way of living based on interdependence and symbiosis. This perspective poses a fundamental question for pedagogy: can education not only prepare individuals to function in the world but also shape ways of coexisting responsibly with it?

It is precisely here that *outdoor education* reveals a broader potential that extends beyond mere methodology. It is not merely a specific way of organizing activities but can be viewed as a mindset regarding the relationship between the individual, education, and the environment. Its significance stems not only from the appeal of conducting activities outdoors but also from the opportunity to structure the educational experience differently. Direct engagement with reality enables students to observe its complexity, recognize interdependencies, formulate questions, make decisions, and experience the consequences of their own actions (Beames et al., 2012; Wattchow & Brown, 2011).

The literature highlights numerous benefits of education conducted in natural environments. These encompass the development of cognitive, social, and emotional competencies. Cited benefits include, among others, enhanced self-esteem, autonomy, and a sense of agency; the development of self-control, perseverance, cooperation and problem-solving skills; as well as positive effects on the mental and physical well-being of children and young people (Dillon & Dickie, 2012; Malone & Waite, 2016; Waite, 2011). The importance of the natural environment for children’s cognitive and emotional functioning is further supported by research demonstrating links between contact with nature and attention, self-regulation, and stress reduction (Taylor et al., 2002; Wells, 2000; Wells & Evans, 2003).

However, it must be strongly emphasized that merely being outside the school building does not automatically lead to meaningful learning. *Outdoor education* can easily be reduced to a simple walk, an excursion, or an engaging way to pass the time,

without bringing about any significant change in the student's knowledge. The quality of education outside the classroom is determined not only by the location and contact with nature but, above all, by the way the experience is designed, the degree of student autonomy, the nature of the activities undertaken, the opportunity for reflection, and the teacher's role in organizing the learning environment (Beames et al., 2012; Waite, 2011).

This is precisely why the development of *outdoor education* brings to light a number of issues and dilemmas. One of these is the tension between student autonomy and the need for control and safety. Another concerns the relationship between freedom of action and the purposeful nature of the educational process. Also significant is the question of the limits of teacher intervention: when should the teacher organize, instruct, and supervise student activities, and when should they step back, allowing students to observe, experiment, make decisions, and learn independently – including through making mistakes? Outdoor education also highlights the issue of risk particularly clearly; while risk can be a source of valuable experiences, it simultaneously demands responsible management and consideration of children's actual developmental capabilities (Brown, 2008; Little & Wyver, 2008).

One of the key dilemmas in outdoor education is accessibility. If it is to constitute a significant element of the modern educational process, it should be accessible to all students, regardless of their abilities, developmental needs, or ways of functioning. How, then, can educational environments be designed to foster the individualization of the learning process? In this context, it is crucial to design outdoor experiences in a way that takes into account student diversity and their capacity to participate in educational activities (Beames et al., 2012).

The question of the boundaries between schools or preschools and the surrounding world is also emerging as a significant pedagogical issue. Traditional educational organization relies heavily on the conviction that the classroom is the proper place for learning and that the teacher, the textbook, and prepared instructional materials remain the primary sources of knowledge. Yet, the reality outside the school or preschool can be viewed as a unique cognitive laboratory – a space where the learner not only receives information but also has the opportunity to seek, verify, and interpret it. In this sense, outdoor education challenges the assumption that schools and preschools are the sole privileged sites of education, prompting a redefinition of the relationships between the school or preschool, the learner's living environment, and the learning process (Beames et al., 2012; Waite, 2011).

Contemporary reflection on *outdoor education* increasingly moves beyond the question of whether it is worthwhile to teach outside the classroom, shifting instead toward a far more fundamental question: what kind of education is needed by a student navigating a world of social, cultural, and ecological interdependencies? *Outdoor*

education can serve as a vital arena for seeking solutions to the limitations of the traditional educational model – a model characterized by the separation of knowledge from experience, the student from reality, and the school from the living environment (Louv, 2014; Wattchow & Brown, 2011).

This issue takes on particular significance in the context of the observed reduction in children's direct contact with nature. Louv (2014) highlights the cultural and social factors driving the gradual distancing of children from natural spaces for activity. Modern childhood is increasingly organized within environments that are controlled, formalized, and subject to specific safety requirements. From an educational perspective, this implies not only a restriction on opportunities for spontaneous activity but also a reduction in chances to directly experience the natural world and build a personal relationship with it.

At the same time, caution is needed against treating *outdoor education* as a universal solution to all the problems of modern education. It requires critical reflection on its assumptions, possibilities and limitations. It becomes necessary to ask what practices actually lead to valuable learning, what conditions must be met for the experience to acquire educational significance, and what competencies a teacher should have in order to create an environment conducive to students' activity, autonomy and responsibility. Equally important is the question about the place of *outdoor education* in the formal education system: whether it will remain a set of local and often occasional initiatives, or whether it can become a full-fledged element of the organization of the educational process (Beames et al., 2012; Waite, 2011).

These issues are of particular importance for the education of children, for whom direct experience, physical activity, contact with real-world objects and phenomena, and the opportunity for independent action are crucial conditions for development. At the same time, the preschool and early school settings reveal a tension between the need to explore the world through active engagement and the practice of organizing education within highly controlled settings confined to institutional spaces. Research on early childhood education indicates that the potential of the outdoor environment remains underutilized (Ernst, 2014; Maynard & Waters, 2007; Tuuling et al., 2019).

Contemporary pedagogy is thus faced with the need to rethink the categories of place, experience, environment, and the human relationship with nature. In this process, *outdoor education* can serve not merely as another teaching method or strategy, but as a distinct field of inquiry where questions regarding learning, development, autonomy, well-being, social relations, accessibility, and ecological responsibility converge. Its significance should therefore be considered in both practical and theoretical terms – as a challenge to established ways of defining educational space, the roles of teacher and student, and the very process of knowledge construction..

This is precisely the perspective adopted by this issue of the journal: *Outdoor Education – Problems, Dilemmas and New Directions*. Its aim is not merely to highlight the benefits of education conducted outside school walls, but to engage in a more complex reflection on its place within contemporary pedagogy. Outdoor education emerges as a field where tensions between nature and culture, autonomy and control, experience and knowledge transmission, safety and risk, individualization and standardization, and local practice and systemic solutions become particularly evident. Recognizing these tensions can serve as a starting point for a deeper examination of the future directions of contemporary education.

In this sense, the question of *outdoor education* becomes a question about the school and the preschool themselves – about their boundaries, functions, and capacity to respond to a changing reality. It also becomes a question of whether education can prepare individuals not only to function effectively in the world but also to understand its interdependencies and participate responsibly in shaping it. It is from this perspective that *outdoor education* can be viewed as a significant area of contemporary pedagogical reflection – not because it proposes a simple departure from the classroom, but because it compels us to rethink where, how, and with whom learning should take place.

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