

OUTDOOR LEARNING IN-SERVICE TRAINING FOR TEACHERS A CASE STUDY FROM PRATO

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Abstract

Children today spend significantly less time playing outdoors than their parents did. Therefore, great attention must be paid by professionals to face this educational challenge, especially within early childhood scholastic contexts. That is a particular task for Outdoor Education (OE), a field of practice and research traditionally associated with personal and social development, and environmental education. The field has rich histories in some European countries (e.g. UK, Scandinavian nations, Germany), but nowadays is also more common in Italy, from where this Case Study comes. The aim for this study was to reinforce teachers' awareness about how best to use the outdoors at school, to construct a supportive context for activities, to extend their classrooms into the school grounds and local neighbourhood. Our article aims to enable educators to understand also the philosophical underpinnings of an educational model based on experiential Outdoor Learning (OL) in authentic contexts, which can be adopted and adapted by educators across Europe.

KEYWORDS: Outdoor Learning, Active Training, Case Study, Experiential Approach.

1. Introduction

When back in the city because summer holiday is over, many children live a drastic reduction of physical movement, because games like chasing, climbing, seeking and hiding, are more difficult within an urban contest. It's a shame, because spontaneous games play an important role in child development, such as the physiological evolution of nerve plots and cerebral cortex. They stimulate motor skills, and further both cognitive and emotional/affective processes (NICE, 2008).

Starting from the very beginning of life, a baby's movements become gradually more and more precise, so she/he needs practice and therefore, of

course, concrete opportunities for exercise with her/his body. Probably, we might consider that embodiment is the key developing aspect, reinforced perhaps by enjoyment (White, 2011, p. 2). Therefore, in planning daily outdoor routines in kindergartens it is important to allow room for motor games and sensory activities, in particular for those spontaneous activities that children are keen to create and do, if they have space and time available enough.

Applying an educational model based on embodiment, play and games, a multi-sensory and experiential approach, learning by doing and so on, in our In-Service Teacher Training we did as much active experience as we could, followed by debriefing (Greenway, 1993), a progressive method that allowed us to collect a lot of interesting feed-back, so that now it's possible to consider them data to present, discuss and share. This description process is consistent with the method called *Triangulation* by Stake (1995, p. 107), who claims it's one of the main useful dimensions in Case Study, his commonly known research design. Triangulation is able to make sharp connections on several issues, between subjects who are in a relationship, such as: trainers, trainees and children (and their parents) – in our case, in background there was also a powerful relation with the out-of-doors, of course...

1.1. Outdoor Education in Theory: an Active Framework

The “grandfather” of active education is John Dewey, mainly thanks to his *Learning by Doing* concept, which underpins the basic theoretical assumptions of OE as well. Many other influential authors had given their legacy to OE (Joyce, 2012), e. g. Jean Jacques Rousseau for his ideal of a “natural” place for learning far from the civilized world, where a child can freely express and develop his original capability; then there was Friedrich Froebel who created the Kindergarten, following the path of his master Pestalozzi, in the UK Margaret McMillan (1919) adopted this new approach at the beginning of XIX Century with her *Nursery School* model.

Therefore OE has become a crucial point of social policies in Northern Europe, focused more and more on the design of specific interventions for individual and social well-being. In recent years, a particular focus on respect for nature and the environment is spreading, and despite the extended and increasingly massive urbanization, a part of society considers it important to devote attention to and to use the environment as an educational resources.

Moreover, OE aims to consider learning as an action-oriented process, emphasizing both development and knowledge of an active subject; anyway, a clear understanding of the term OE is more than an exercise in semantic: a proper definition “it can help uncover some of the deepest and most longstanding problems with education itself” (Quay, Seaman, 2013, p. 1). The following can be considered a synthetic and useful definition for our purposes: “*Outdoor education is a direct, simple method of learning that extends the*

curriculum out-of-doors for the purpose of learning. It is based on the discovery approach to learning and it appeals to the use of the senses – audio, visual, taste, touch and smell – for observation and perception” (Lewis, 1975, p. 9).

Anyway, two essential OE features are *experiential learning* and *place-based* approach, and a coherence between these processes both inside and outside. Experience consists not only in a direct sensory exposition, but rather in a cycle where also reflection plays an outstanding role. It takes into account the aesthetic and affective dimensions, not only the logical and cognitive ones (“Aesthetic experience is where we live – it is the way we are *being* a person, *here and now*; Quay, Seaman, 2013, p. 82). And so, it’s all about not merely doing activities, knowing subjects and being occupied, but about organizing children’s life, especially school life, as a habitat in which to learn from direct experience. It is about following place-based learning instead of a “no-matter-place” in which to learn abstract lessons with a remote reference to possible living to be done in the future.

To summarize this first part, OE is based on two main approaches:

1. Learning methods that take place as the interface between experience and reflection, based on actual experiences in real-life situations;
2. An Interdisciplinary conceptualization which implies, among other things:
 - a. learning spaces extended beyond the classroom and including natural environment and cultural heritage;
 - b. emphasis on the relationship between sensory experience and knowledge, giving great importance to where they take place.

Dahlgren & Szczepanski (1998, p. 26) argue that "*reflection is needed to transform experience into knowledge. The distinctive character and identity of OE is based on the potential of awareness education, which may qualify for significant learning. The distinctive character of Outdoor Education is that of a sensory - experiential approach to the psychological development of the child and his (sic) learning*".

1.2 Description of an Outdoor Learning Training for Crèche and Nursery School Teachers

In recent years, OL has become the subject of research which demonstrates the positive effects of the practices of teaching methodology in educational contexts, and the psycho- physical, emotional and cognitive development of the child. Through sensory and experiential learning, it is shown that the OL has positive effects on motor and language skills, leadership, problem-solving, self and contextual awareness, and collaborative attitudes (Higgins, Nicol, 2002).

Regular use of playground and garden, day-after-day and through concrete participation, is the most suitable way for a preschool child to develop

her/his intelligence, to answer the needs of physical engagement; and one of the best ways available for teachers to understand and learn the activity needs of touching, moving, resting, solving problems and being occupied in one's own project, set off by internal curiosity and not by follow external instructions. Playing outdoors a child can also meet other children and do with them those group games which are almost impossible to do indoors, so that children become aware of both their capabilities and limitations, so that they learn to deal with unexpected issues and related emotions, such as sense of fear, and sometimes to overcome them. They can become more independent and capable, implementing their sense of freedom. Finally, we must consider that Italy is one of the western countries with the highest percentage of overweight and obese children, with all the consequences which that entails physically and psychologically, not only in childhood but also, for many of them, in adolescence and adulthood.

The spaces for outdoor games and activities must be free of danger, but in order to raise children interests it's also necessary that they aren't dull and flat. So it's important to create a challenging external environment that fosters contact with both natural and socio-cultural contexts. School playgrounds, gardens or courtyards represent good resources for child development and a real place-based learning, along with the opportunity to explore them.

1.3 Explore and Reflect

Our training course involved two groups of In-Service teachers, about 40 people in total, with whom we could work in an active way, e. g. take them outside or give them a "cue" such as pictures to reflect upon, and so on. Here we can present a brief description of that process, reporting three activities and the results of consequent debriefing, as Case study, a view that "draws from naturalistic, holistic, ethnographic, phenomenological, and biographic research methods." (Stake, 1995; p. VI).

1.3.1 Activity Number One: "Recreation"

From the famous Italian book *Cuore* (1886), we read the description which the author De Amicis makes about "recreation" in a nursery school. A situation of confusion and randomness, in which the role of the adult is indeed only that of supervisor. Today that is still the case in many schools, and it wastes a great educational resource. We must overcome the dichotomy between traditional teaching and recess. Education is at all times. Outdoor life should not be seen as a moment of disengagement (both for children and for adults). Let us ask ourselves how to transform the garden from the "letting off steam place" into an "educational garden." Outdoors, what should be the role of the educator? Crèche and nursery school outdoor areas (garden, courtyard, terrace...) border on realities which differ from the playground itself: roads, fields, buildings...

Whatever that reality is, it inevitably arouses the curiosity of the children. In training, the teachers were divided into small groups and invited to tell each other what lies beyond the fence of their services, and, particularly, about how the children interact with that reality. The observations recounted later to the large group reveal an environment rich in micro stories, such as:

- A busy road where there are passers-by; to attract their attention, the children throw a ball out of the fence, it was picked up and thrown back in ...;
- One hears the noise of a passing helicopter;
- A lady hangs out laundry on a near terrace;
- A huge cleaning machine cleans the street;
- Big crows land in the field.
- One hears the approaching engines of mowing machines coming to cut the playground grass. Some children are afraid and cry. One smells the fragrance of freshly cut grass. When the job is finished, the machines leaves the garden and the children wave goodbye - even those who were crying;
- Some pigeons were in the garden, they fly away frightened by children's arrival. A child who still doesn't speak, indicates a distant balcony barely visible behind a treetop. The teacher looks where the child is indicating but doesn't see anything unusual. The child insists. Finally the teacher understands what the child is trying to say": one of the pigeons is on a balcony behind the tree!

In conclusion, the educator can play an outstanding role in the garden, paying attention to pupils' curiosity and activities. It's necessary to abandon the old habit of chatting with colleagues, in order to be responsible for one's own small group (an attitude well described through the Italian expression: "to know one's own chicks"). It is necessary to accompany children in their explorations, providing them with the right word at the right time (cranes, pruning trees, helicopter ...). It is necessary to sensitize the children toward the animals which inhabit the garden (don't crush the ladybug ...). It is necessary to set limits (now stop throwing the ball into street, it could end up under a car...) .

1.3.2. Activity Number Two: What nature has to offer.

What does nature offer in your playground? We compile a long list (trees, plants, animals...), to work with and to discuss:

- Evergreen and deciduous trees -leaves to be collected;
- Protruding roots of large trees – to climb up and down, go around, sit on...;
- Trees with low branches - become shelters;
- Fruit trees such as pear, plum, fig, apple – give fruit to make jam, to take home...;
- Trellis, flowers (rose, wisteria...) - to pick ?;
- Aromatic plants both in the ground and in pots, rosemary, sage, thyme - each family has contributed one;
- Lawn with crabgrass, chicory, clover, dandelion, little asters ...;

- Animals: birds, lizards , ants, earthworms , spiders , snails, slugs...;
- Hilly terrain, solid ground, mud, puddles, sticks, leaves, pine needles, pebbles, stones, rainwater...

We look at a Francesco Tonucci cartoon (1995): Parents: "This Christmas we want to realize your dream. Tell us which toys you want."
"Daughter : "Puddles and clay!"

Thinking about present day commercial toys, it seems inconceivable that children can play at “no cost ”, and yet earth and water have always been “universal toys”, free and easily available. From the apocryphal gospels we know that even baby Jesus played with these elements almost 2000 years ago! We might ask our selves: in crèches and nursery schools, are puddles resources or problems? We discussed it in small groups, starting with a real episode (described in "La pozzanghera"; Ritscher, 2013). We concluded the following:

- There needs to be a shared approach between colleagues, and between teachers and helpers;
- We must help families understand the importance of playing with earth, water, mud; the importance of getting dirty and then clean again; the importance of learning how to take off one’s shoes, put on boots and vice versa; and also, the importance of a small daily habit, that of using the doormat, as a contribution to keeping indoor floors clean (it part of being a responsible citizen).

1.3.3 "There is no bad weather , there are only badly dressed people "

It 's quite difficult to prepare small children to go out in the garden, and equally difficult to undress them when they return. Are clothes a problem or a resource? The answer depends very much on how the situation is organized. When the weather is not "nice", it is important to organize all the practical details. Beginning with rubber boots: each child must have his own boots, which are kept in a definite place, near the door leading to the garden. Upon returning indoors if the boots are wet inside, they have to be dried in the sun, or on a radiator, or with a hair dryer. If it's cold, it is best to keep boots indoors. The adults, too, must wear their rubber boots.

To go out in the rain is a special activity that requires particular organization

- Small umbrellas or hooded waterproof capes;
- A drying rack for any wet clothing;
- Small groups at a time;
- To avoid dirtying the indoor floor, take boots off before entering;
- Share the project among all colleagues;
- Share also with families.

One very important educational goal is to acquire independence in dressing. Adults (teacher, helpers, parents) should does not replace the child’s efforts, but

accompany her/him ("Help me to do it by myself " is the Montessori motto to bear in mind). They are "small" achievements that nourish self-esteem ("I've done it", "I know how to do it"). We must remind parents that at school, children's clothes must be practical, self-manageable, and one must allow them to get dirty. Brand names and fashion are unimportant!

1.4 Conclusions

Using small group structure, active involvement, case studies descriptions and discussion, allow effective reflective thinking for In-Service teacher training. We did so to introduce an OL pragmatic approach, based on some key assumptions:

- Reflect on the school setting, e. g. how spaces, objects and the whole organization are managed. This allows us to rethink it with stronger educational intention, in order to plan what was not there before;
- An OL approach in crèche and nursery school needs a pedagogical reflexivity to be shared within a working group capable of expressing freely any concern: anxiety, but also safety and capabilities.
- Training must help educators to guarantee children's personal growth through a kind of paradoxical journey between two rights: to risk and to be sure. Educating children to live outdoors, requires the ability to wait and not anticipate child action. OL is consistent with a slow school approach.
- We need to observe carefully what the child wants to tell us with words, gestures, postures, facial expression, with entire body communication. An educator able to observe, to be a reassuring presence for children, encouraging and supporting both with sight and voice, assures opportunity to reach "small but huge" discoveries.

Clearly, it emerges that teachers perceive positively the usefulness and impact of training in OL, as it tends to improve significantly the quality of relationship between themselves, children, families and the out-of-doors settings. Reflecting in small groups upon the educator's role in the garden leads to a set of basic guidelines:

- Take the children outdoors in small groups with their respective educator (who "knows her chicks");
- Avoid a dispersive setting in garden, create different centers of interest;
- Interact, participate with discretion, but without replacing the children's own initiatives (it's important to distinguish between education and entertainment);
- Stimulate and sustain children curiosity;
- Encourage the discovery of natural elements (also by eliminating the preponderant use of tricycles...);
- Create safe conditions: instead of standing up to watch, sit down (preferably on a bench) in a strategic point;
- Share your project with families.

OL is particularly interesting as an educational approach because it simultaneously involves reflectivity and pragmatic points. It leads a community towards a project growing not only in theory, but linking abstract reflections and practice actions. In conclusion, it fosters social and personal well-being.

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