

Perspectives on outdoor education for preschoolers

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Abstract. The purpose of the article about outdoor education is to highlight the importance and benefits of learning in natural environments, especially for preschool children. It aims to show how outdoor education supports cognitive, emotional, social, and physical development, complements formal education, and promotes active, experiential learning. The article also explores how outdoor activities can meet children's basic psychological needs and contribute to their overall well-being and inclusion.

The methodology used in the article is primarily descriptive and practical. It presents a theoretical overview of outdoor education, The approach is experiential and learner-centred, focusing on: Learning through direct interaction with nature; Active participation in outdoor games, storytelling, creative activities, and environmental tasks; Integration of curriculum goals (language, math, communication) into natural settings; Use of observation and reflection to guide and adjust educational practices; Encouraging personal responsibility, teamwork, and inclusion.

The article on outdoor education highlights several key findings and expected outcomes. It shows that children are more active, engaged, and motivated when learning in outdoor environments, which fosters deeper involvement in the educational process. Such experiences also strengthen their connection to nature, encouraging respect for the environment and increasing awareness of ecological issues. Outdoor education proves particularly beneficial for diverse learners, including those with learning difficulties, by providing alternative, hands-on opportunities to explore and understand concepts. Moreover, combining physical activity with learning has a positive impact on well-being, helping to reduce stress while supporting emotional and mental health. Finally, outdoor learning facilitates curriculum integration by linking core subjects with real-life, experiential contexts, promoting a multidisciplinary approach to education.

This research highlights the importance of outdoor education as a powerful tool for enhancing early childhood development. The findings suggest that integrating outdoor education into early learning curricula can improve engagement, inclusiveness, and overall well-being, offering educators a meaningful way to enrich traditional teaching methods.

Keywords: Outdoor education; Early childhood; Experiential learning; Social-emotional development; Nature-based learning.

1. Introduction

1.1 History and forms of expression

Outdoor education is a relatively new concept in the Romanian educational context, but it is increasingly attracting the interest of educational stakeholders within the formal education

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system. There are many interpretations of the term outdoor education, but to offer a simple definition, we can say that this form of education is based on learning in the open air. The term may include environmental education, recreational activities, personal and social development programs, hiking, adventure, and more.

1.2 Key characteristics of outdoor education

Outdoor education provides the opportunity for direct contact with nature. Environmental protection is a global concern, and the massive urbanization has had a harmful impact on nature, especially as people often fail to realize the consequences of their non-ecological actions. Outdoor education emerges as an extremely beneficial way to change attitudes and behaviours towards the environment.

Outdoor education is a powerful source of learning experiences. A relaxed and free environment, without the constraints imposed by "the four walls of a classroom," can offer students countless challenges. As a result, the educational process becomes strong, inspirational, and capable of changing antisocial behaviours while fostering strong interpersonal relationships based on mutual support.

Outdoor education facilitates the learning process for students who face difficulties in this area — it offers a different learning environment that allows students who usually struggle and have low academic performance to become more motivated and capable. It contributes to personal development, both for those who apply it and especially for the students. It fosters team spirit — the connection between students, and between students and teachers, leads to increased active participation and enhances active citizenship in both groups.

Outdoor education provides numerous physical, emotional, and mental benefits that contribute to societal well-being.

1.3 The general objectives of outdoor education are:

- Development of socio-personal skills: improving teamwork, enhancing social relationships, developing leadership abilities;
- Development of management skills: organization, coordination, evaluation;
- Providing a stimulating learning environment;
- Offering the possibility to create a relaxed and motivating space tailored to the identified issue — it allows for reaching high levels of imagination in order to achieve the desired results.

2. Research methodology

Practical aspects of implementing outdoor education

Most of the time, school-based education has a theoretical (cognitive) focus. Teachers must follow a dense curriculum and have limited time to deliver it to large classes. In outdoor education, children learn everything in a practical, active way—through personal experiences they later reflect on to draw meaningful lessons. This method is called experiential learning — you learn with your brain, hands, and heart!

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Larimore (2020) emphasizes that nature-based learning isn't about abandoning curriculum but enriching it by using the natural environment as a context for teaching traditional content like literacy, math, and science. The same author discusses how outdoor environments naturally invite risk-taking, which supports resilience, confidence, and critical thinking when appropriately supervised.

In the area of Language and Communication, with older preschool groups, depending on their developmental level, outdoor activities can take various forms, such as:

- Dramatizing a story that was previously read in the classroom — children can be asked to change the storyline. (To avoid chaos, prepare the children the day before, guiding them through the process but not making decisions for them. The activity should not involve rehearsals; instead, children are encouraged to be spontaneous, having reflected beforehand on how to modify the story and improvising during the activity.)
- Creating reading corners together with the children — when planning storytelling activities (e.g., teacher's read-aloud), these corners can become natural learning spaces.
- Encouraging children to compose poems inspired by natural objects around them (trees, grass, etc.).

Mathematics also offers a wide range of diverse opportunities. Through composing or solving problems, preschoolers are placed in situations where they must evaluate specific aspects using exact numbers. For example:

A pile of stones can be gathered, from which each child picks one, followed by various math games or classification activities (by shape, colour, size).

In the school or kindergarten yard, children can be asked to form different geometric shapes, allowing them to learn in an interactive way; the schoolyard or flower garden can be measured by the children.

Outdoor environments offer rich, hands-on sensory experiences that strengthen STEM understanding—digging, pouring, stacking, and observing all become meaningful learning moments. Selly (2017) emphasizes that science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) are naturally embedded in children's outdoor exploration—such as building with sticks (engineering), measuring puddles (math), or observing insects (science). Outdoor STEM activities build problem-solving, experimentation, and analytical skills through natural trial-and-error experiences—like constructing shelters or testing ramps. Outdoor environments offer rich, hands-on sensory experiences that strengthen STEM understanding—digging, pouring, stacking, and observing all become meaningful learning moments.

There are various outdoor education programs that can be useful in different contexts, depending on the identified needs. Such programs can focus on health and physical education, environmental science, management, or psychology. Valuing outdoor education in children's emotional and social development is a premise for their cognitive growth.

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3. Results

An important aspect of outdoor education is that it can contribute to increasing individuals' overall well-being. Beyond a person's basic needs, there are several psychological and social needs that outdoor education can address—such as the need to feel respected, socially included, active and responsible, and the need for safety.

- The need to feel respected – Outdoor activities encourage children to feel at ease, which makes them more open, communicative, and willing to express their opinions. They feel acknowledged and realize that their decisions matter. Pupils can be consulted on the choice of games or activities.
- The need to be responsible – Outdoor learning gives children the opportunity to take on various tasks (since outdoor education is also a form of organized and structured learning, the teacher must ensure that all students are involved). Under the teacher's guidance, each child is assigned specific responsibilities to help achieve the activity's goal. For example, during an environmental clean-up activity, one child may be responsible for cleaning trees, another for watering flowers, etc.
- The need to be active – Participation in various sports activities, games, or thematic walks brings significant physical and psychological benefits for students. Play is a core feature of childhood, so it's essential to constantly encourage pupils to run, play, and take an active part in different experiences.
- The need to be socially included – Perhaps the most important feature of outdoor education is its capacity to help children overcome various difficulties (psychological, physical, social, emotional, or financial), enabling them to feel socially integrated and a part of a community.
- The need to feel safe – One key aspect emphasized in the educational literature is that outdoor education must consider this need. While the classroom offers a safer environment, the outdoors presents certain risks and unpredictable situations that could negatively affect children.

Teachers must identify possible hazards and design a risk management plan, which will be addressed later, as it's a critical element—so much so that some experts have questioned the usefulness of outdoor education without proper safety planning.

Since outdoor education addresses a wide audience regardless of age—and the needs are similar for both young and older learners—this type of education must acknowledge its rightful place within the broader educational framework.

4. Discussion

The perspective of outdoor education in relation to other forms of education

Among all educational approaches, outdoor education aligns best with non-formal education. Like non-formal education, outdoor education relies heavily on active participation, enhances the learning process while minimizing the constraints typical of traditional schooling, offers

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immediate practical utility of the knowledge gained, and takes place in varied settings with a relaxed structure and flexible content.

In the book „Manual de educație outdoor - Lifelong Learning Programme” (2010- 2012) the outdoor education as described as experiential learning - The manual highlights that outdoor education is based on learning by doing, where participants engage directly with their environment, reflecting on experiences to build knowledge and skills. It also emphasizes how outdoor education supports the development of key European competences: learning to learn, social and civic competences, sense of initiative, and environmental awareness. It also uses methods that encourage engagement, features a flexible structure and planning, is learner-centred, and builds on participants' experiences.

Both non-formal and outdoor education can be successfully integrated into formal education to maximize learning outcomes. The current trend is to amplify these two forms, as their integration leads to a more qualitative and valuable educational system, offering long-term benefits, covering a wide range of subjects, and—most importantly—focusing equally on those who implement education (teachers) and those who receive it (students).

Formal education has the merit of being organized and structured, encompassing a wide range of information and knowledge essential to an individual's educational development. Informal education supports formal learning by ensuring that the learning process continues anytime and anywhere, throughout life. Non-formal education contributes by addressing an individual's psychological, social, and emotional needs through interactive and participatory methods.

Outdoor education, in turn, “brings these three forms of education into the open air,” revitalizes them, adds freshness and dynamism, and extends their positive impact across various fields—especially in sustainable development, environmental protection, and personal and professional growth.

5. Conclusions

Outdoor education represents the sum of actions carried out by teachers, instructors, trainers, and educators in a natural environment, using experiential methods to bring about changes in participants' physical, intrapersonal and interpersonal skills, as well as their attitudes toward the environment. School-based education remains incomplete if it is not enriched by what can be offered outside its physical boundaries. An innovative kindergarten or school will embrace and integrate such experiences, turning them into allies—sources of reinforcement, revitalization, and expansion of its educational scope.

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