Outdoor education (OE) takes the form of a vast and versatile educational strategy, based on active pedagogy and experiential learning: it is determined by the principle of applying itself to the external and natural environment. It can be used in countless educational itineraries appropriate to examine, broaden and detail what is done indoors, in the classroom. In this sense, it is not a strategy that replaces the more traditional educational system, but rather accompanies and completes it with experiences that the closed environment is unable to offer.

However, going out into the open does not mean re-introducing outside what is done inside but, instead, using what the environment and nature make available for further learning. This is characterised by the phenomena that, in a very natural way, occur outdoors and not indoors: rain, snow, wind, soil, mud and plants in the various seasons, the animals that live among the vegetation or above or below ground, etc. In our technological-digital society, among other things, it appears vitally important for children to maintain the feeling of affinity that connects them to nature, biophilia, for an education that respects the environment and its sustainability, so that future men can see nature not only as a resource to exploit, but also as home. The external environment is consequently part of day-to-day life and must be experienced by the child as an educational environment with strong social, cognitive, sensory-motor and emotional characteristics.

OE offers the advantage of great flexibility and adaptation to contexts, to the different age groups, to the different goals and projects. Its key characteristic resides in the explorative, observatory, manipulative freedom with which the child can relate to the outside environment and mature knowledge, skills and competences, through concrete and direct experiences. If we believe that childhood is the age in which sensory-motor sensitivity, connected with the bodily-kinaesthetic intelligence, is preponderant and fundamental, we cannot think of exclusively indoor educational projects in the classroom and exclude the external environment and the countless opportunities it offers to learn and experience. It is true that many educators could respond that they go out, that children spend part of the day in the open air, at least when the season allows for it.

The problem is to ask oneself if our going outdoors is merely recreational or, above all, educational, namely part of the project designed for that class of children. If we think of the outside world as an educational environment, then going out is not random or limited to the situation of good weather, but it is daily because it is part of the educational experience and connected to what is done inside and inserted in the plan and daily routine. Applying OE means merging concrete experiences, done in
the open air, with moments of theoretical reflection (narration, conversation) and final production (graphic, plastic, and verbal) before and after the activities.

Among the fundamental characteristics of OE, we can recall problem solving approach, environmental context, namely the school courtyard as environment that can be used daily and the direct involvement of the child⁴. In brief, the educators must assess three possible attitudes:

1. leave the children free to follow their intuition, interest and curiosity. In other words, support the actions undertaken by children and go back to them in the classroom, connecting them to the educational programme in an interdisciplinary manner and as possible examination or enrichment of goals already present in the overall educational plan;

2. guide the curiosity of children towards activities that are already part of the educational programme thanks to the skilful preparation of the outdoor setting (if school courtyard) or to the choice of special settings (if a guided outing);

3. the unexpected, namely a sudden orientation, caused by a random fact or event which becomes the centre of attention and activity of the child. The unexpected has the advantage of generating amazement, marvel and action, facilitating the process of learning from the known to the unknown, namely acting on what was unplanned, and which becomes sense experience.

Management of OE activities requires co-operation with families, satisfaction of logistical needs, first and foremost suitable clothing (waterproof boots, capes and hats, overalls, etc.) to allow access to the outdoors in all weather and seasonal conditions; light rain, mud, wet grass, snow, wind, etc. Secondly, it is necessary to manage the spaces used in a safe manner, through an appropriate arrangement of the environment itself and of the rules regarding the activities that can or cannot be undertaken. Such management should educate children to responsible behaviour towards dangers, thanks to the experience of risk, emerging from the awareness of their limits and forged by the direct relationship with the outdoors.

To finish, OE proposes itself as a flexible and intentional approach with which educators can give quality to the educational process for their children. It is not necessary to resort to any special activities or to equip oneself with any particular tools but, through the availability of daily spaces, it is possible to give free interpretation to the natural curiosity of children towards things and events that happen around them, when they are immersed in an attractive environment like the outdoors. The possibility to act on the environment creates a virtuous and highly motivating educational circle in which doing and saying pursue one another continuously, reciprocally enriching themselves with new learning through concrete experiences, abstractions and transferability to subsequent experiences.

