

The spread of outdoor education in Milan (1911-1922): The role of the Società Umanitaria¹

Gabriella Seveso

Università degli Studi di Milano-Bicocca

Luca Comerio

Università degli Studi di Milano-Bicocca

Abstract

This contribution aims to investigate and reconstruct - analysing the issues of the magazine “La Coltura Popolare” - the important role played by the Società Umanitaria in the spread of outdoor education as a children’s right, during a very lively and pedagogically significant period of the Milanese history. The paper will be concentrated on two main focuses: the first is the promotion of open-air schools, with the accurate reflection and systematization of the main Italian and European examples as hosted in the pages of the aforementioned journal; the latter is the Società Umanitaria’s commitment to disseminating the Montessori method as an approach that underlines the value of outdoor education. As can be seen through the numerous excerpts from the journal articles proposed here, the debate on outdoor education at the beginning of the Twentieth century, with its precious heritage of insights and sometimes pioneering practices, offers a valuable reference for gaining a deeper awareness of outdoor education as it is conceived and practiced today.

Questo contributo si propone di indagare e ricostruire - analizzando i numeri della rivista “La Coltura Popolare” - l’importante ruolo svolto dalla Società Umanitaria nella diffusione dell’educazione all’aperto come diritto dei bambini, in un periodo molto vivace e pedagogicamente significativo della storia milanese. L’articolo si concentra su due *focus* principali: il primo è la promozione delle scuole all’aperto, con l’accurata riflessione e sistemazione dei principali esempi italiani ed europei accolta nelle pagine della citata rivista; il secondo è l’impegno della Società Umanitaria nella diffusione del metodo Montessori come approccio che mette in particolare rilievo il valore dell’*outdoor education*. Come si evince dai numerosi stralci di articoli qui proposti, il dibattito sull’educazione all’aperto di inizio Novecento, con il suo prezioso patrimonio di intuizioni e pratiche talvolta pionieristiche, offre un valido riferimento a chi intenda porsi con maggiore consapevolezza nei confronti dell’*outdoor education* così come viene concepita e praticata oggi.

Keywords: outdoor education; Milan; Società Umanitaria; open-air schools; Maria Montessori

Parole chiave: outdoor education; Milano; Società Umanitaria; scuole all’aperto; Maria Montessori

¹ This paper is a summary of the authors’ joint research and writing activities. For purely formal purposes, Luca Comerio may be viewed as the author of § 1 and 2, and Gabriella Seveso as the author of § 3 and 4.

1. Introduction

In the first two decades of the Twentieth century, in Milan the debate on education - focused on teaching and educational methods, teacher training, school spaces, children's rights - became very lively and active (Chiosso, 2019; Negri & Seveso, 2021); at the same time, in the city there were original educational experiments, also thanks to new theories and practices then emerging in Europe and the United States (D'Aprile, 2010; Duval, 2002; Ferrière, 1922; Marcarini, 2014; Pizzigoni, 1912; Rossi Cassottana, 2014; Tomarchio & D'Aprile, 2010). Within this debate and these innovative educational experiences, an important issue was the right of children to outdoor education: the urbanization and the growth of the city on the one hand undeniably improved everyday standards of living and stimulated economic development, on the other hand, however, created social and health problems that pushed philosophers, thinkers and politicians to emphasize the importance of educating children outdoors, for their physical and mental well-being (Forti-Messina, 2003, pp. 108-111).

Against this backdrop, that saw the spread of open-air schools and teaching methods promoting outdoor education (Châtelet et al., 2003; D'Ascenzo, 2019; Freeman & Seaman, 2020), the Società Umanitaria (Umanitaria Society) played an important role; founded in 1893 thanks to a legacy of 10 million lire from Prospero Moisè Loria - a wealthy businessman of Jewish origin - this society, based in the centre of Milan, brought together prestigious intellectuals, thinkers and politicians of the time. The aim of the Società Umanitaria was to improve the cultural, social, and civil status of the people of the city, especially among the lower classes; it was inspired by ideals of equality and social justice. One of the society's leading concerns was the right of children to healthy environments and outdoor experience to compensate for the sudden and drastic urbanization and industrialization; therefore, on the one hand, the society participated in and led debates on this topic - especially on the pages of the journal *La Coltura Popolare* - on the other hand, it conducted key, innovative projects providing children and young people with opportunities to spend time in nature and outdoors. Furthermore, it consistently promoted the spread of Montessori education in Milan, an approach that emphasized the need for outdoor education (Caprara, 2018; Colombo & Beretta Dragoni, 2008); indeed, the fruitful meeting between Montessori and Augusto Osimo, secretary and later chairman of the Società Umanitaria allowed the pedagogist's experiments to be carried out (Pozzi, 2015; Pironi, 2018): their cooperation began in the context of a redevelopment of some Milanese districts which were overcrowded and rundown. The Società Umanitaria implemented a project to build working class houses following the principles of the most modern architecture and urban planning, with a particular focus on open and natural spaces, and on the promotion of participation in community life. Within this project, the first two Children's Houses in Milan were built in Via Solari and Le Rottole (today Viale Lombardia), with the aim of equipping these two new model areas with high-quality educational institutions, based on the Montessori principles, including outdoor education; as we have seen, the Montessori method attached great importance to the environment and argued that learning and outdoor activities fundamentally stimulated the development of children. The commitment to children's rights, disadvantaged children, and the issue of the environment and outdoor spaces were the main ideas that the Società Umanitaria shared with the Montessori method (Negri & Seveso, 2022).

With the aim to reconstruct the important role played by Società Umanitaria in the spread of outdoor education, in this contribution we will propose an analysis, still partial, of the papers published on the pages of the journal *La Coltura Popolare*, founded in 1910 as the continuation of an earlier publication, the *Bollettino delle Biblioteche popolari*: the journal, whose first issue came out in March 1911, played in those years a fundamental role in the Italian pedagogical debate and therefore is an interesting source to understand the reflections that emerged and the projects carried out on outdoor education and schools in nature.

2. Promoting and debating open-air schools

The right to outdoor education was also covered in *La Coltura Popolare* in terms of news about, and assessments of, the implementation of outdoor schools: the articles published on this subject are significant and show that the journal - and by extension the Società Umanitaria - was deeply interested in it. These contributions are as many as thirty-three in the years from 1912 to 1914 and they mention initiatives in eight countries, in addition to Italy (Belgium, France, Germany, Luxembourg, Switzerland, United Kingdom, USA, Persia); about Italy, open-air schools are mentioned in many cities: Bergamo, Brescia, Florence, Genoa, Livorno, Milan, Padua, Parma, Pavia, Rome, Turin, Treviso, Udine, Venice, Verona.

In 1911, *La Coltura Popolare* published an article by Maria Sanguini, “Per il metodo negli asili” [“In favour of method in nursery schools”] (1911, pp. 393-396), covering a national conference organized in Milan by Unione Italiana per l’educazione popolare [Italian Union for Working-Class Education] - together with the Union of Infant School Teachers, the Milanese branch of the Associazione Pedagogica Italiana [Italian Pedagogical Association], and the journal *Voce delle Maestre d’asili* [Voice of the Nursery School Teacher] - on the theme of method in kindergartens. The author, who was then the head of the Children’s House in Rottole, replied in detail to several criticisms of the Montessori method, calling for “outdoor schooling”, “outside of the box-of-brick school”, and mentioning existing projects implemented by professor Lauriti and supported by Fornari. In this paper, the concept “open-air school” was still ambiguously defined, but importantly it was mentioned as key to reforming the schools of the period.

Another key article, by Mario Ragazzi, appeared in the April 1915 issue of the journal under the title “La scuola all’aperto in Italia” [Outdoor Schooling in Italy] and had been presented by the author at the 4th Congress on tuberculosis held in Genoa on 7 February 1915. It appears immediately after another article presenting the Associazione Italiana per l’Igiene della scuola [Italian Association for School Health] to the readers of the journal. This is confirmation of a continued emphasis on the right to outdoor education for vulnerable and underdeveloped children. Nevertheless, at the end of the article, the author discusses projects for children in general. He is fully conscious of the fact that the term “outdoor school” covered a range of experiences and interpretations:

«The concept of the usefulness, or rather the necessity, of outdoor life for physically compromised children is universally recognized. Systems of implementation vary from one country to another, and so, the expression “outdoor school” stands for institutions that share the same goal but are quite different to another, and we need to be aware of all the various denominations, especially because in Italy we have examples of all the different kinds of child welfare that have been adopted in other countries, some of which we even invented ourselves» (p. 163).

The essay reviews the different kinds of European institutions that were then included under the heading of outdoor school, specifying that some of these were not called “schools” in Italy: for example the French and Swiss *écoles en plein air* were equivalent to the Italian health-promoting holiday camps [*colonie di vacanza* in Italian] or short term stays for children with health problems (Comerio, 2018; Rey-Herme, 1954, 1961). In reviewing these institutions, the author makes it clear that he views outdoor education as an inalienable right of children affected by certain diseases (scrufulosis or tuberculosis) or who needed to be quarantined from family members with these diseases.

Next, the author explores applications of outdoor schooling in Italy, where it was then understood as «An open-air school for children who, although they might be weak or thin, are not affected by any disease that would

preclude them from attending ordinary school, where they could remain and follow the normal course of studies» (p. 156). Ragazzi analyses outdoor schools in the leading Italian cities (Padua, Venice, Genoa, Rome, Verona, Brescia, Florence, Parma, Milan, Bergamo, Treviso, Pavia, Udine), which shared a set of characteristics: they were mainly intended for convalescent or sick children; they were operational at certain times of the year; some of them fulfilled a dual purpose (working with sick children for some months of the year and functioning as regular outdoor schools for the rest of the year). His thorough review shows: the ambiguity of the term “outdoor school”, which was still used to describe institutions with different purposes and beneficiaries; the vitality of the outdoor schooling segment from both a qualitative and quantitative point of view (especially in Padua, Rome and Milan); the wide range of solutions being implemented in terms of the design and use of outdoor spaces. Concerning the last of these aspects, the author highlighted the example of Rome, which had three types of outdoor schools: permanent open-air schools in “Saffi-style” pavilions with floor-to-ceiling windows that could be fully opened, and in some cases with Grilli Neroni-style portable desks (Grilli, 1911); open-air schools set up in the gardens and courtyards of existing school buildings; open-air schools set up on the terraces of seven large school buildings in the city center. In relation to teaching methods, the open-air schools did not appear to follow any particular approach or curriculum; however, the author commented approvingly on an outdoor school for underdeveloped children in Verona, located in the gardens of an ancient Roman theater, where the “Montessori teaching method was applied, and particular attention was paid to education and physical development” (p. 167).

Importantly, at the end of the essay, the author presents the concept of outdoor schools for *all* children:

«To complete this review of Italian outdoor schools, I feel that is useful to mention projects designed to bring the benefits of the open-air to all students, without distinguishing between the weak and strong, or between the more needy and the less needy. Projects that are well known because they have been amply illustrated and discussed; one is large-scale and complex, the Scuola Rinnovata Pizzigoni; the other is simpler and more limited, the itinerant class in Bergamo» (p. 167-168)

Ragazzi goes on to devote a paragraph to the experimental Pizzigoni school in Milan, including a detailed description of its spaces and furnishings, teaching methods and syllabuses: «work at desks is kept to the minimum possible and intellectual learning is based above all on observing things and facts, and on life in direct contact with nature» (p. 168). Next, he describes the itinerant class implemented by Fratus in Bergamo, where lessons were held in healthy, natural environments chosen ad hoc by the teacher thanks to the adoption of mobile school furnishings including portable desks. He explicitly praises the Pizzigoni school:

«Without going into detail, it is certain - from a health perspective - that this regime is advisable for all outdoor schools and that the Rinnovata school board and Milan City Council are now extending it to the entire group of schools to which this school currently belongs» (p. 168).

These closing paragraphs on the open-air schools implemented by Pizzigoni and Fratus are even more interesting because they confirm the shift from a view of outdoor schooling as a right of sick or underdeveloped children to a notion of outdoor education as a right of all children. However, the author continues to emphasize the physical health benefits of open-air schools more than their implications for mental health and overall wellbeing, perhaps because he was a medical doctor himself.

The theme of open-air schooling for all appeared again in other articles published by the journal in the following years, some of which presented case studies from other countries: see for example a description of the École des Roches – based on the Abbotsholme model - implemented by Demolins beginning in 1899 (Demolins, 1906), which featured in the February 1918 issue of the journal in an article by Federico Filippini: in this case, the natural environment and outdoor activities were said to be important because of their undoubted health benefits for any child or youth: specifically, the author stated that young people «need movement, air, and light» (p. 108). A similar view was proposed in the May 1918 issue, in a paper by R. Lorenzi entitled “La Scuola Nuova di Bièrges” [The New School at Bièrges], which documented the model implemented in Bièrges les Vawre by A. Faria De Vasconcellos.

3. The Società Umanitaria’s commitment to disseminating the Montessori method as an approach of outdoor education

The Società Umanitaria’s promotion of the right to outdoor education was undoubtedly also underpinned by its partnership with Maria Montessori, its efforts to disseminate the principles of the Montessori method, and its setting up of Children’s Houses, beginning in 1908 (De Giorgi, 2018). Montessori herself felt very strongly about this topic, as she often emphasized in her lectures and her writings (De Sanctis, 2013; Durakoglu, 2014). In her treatise *Metodo* (which later became *The Discovery of the Child*), she observed that:

«(children) run outside when it is raining; they remove their shoes when they find a puddle of water; and, when the grass of the meadows is damp with dew, they run on it and trample it with their bare feet; they rest peacefully when a tree invites them to sleep beneath its shade; they shout and laugh when the sun wakes them in the morning as it wakes every living creature that divides its day between waking and sleeping. Yet we anxiously wonder how to keep children asleep after daybreak and how to teach them to take off their shoes and not go running in the fields. Actually, nature frightens most people. They fear the air and the sun as if they were mortal enemies. They fear the frost at night as if it were a snake hidden in the grass. They fear the rain as if it were fire. Civilized man is a kind of contented prisoner, and if now he is warned that he should enjoy nature for his own health, he does so timidly and with his eyes on the alert for any danger. To sleep in the open, to expose oneself to the winds until the rains, to defy the sun, and to take a dip in the water are all things about which one can talk but which one does not always put into practice. Who does not run to close the door for fear of a draught. [...] almost everybody believes that to take very long walks in the open country, whether it is sunny or rainy, taking advantage of all natural shelter, is a heroic effort, a *hazard*. One must grow accustomed these things, they say; but they make no move. How is one to get accustomed, then? Perhaps the little children ought to get accustomed; but no! They are even more sheltered than the adults. Even the English, with their sporting bent, do not subject their little ones to the tests given by Nature and hard work. Even there, the good nurse draws them, when they are already well grown, in their little carriages, into the shade when the weather is good, and does not allow them to run about and do as they choose» (Montessori, 1999, pp. 74-75)

Thus, Maria Montessori saw the opportunity to daily experience the natural environment as a key part of children's education and a right of all children (Montessori, 1950, 1952, 1970). This was partly thanks to the influence of Alice Franchetti, who had introduced Montessori to the work of Lucy Latter and the Englishwoman's educational method based on gardening and horticulture (Pironi, 2010; Trabalzi, 2003). In the Montessori method, outdoor education was not only seen as benefiting children's health, but - above all - as key to their mental wellbeing and learning trajectories:

«Raising animals and growing plants – Bertolino and Filippa write - provides an opportunity to foster children's sense of responsibility and their awareness of their own actions, as well as introducing them to an alternative perspective to that of the here and now: each child will need to know how to behave appropriately towards the living things in his or her care, how to foresee and provide for their needs, have respect for them, and wait patiently for nature to reward these efforts. Nature as the ideal context for supporting sensory experience Montessori tells us that natural environments are the ideal setting for children to exercise and refine their sensory, visual, tactile, olfactory, gustatory, auditory, and motor skills» (Bertolino & Filippa, 2021, p. 140).

The outdoor education, therefore, was a crucial component of Montessori's theorizing, with which the perspective of the Società Umanitaria was fully aligned (Seveso, 2018). This shared position is reflected in the article by Maria Sanguini that we mentioned earlier, which was published in *La Coltura Popolare* in 1911: in her review of the Italian and international debate on teaching methods in nursery schools, Sanguini calls for «open-air schooling», «outside the box-of-brick school» (395), with a view to modernizing the asphyxiating, passivizing, and repetitive educational methods of the day.

The Società Umanitaria's and Montessori's joint commitment to outdoor education was further confirmed in 1914, when the first training course for Montessori teachers was held at the society's headquarters in Milan: the subjects included “Guide to the observation of natural facts”, taught by Professor Maurilio Salvoni, a chemistry and natural sciences graduate, educator and education specialist who had been involved in starting up a nursery school in Milan. At the end of the training course in 1915, Salvoni himself published a sort of balance sheet of his course in *La Coltura Popolare*, an article that clearly articulates the Montessori approach to outdoor education. Specifically, Salvoni emphasized that between three and five years of age, children “normally” take an interest in the natural phenomena that present themselves to their senses: therefore, they do not need teachers to show them nature but rather teachers with experience in observation, practical experimentation and inquiry. In keeping with this perspective - which was clearly shared by the teachers on the training course, by Montessori herself, and by the Società Umanitaria which was organizing the course - the Children's Houses in Milan in those years had gardens equipped with materials and tools for outdoor work. Articles published in *La Coltura Popolare* allow us to reconstruct the children's outdoor activities, which were an integral part of their overall learning trajectories and school work: in *Diario di una colonia felice*, published in the journal in two installments in 1915, Maria Ponticelli, a teacher at the Children's House in Via Michelangelo in Milan, notes that: «I'm looking forward to the fine weather which will allow me to take the children into the garden, where I will guide them to observe nature to their advantage and delight» (1915a, p. 673) This Children's House, which had been set up by Gemma Muggiani in a villa described by the writer Ada Negri “as a nest hidden among green foliage” (Ponticelli, 1915a, p. 671), combined the principle of children's right to outdoor education by giving them access to green spaces with the Montessori method which by then was well known in Milan. Ponticelli kept a journal, which documents the fact that many everyday school activities took place in the garden. This is further

borne out by the photographs illustrating her article in *La Coltura Popolare*, many of which show teachers and children outdoors: on p. 674, there is a photograph of five children in the school garden with brooms: the caption “Spring is here” implies they had been given the job of sweeping up outside; on p. 675, “Work followed by ring-o’-rosies” shows five children hand in hand in a circle with the teacher, and four other children handling wooden circles; on p. 678, the snapshot “For tea” portrays a large group of children sitting at a long table that has been carefully laid, the teacher standing beside the table, a little girl holding a jug and pouring water for her classmates, and a little boy standing with a serving plate - we can deduce from this that even routine activities took place outdoors whenever possible; on p. 679, the photograph “Numbering” shows five children and a teacher sitting on a mat on the ground with a set of objects, proving that subject-specific learning tasks were also conducted in the garden; finally, the article closes with a photograph entitled “Working break”, showing nine children with drawing and painting equipment seated outdoors at three tables with a teacher standing by (p. 681).

Thus, overall, this long essay published in *La Coltura Popolare* confirms the importance attributed to outdoor education by the Montessori method and the Società Umanitaria’s Montessori schools, as well as the journal’s commitment to disseminating this approach: a vision of outdoor education as a basic children’s right, and as part of the right to a schooling that is both pleasant and tailored to the physical, mental, and learning needs of children. In the case of the Montessori schools, outdoor education was perceived as crucial for all children, and not just for underdeveloped or weak children: it was therefore a universal right, not a special right for certain categories or a form of social welfare. Again, we can clearly observe the shift from a health- and welfare-based view of outdoor education to its recognition as a universal right and integral component of children’s overall wellbeing and education.

A few years later in 1921, *La Coltura Popolare* published an article about nursery schools in the Italian-speaking area of Switzerland, which were then run following Montessori principles. This piece emphasized education in nature and about nature as a core aspect of Montessori teaching and a right of children. The article referenced Louise Briod’s visit to the model school in Bellinzona and to another school in the small country village of Caneggio: concerning the latter, the author wrote:

«Some 20 boys and girls, under the admirable supervision of Assunta Durini, flower and bloom, flowers among flowers, older brothers and sisters of the small animals of whom they take such gentle care, and all that is nice, beautiful and good rises up to meet them» (G. P., 1921, p. 278).

The essay goes on to describe the children’s admiration and ecstasy and their respectful and attentive observation of spiders’ webs and all sorts of flowers, and quoting the words of a local journal (*Pro Juventute*), reiterates that:

«The boys and girls of Caneggio live in harmony with nature. Nursery school does not take them away from their country environment - it only helps them to discover all of its beauty, appreciate all of its resources, respect all of its manifestations...» (*ibidem*).

This short essay lyrically and passionately advocates for an outdoor schooling that is not in contradiction with country life, but rather makes the nursery a place of development based on the right to remain in a natural environment.

Other teachers' journals and reports also reflect this emphasis on outdoor activities. The author of *Diario di una colonia felice*, which we cited earlier, recalls making a gift of a small plant to each of the children and how consequently her young pupils developed a desire to raise plants. Similarly, another teacher – Elettra degli Uberti Roncalli – in her journal published in 1917, wrote: «March 16th. I brought in and potted two forget-me-nots. The children are very interested in this operation and as a result also in the green plant which they had previously been forgetting to take care of» (*La Coltura Popolare*, 1919, p. 889). Again, in 1919, the teacher Lola Condulmari, noted in her journal:

«November 1916. The weather improved in the afternoon, and we went out into the garden. Ida and Linda spent a long time in front of the grapevine, which is losing the last of its leaves. They chose two reddish-purple ones. Ida assured her classmate that they would never be able to find a pencil of that colour» (ivi, p. 890).

At a later date, she describes with satisfaction her class' gardening activities: «April 1916. The garden is beginning to look green. The children are lovingly following its progress. Each of them has been assigned a small flower bed and we are beginning to sow flowers in them» (ivi, 891). Still later, the teacher links outdoor education to concentration and attention skills, as well as to aesthetic experience:

«April. We were made a gift of a cage with three pretty birds, who fill our house with cheerful trills. The children are happy. [...] May. Our house has been cheered up by an abundance of flowers. The children love to place them all about the place» (ivi, 892).

Finally, the key contribution of outdoor spaces to children's physical and mental wellbeing as well as to the design of effective teaching-learning trajectories is also borne out by the photographs that often accompanied the publication of these journal extracts or articles written to promote adoption of the Montessori method in Italian schools.

In 1922, *La Coltura Popolare* published a long article entitled “The Montessori method and the Società Umanitaria”, which was an extract from a monograph that had just been published describing the society and its works. The article clearly outlined the principles of the Montessori method, as well as the experimentation conducted to date by the Società Umanitaria in collaboration with Maria Montessori. Importantly, the many photographs chosen to illustrate the article displayed educational activities in exclusively outdoor settings. Specifically on the theme of learning settings, on p. 248, a photograph called “Tidying up” shows children in the garden, beside a fountain, clearing up after a meal. On the theme of materials and activities, a snapshot on p. 249 captioned “Drawing” features children sitting around three tables in the garden, with the teacher leaning over them as they draw; three other children are standing around, appearing to be observing some bushes. On p. 250, the photograph entitled “At work” displays four children working with materials while sitting outdoors at a table. The text explains that “educational gymnastics are also to be understood as exercises in the open-air such as gardening, tending to plants, or looking after domestic animals, etc.” (p. 250). On p. 251, we find a photographic illustration of recreation or exercise: in “Movement and rest”, eight children are playing in the garden holding hands in a circle, while other groups of three or four children are just standing about, and still others are seated at a small fountain, seemingly absorbed in little activities of their own or in their thoughts. Similarly, in “Singing Ring-o'-Rosies” on p. 253, we see some groups of children in circles and others standing by themselves beside plants or flower beds. A photograph on p. 257, with the humorous caption “Attention...!” appears

to illustrate gymnastics combined with measuring tasks, because it shows two teachers with seven children of different ages who are walking around a wooden plank laid on the ground in the garden. Finally, the different seasons – with the reflections, experiments, and reasoning that they inspired – offered a further pretext for outdoor exploration and activity, as illustrated in the photograph “Grape harvest” (p. 260), in which a teacher is holding a wooden ladder that two children have climbed up; seven other children are standing around: the ladder is needed to pick some bunches of grapes from a pergola.

4. Conclusions

Our analysis of articles published in the journal *La Cultura Popolare* in the period between 1911 and 1922 clearly documents the important role played by the Società Umanitaria in the promotion of the rights of outdoor education, not only describing and publicising the experiments of open-air schools, but also, presenting the Montessori’s *Case dei bambini* (Children’s Houses), founded precisely on outdoor activities; in fact, the Montessori method conceptualized outdoor spaces as key to educational activity and to the harmonious development of children’s cognitive, relational, and emotional abilities. The contributions published by the journal also reflect a key development over time: at first, some authors point up that outdoor schools are necessary for physically or economically or socially disadvantaged children; then, others saw outdoor education as a right of all children, and consequently, also open-air schools and Montessori schools based on outdoor activities. This debate and these outdoor education experiments, which were very important and interesting for the history of education, died out after the 1920s, due to the rise of fascism, which centralised the education system for twenty years, bending it to its own propaganda needs (Gibelli, 2005).

The focus on outdoor education in the period considered, with its precious heritage of insights and sometimes pioneering practices, nonetheless constitutes an inescapable reference in order to better understand the reflections and experiments proposed today (Ascenzi et al., 2020; Cappuccio et al., 2020): studying what came before us can indeed help us recognise that today’s practices - even the seemingly most innovative ones - are almost always embedded in paths of study and experimentation rooted in the past (Comerio, 2020; Rossi, 2011; Zucconi, 2016).

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Gabriella Seveso è professoressa di Storia della pedagogia presso l'Università degli Studi di Milano-Bicocca. Le sue ricerche recenti hanno riguardato la tematica della relazione fra generi e generazioni nella storia della cultura occidentale, con particolare riguardo alla cultura antica. Si è occupata inoltre di fumetti per ragazzi/e, di pedagogia montessoriana, di movimenti delle donne e associazioni femminili nel Novecento: su questi temi ha pubblicato numerosi saggi e volumi.

Contatto: gabriella.seveso@unimib.it

Luca Comerio è assegnista di ricerca in Storia della pedagogia presso l'Università degli Studi di Milano-Bicocca, è socio del Centro Italiano per la Ricerca Storico-Educativa e socio junior della Società Italiana di Pedagogia, nell'ambito della quale è membro del Gruppo di lavoro "Pedagogia dell'ambiente, Agenda 2030, Sostenibilità del Benessere. Next Generation EU, Giustizia, Resistenza Educativa". Si occupa di pedagogia attiva e di educazione in natura in ambito scolastico ed extrascolastico.

Contatto: luca.comerio@unimib.it