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Outdoor Education between Past and Future: the Italian Experience of *Orti didattici*

Abstract

Dieser Beitrag befasst sich mit Lerngärten, die in Kindergärten und Grundschulen in Nord- und Mittelitalien weit verbreitet sind. Diese Aktivität begann im Schuljahr 2014–2015 mit der Genehmigung des Ministeriums und der Zusammenarbeit von Kommunen und einigen Umweltgruppen. Die Idee ist nicht nur wegen ihrer ethischen und intellektuellen Ziele interessant, sondern auch, weil sie traditionellen Arbeitsmitteln eine instrumentelle didaktische Rolle zuweist. Ziel des Beitrags ist erstens die Beschreibung dieser Aktivitäten und zweitens eine Konzentration auf die dabei verwendeten Lehrmittel.

Keywords: children, school, education, environment, society, sustainability

1 To begin

On the basis that, as reported in the call for papers of the conference at which this topic was presented, "education for sustainability should enable people to shape the future actively, independently, and responsibly in a globalized world", my intention is to investigate a special teaching activity, which was pursued in *Orti didattici*, i.e. *Didactic Vegetable Gardens*. Presently, these schools find their hospitality in some *Kindergartens* and primary schools, principally in Northern and Central Italy.

Orti Didattici started their activities in the school year 2014–2015, approved by the Ministry of Education and supported by municipalities and a few ecological groups. The didactic approach and experiences in these institutions are interesting not only for their explicit and intellectual purposes, but also as they allow us to rethink the concept of ethical and intellectual media, as I try to explain in the conclusion of my paper.

This paper is centered on:

1. describing these didactic activities thanks to teachers' reports and the photos they use to upload online;
2. analyzing the teaching tools used: the "textbook" is the environment, with the inclusion of the five senses of pupils, complemented by notebooks and illustrations, up to digital means such as cameras and computers, in a mixture of traditions and new trends.
3. Other aspects to be considered in the conclusion are environment and nature as specific didactic and educational media. These are of the utmost importance of this experience, and they should be helden in particular consideration.

To sum up, *Orti Didattici* are didactic and interesting experiences, a schooling model which tries to safeguard the past for a conscious and sustainable future.

2 In the past

Orti didattici are the heirs of a long educational and didactic tradition: since the beginning of the 20th century with the *Waldschulen* or *écoles en plein air*, particularly addressed to sick children and to the prevention of diseases such as tuberculosis, which were created throughout Europe and the United States, up to Freinet's well-known educational approach (1964).

Past experiences, in Europe and in Italy (see D'Ascenzo, 2018), were inspired by three general assumptions:

- a positivist cultural approach, involved in fighting against poor hygiene, malnutrition and a too low level of compulsory school education;
- a socialist political orientation, defending the process of popular emancipation and welfare;
- and, finally, a new educational approach to childhood, schools and didactics, as *les Écoles Nouvelles* testify with educationists and educational theorists like, for example, Georg Kerschensteiner, Adolphe Ferrière, John Dewey, and Maria Montessori (see, e.g., Skiera, 2010).

Therefore, *écoles en plein air* experiences aimed principally at a healthy and integral form of education, not far from crowded cities¹, but in close contact with the natural environment, such as the seaside or the woods, gardens or farms. Their aim was not a new approach to the natural environment from an educational perspective or with an ecological consciousness, because everything necessarily aimed at health or, as in the projects of Ferrière and Freinet, at making pupils the protagonists of their growth process.

En plein air pupils – we can synthesize – can learn and, more generally, grow better than in the limits of unhealthy school buildings. And, above all, they can recover their health and become stronger adults who can earn their living as workers.

3 A new perspective

The difference between the current experiences and previous ones must be emphasized: the vegetable didactic gardens are not planned and organized as a therapeutic moment, but as a potential laboratory to learn about natural cycles, to get to know the world of agriculture and biological habitats, to acquire conscious consumption habits and, finally, to respect the natural environment.

This new educational and didactic trend is based on two principles: the first is strictly educational; the second is grounded in the serious ecological urgency of our time and, therefore, in its political, ethical and social implications.

We can summarize that the *Orti didattici* aim, on the one hand, to apply a "learning by doing" educational approach to make pupils not only the protagonists of their growth process, but also responsible for their present and future choices, and, on the other, to build young people's ecological awareness. The expected outcome is a new generation

1 The first *Waldschule* was established in 1904 in Charlottenburg, a suburb of Berlin. Moreover, the most important open-air schools in Italy were organized in Genoa and Milan, i.e. two of the most populous and industrialized cities in our country at the beginning of the past century (see D'Ascenzo, 2018).

of women and men, whose keywords could be attention and respect for the natural environment in order to reach the necessary sustainability.

I will refer to some examples to show the importance of these activities, which are both interesting and emotionally engaging.

However, as Clausse (1961) underlined many decades ago, we must not underestimate the risk of simplifying the questions that these activities intend to face.

First of all, I refer to the opposition Nature/Culture, as if the environment lives, survives and could be studied without reference to human history and social choices. The true risk is to assess Nature as an absolute datum, whereas it is always the outcome of many internal and external interrelations.

The truly new educational perspective is to take the environment as a genuine laboratory, where the objects to be observed, described and understood (plants, animals, habitats and so on) are also the necessary media for acquiring scientific concepts and organizing these concepts in a meaningful, cultural sequence.

I think that these experiences can only be truly successful if they are designed to educate in a general and complex perspective, and not only to face a contingent problem, that needs to be effectively addressed through clear political and social choices. Truly educated subjects cannot but be respectful towards their natural and social environment and supportive and responsible towards their neighbors.

Therefore, we can state that, even if these experiences are interesting to train pupils in natural sciences, something more is needed from a general educational perspective.

4 At work

However, to reach a final evaluation of these experiences, it is necessary to describe them.

First of all, let us know why these experiences are planned: on the one hand, as I have already said, we find in all these projects the ecological emergency and all that it implies, from environmental preservation to the problem of natural resources and conscious consumption; on the other hand, we must mention a critical perspective on the supremacy of technology, which disconnects young people from their world and from each other.

For, as Geoffrey E. Bishop (Chistolini, 2022, p. 146)² says, "it is far easier to text or to tweet than it is to speak, and far less risky. Technology has allowed us to disregard our own inner protective sense (caution meter) to not take real risk and to achieve mediocrity and to be satisfied".

From this perspective, the outdoor environment provides a place and an opportunity for children to contact their inner context. Bishop explains: "Nature imparts no demands, it allows a child some alone time, or time in nature with a friend, to lie on the grass, or dig in the soil, to watch a worm or allow water to run over their hands" (Chistolini, 2022, p. 146).

² Bishop began to be engaged in these activities over thirty years ago. After his studies in Australia (where he was born), in 1996 in Wisconsin, he started the Nature's Class Institute. This institution is at disposal of all the interested schools to plan and follow up projects of environmental education and obviously open-air activities.

Therefore, we must not forget children's rights. As we can read in the Decalogue of "The Association Children-Nature"³, the outdoor world is a school, because it is a place where girls and boys can develop freely. In a garden or in a wood or on a farm, they are free to play, to explore, to learn, with no hierarchical structures or rules, in an inclusive and collaborative space where we can find continuous and meaningful exchange between adults and children, families and teachers, outdoor and indoor classrooms. Acquiring habits of autonomous behavior is very important.

And in concrete terms? When we read the projects that the teachers draw up, or look at the downloaded images of these experiences,⁴ we immediately notice that we are in the presence of the genuine tradition of "learning by doing" didactics.

As in the past – if we think of Deweyan suggestions in *The School and Society* (1899) – there is a close relation between school practice and the different aspects of out-of-school life in these contemporary didactic experiences. A scientific spirit matches a joyful social climate, which was peculiar of Italian *école sereine* in the twenties of the past century, especially according to the educational theories of Giuseppe Lombardo Radice (Ferrière, 1927) and to the didactic activities of Maria Maltoni at San Gersolè, described in her diaries (1949). Therefore, we may affirm that in a *Didactic Vegetable Garden* the pupils can act – at the same time – as little scientists, in so far as they approach the natural sciences, and as little artists, in so far as they can freely enjoy and reproduce (painting, singing, and so on) the beauty of the environment.

Therefore, we can list the characteristics of these activities:

1. a close-knit and united teaching team;
2. collaboration with families and educational agencies in the town or region where the institute is located;
3. a general, pervasive attitude of play, inflected in particular special games, for example with the grass and the flowers or the sand, in the woods or in the garden or at the seaside: generally, pupils play together and share their experiences and the joy of discovery;
4. physical activities, like walking or running or riding or even, in extraordinary contexts, climbing;
5. a dialogic didactic approach;
6. continuous, but discreet presence of the teachers, always prompt in helping their pupils, but not in directing their activities;
7. an interdisciplinary approach to learning/teaching activities;
8. observation, exploration of space according to problem solving techniques.

3 This Decalogue was written about forty years ago by the teacher and principal Gianfranco Zavalloni, engaged in defending children's rights. Unfortunately, he died in 2012, at the age of 56. But his legacy still stands as the online references show. See for example <https://andiamoall'avventura.it/2020/11/20/diritti-natura-li-dei-bambini/>, last consultation on September, 15th, 2024, where I found the above information.

4 Online, we can find a lot of documentation concerning open-air schools in general and, particularly, *Didactic Vegetable Gardens*. I have consulted this rich but, after all, similar material. Therefore, describing the characters of these experiences, I have chosen the documents about three Italian schools: two are in Northern Italy, respectively at Tradate, a little town near Varese and at Crema, near Cremona; the third is at Lucca, the beautiful town in Tuscany, i.e. in Central Italy. Unfortunately, in Southern Italy these didactic activities are still rarely planned and organized. See, for example, www.legnolandia.com (giochi nel parco [Games in the Park]) or www.scuola.net (5-motivi-per creare- un-orto-di-classe [Five Motives to Create a Classy Garden]).

By experiencing the outdoor world, pupils do not only learn a specific language, apply arithmetic notions to the different situations in a revival of Freinet's *calcul vivant* and finally know important data, but also learn to classify, to draw and to describe different natural contexts or problematic situations. Nothing is learnt by heart, but thanks to the problem-solving method and according to the logic criteria of inquiry. Therefore, every notion and every concept are destined to stick in pupils' minds and to be still alive, because these notions and these concepts have been freely and actively acquired.

Respect for the environment, natural habitats and eco-system is indirect but desirable and, this is our hope and persuasion, a sure outcome.

5 What is really new: the environment as a new medium

I agree with Elena Marescotti, when she states (2000, 2007a, 2007b) that, in spite of the contingent relevance of an ecological approach in the curricula, when we refer to the natural environment and to its relations with Culture, our intellectual horizon must become wider and wider up to a general consideration of education itself – and, obviously, up to its implications, including, I add, didactic choices and their tools, as far as no didactic project can work without a general, regulatory idea at its basis. Kant (in a general perspective, in his *Kritik der Urteilskraft*, 1790) and Dewey, speaking explicitly also of educational projects (1922, 1938), taught this clearly. Clausse (1961) did not but repeat this concept when he affirmed the superiority of axiology over methodology.

Therefore, I try to consider these specific, undoubtedly interesting activities only in the light of what I have written above, thanks to a scientific approach to educational questions and not simply to practical and contingent suggestions or emergencies.

The real revolutionary idea – in my opinion – is not the active approach to learning/teaching activity, nor the effort to communicate an ecological *forma mentis*, which can be transferred into particular daily habits. The real educational revolution concerns the suggestion of the intrinsic, structural and therefore necessary connection between education and natural and social environment. As Elena Marescotti (2007b) writes, environment acts in educational activities in three directions, i.e. in the relations among individuals and contexts, in the transformations the knowing process is able to produce, and finally in the planned improvement of personal and social living conditions.

I think that *Didactic Vegetable Gardens* may be a good opportunity to realize this complex educational challenge; and not only for their explicitly defined, contingent goals, but because in these experiences the environment is, at the same time and in an extraordinary way, an object to be known, a true laboratory and a medium.

We can say that, to understand the importance and the genuine meaning of environment, pupils must "use" it: in this specific and particular case, medium and goal must not be considered as two different aspects, because they are really interacting. They are two sides of the same coin.

From this perspective, the environment may be considered an important didactic tool not only for its ethical and intellectual meaning, but also because it recovers traditional working tools and, above all, places digital media, on which the younger generations depend too much, in a subordinate or instrumental didactic position. This fact favors the long-term usability of the tools with regard to their didactic-methodological service, and the recycling of materials.

But there is necessarily much more.

Galilei (1623) dealt with the great book of the universe and described Nature not as a datum but as a process, as I wrote in 2007: well, *Orti didattici*, although planned for children, seem to meet this Galilean principle.

As far as the real didactic medium is concerned with the environment itself, pupils must first of all learn to read its characters, its qualities, its interactions; must face the problems it presents; must learn to interact with it and, above all, to understand its intrinsic complexity.

The road to achieving the consciousness of this complexity and to acquiring a deep knowledge of Nature's structures and internal mechanisms is long and difficult and needs time and intense study.

However, the first steps may develop with some simple activities: pupils, for example, are stimulated by their teachers to observe flowers, to draw or to walk in a wood and describe scents and colors, to manipulate soil or to distinguish different kinds of seeds. At the beginning, all these or similar activities develop without the mediation of schoolbooks, digital tools or the words of adults to be learnt by heart. Observing, manipulating, cultivating, eating what has grown in the vegetable gardens are but different ways *to use this medium, which is the real medium of our lives*.

Books, notebooks, tablets, adult lessons, though necessary, will come later and only put in order what was observed, noticed and understood in the open-air laboratory.

Therefore, the prerequisites are laid to answer two fundamental questions: Is Nature distinct from Culture? How and how much have historical events influenced or can influence the natural environment? For the answers to these fundamental questions are the conceptual ground on which it is necessary to build an ecological awareness, congruent with the educational process and the ideal and not only with serious, but also with contingent emergencies.

This is the idea to be stressed. At present, teachers planning these experiences only unconsciously or implicitly consider outdoor resources as didactic tools. For they prefer to emphasize the role of the environment only as the goal of their project, based on the outcome in terms of ecological awareness.

Nevertheless, it is important to emphasize that the successful and long-lasting outcome of these didactic projects and experiences depends on two factors:

- to be able to organize the environment (and especially natural environment) as a true scientific laboratory;
- to realize, as I have mentioned, the complex quality of the environment; as this consciousness is the ground on which it is possible to understand that the environment is and must be at the same time an object to be known, a moral and political goal to be reached in order to protect it, and, finally a medium in the process of gaining knowledge: obviously, in school, in extra-school cultural agencies and, above all, in the long-term and worldwide human educational experience.⁵

⁵ This perspective is clearly testified, for example, in the educational proposal of Eli Gerzon: according to him – and his idea is very nice, even if not easy to be translated into practice – the whole world is like a great school, where people can learn directly, living. The method he suggests, from his point of view, is travelling (see <https://eligerzon.com/worldschooling.php>).

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