

Nature-Culture, Link Educational Design, Integrated Learning Process, Landscapes

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Abstract

Collocandosi all'interno di un ideale orizzonte di sistema formativo integrato, il progetto di ricerca interdipartimentale FIR “*Asse natura-cultura. Progettazione educativa, Sistema formativo, configurazione del territorio*” (avviato presso l'Università degli Studi di Catania) si propone di valorizzare le numerose esperienze educative, didattiche, rieducative, di inclusione sociale condotte su territorio siciliano mediante pratiche formative di coltura della terra e di didattica all'aperto, cercando di produrre, attraverso innovativi strumenti web di database e georeferenziazione, una sintesi operativa tra tutte le realtà che operano sul terreno dell'istruzione, della formazione, della riabilitazione terapeutica e della rivitalizzazione urbana. Guardando soprattutto, ma non soltanto, al mondo della scuola (e dentro contesti intenzionalmente educativi come istituti penitenziari, centri di recupero e reinserimento), la terra diviene *luogo di cura educativa*, terreno d'incontro tra natura e cultura, spazio di dialogo tra culture diverse, esperienza privilegiata di educazione interculturale. L'orto, e il giardino in senso lato, costituiscono il luogo ideale per intrecciare una serie di scambi con la natura, l'ambiente e la comunità, rappresentando una grande metafora del rapporto di rispetto ed equilibrata cooperazione che può e deve intercorrere tra l'uomo e il resto del mondo naturale e vivente.

Framed within the ideal horizon of an integrated research system, the research project FIR “*Nature-Culture. Educational Design, Integrated Learning Process, Landscapes*” aims at giving value to the many, variously articulated, educational, didactic, re-educational, socially inclusive experiences brought about on the Sicilian territory through land cultivation and farming practices, promoting a network of various organizations involved in teaching, education, rehabilitative therapy, urban regeneration.

Gabriella D'Aprile, Maria Tomarchio – *Nature-Culture, Link Educational Design, Integrated Learning Process, Landscapes*



Looking mainly (but not exclusively) at the school context (and other “*intentionally*” educational contexts, such as penitentiary institutions or rehabilitation centers), the *land* becomes the place of educational care, the ground for a contact between nature and nurture, the space of a possible dialogue between different cultures, a privileged experience of intercultural education. The vegetable garden, and more extensively the “garden”, represents the ideal place for a series of exchanges between the subject and nature, the environment and the community, offering a great metaphor for the respectful and balanced cooperation which characterizes the relationship between mankind and other existences.

Parole chiave: natura-cultura, sperimentazione educativo-didattica, scuola attiva, cura educativa, educazione all’aperto

Keywords: nature-culture, experimentation educational and didactic, active school, care education, outdoor education

The axis of nature and culture in the theory and practice of education-teaching. A research connecting both past and present¹

This article outlines the main theoretical frameworks, programmatic aims, and recommendations for practice based on results from a FIR project, financed by University of Catania. The project was launched in 2015 by a Interdepartmental Research Group made up of faculty from Education Sciences Civil Engineering, Architecture, and Medicine. The FIR project originated as a research project to conduct a census of the numerous educational, rehabilitative, and social inclusion experiences conducted in Sicily through practices of land cultivation. Our ultimate aim of this research project was to identify effective examples of integrated education systems focused on land cultivation and preservation that can be replicated in other areas. A secondary purpose for our research was to become familiar with the various factors in Sicily that influence the fragile relationship between humans and nature and identify settings in which the study of land cultivation can be used as education, vocational training, rehabilitation therapy, and urban revitalization purposes in order to promote a balance between human beings and their environment.

The project plan was built upon a scientific collaboration between the Department of Educational Processes, the Department of Architecture and Urban Planning at the University of Catania, and their seven-year partnership with the estab-

Gabriella D’Aprile, Maria Tomarchio – *Nature-Culture, Link Educational Design, Integrated Learning Process, Landscapes*



ishment of the association with communities and schools called the *Orti di Pace-Sicilia* (Peace Gardens of Sicily). *Orti di Pace-Sicilia* represent a concrete example of how the land becomes a place of educational care and the grounds for contact between nature and nurture; the space for a possible intercultural dialogue and to build a respect for the environment (De Vitis, 2012). The vegetable gardens of the *Orti di Pace-Sicilia*, and more generally the “garden”, represent the ideal place for a series of exchanges between individuals and nature, the environment and the community, and the gardens offer a great metaphor for growing a respectful and balance that characterizes the relationship between humankind and their surroundings.

The relationship between humankind and the natural environment has never appeared as fragile and unstable as it does now given the political and economic upheaval occurring across the globe. There seems to be a conception among some political and business leaders that protecting nature is a contradictory element to culture, economic development, and political security, but we see the phenomena being more deeply interrelated and interwoven than ever. The environmental sustainability and the ecological impact are delicate topics object of many international documents addressed to safeguard natural resources. The main purpose of these documents is to spread a growing awareness and show as the consequences of everyday life choices and lifestyle can influence the planet future (Martínez-Alier, J. et al. 2010).

Safeguarding the environment has historically been an important issue, but certainly today it much more important and has become one of the most urgent issues debated by governments and citizens. There is a general consensus that each citizen who should adopt responsible behaviours for sustainable living and safeguarding the environment.

Environmental protection involves important life choices carried out at the local level in order to influence all the community. It seems obvious that a task so complex cannot be accomplished only by bureaucratic institutions that work isolated from the larger community. Instead, multi-level cooperation is required to combine organizations engaged in training and education with local communities.

In seeking to identify effective examples of integrated education systems focused on land cultivation and preservation, the FIR research project acts as a catalyst to nurture perspectives aimed at enlarging the sometimes narrow view of environmental education practices, and thereby move the attention towards taking on an *ethic responsibility of care* (Jonas, 2002) that could contribute to a reconversion of man from “consumer” to “sustainable producer”, thus generating a new awareness of daily consumer behaviours.

Gabriella D’Aprile, Maria Tomarchio – *Nature-Culture, Link Educational Design, Integrated Learning Process, Landscapes*



Land cultivation as educational experiences

The practice of land cultivation becomes a place of educational care and cultural development, and a space of important learning/apprenticeship experiences in the school context, and other educational contexts, such as penitentiary institutions or rehabilitation centres. Through land cultivation, many educational training programs can be experimented, not just focused on environmental protection and education for sustainable development, but for experiences related to healthy living, civics, mental rehabilitation, and the social inclusion of disadvantaged people, such as those with disabilities and special educational needs, convicts, and those at risk of marginalization like immigrants. Land cultivation projects related to cooperative social enterprises and associations for biological agriculture, inspired by eco-sustainable behaviour and use of environmentally friendly technologies can all be used to create a stronger link between humans and their environment.

Results from the *Orti di Pace-Sicilia* project illustrate the potential implications of active community involvement in which people of all ages take a role in the physical care of their natural surroundings, public places, and common assets such as parks and gardens. The act of collectively learning and working to sustain the land does not only result in academic outcomes related to horticulture, agriculture, and biology, but it has a secondary result of helping to retrieve a collective memory of the community toward the renewal of a common regional identity. It is this connection between history, education, and culture that promotes the systematic practice of restoring the memory of the many significant educational experiences of land cultivation different historical and cultural periods in Sicily.

For example, in the early twentieth century the interest in educational practices for the care cultivation of the land took on an entirely unique significance in Sicily to promote a model of integrated education and harmonious development of children's potential. The attention given to the natural environment as an educational project relates to the active learning aspect found in manual labour, and promotes the natural method of learning and principles of social cohesion. A focus on land cultivation as an educational endeavour during the early twentieth century inspired a culture of pedagogical activism and active learning that valued the role of the natural environment in the context of education and cultural renewal.

A detailed analysis of archived documents related to several areas of the Sicilian educational culture in the early twentieth-century bears testimony to the rich Sicilian history advanced pedagogical models and educational experimentation. Sicily offers a significant reference laboratory that boasts a rich historical experience of outdoor classrooms, classroom gardens, educational land cultivation that were widespread since the establishment of Campicello School (RD of November 29, 1894 n. 525), belonging to a system of primary schools that were part of a phe-

Gabriella D'Aprile, Maria Tomarchio – *Nature-Culture, Link Educational Design, Integrated Learning Process, Landscapes*



nomenon of pedagogical activism in the first decades of the twentieth century. The pedagogical activism related to land cultivation that was experienced within the system of primary schools helped to launch an innovative period of educational experimentation that resulted in the movement of *New Education and the Active School in Sicily* (Tomarchio M., D'Aprile G. (ets), 2010-2011). *The New Education and the Active School* movement was not only a sign of how land cultivation education could address issues of rurality such as unemployment and lack of education, but it was also a sign of a growing awareness of the value of educational and teaching experiences conducted outdoors, in direct contact with nature.

Previous research carried out by the research group chronicled the outdoor education experiences conducted at the Grammar Schools “Regio Ginnasio Magistrale” active in Marsala between 1911 and 1927 and directed by Michele Crimi (1875-1963) (M. Tomarchio 2007; M. Tomarchio- G. D'Aprile 2008, 2014). Summer camps, training courses, supplementary courses, garden classes and the *Children's Library* are another example of a model of an integrated education program. The program was conducted by Michele Crimi and explained in his book, *The Educatorio-Ricreatorio Garibaldi*. Extensive photographic documentation of outdoor education programs is also contained in the book *Earth as a Health Education in Sicily*. A wealth of information about past educational programs based on land cultivation and outdoor education exist in unpublished sources from the Family Crimi archive, on display at the documentary exhibition Michael Crimi (1875 to 1963). Unpublished pages of *Sicilian Pedagogy* (Department of Educational Processes, University of Catania) also offer examples of how outdoor education focused on land cultivation helped to strengthen the bonds between humans and their environment. One of the main vehicles used to bring outdoor education to the rural areas of Sicily during the early twentieth century was the summer camp model. Among the most significant camps documented is the one dedicated to Garibaldi. This particular school camp opened in March 1912 on a plot of land that was initially uncultivated, overgrown, and in general ruin. The 8,372 square meters of land was then cultivated by children aged between 8 and 14 years old as part of the summer camp. The children were mostly from families with a disadvantaged economic status. The land was divided into small flowerbeds, which were assigned to small groups of children to care for and cultivate crops. Children learned to plant wheat, flowers, and vegetables under the supervision of a teacher-gardener. In each small plot of land, every child carried out various activities: such as seed selection, weeding, cleaning, fertilizing, harvesting, reaping and storage of products. Young students then enjoyed the proceeds of their work and were allowed to eat the produce and bring it home to their families. The summer camps were an example of how an educational institution responded to the need to not abandon the children after school hours and thus prevented cases of child exploitation that

Gabriella D'Aprile, Maria Tomarchio – *Nature-Culture, Link Educational Design, Integrated Learning Process, Landscapes*



were common at the time in Sicily. The summer camps engage children in outdoor education through hands on lesson and labour, to involve them in occupations that could at the same time act as vocational training on a larger scale. It is through this type of relationship hands on relationship with the land, outside traditional classrooms, that Michele Crimi ideas of pedagogical activism can be seen, in the search of educational contexts that could empower an increasingly suitable way of making space for “new and deeper energies” of the child while simultaneously responding to the many needs of Sicilian children and youngsters. Crimi’s ideas, as seen in the summer camp model, emphasized the central role of the school as the heart of social-cultural development for an entire country. It was this rich history of Sicilian outdoor education that led to the current project launched in 2009: *Orti di Pace-Sicilia*.

The Association works in the Sicilian field making a connection activity among Sicilian realities in educational field, training, rehabilitation, turning to farming practices of plants and trees in a biotechnological and bioregionalism context. It proposes to advertise and carry out shared interventions for the spread of eco-sustainable behaviors.

Land cultivation education: *Orti di Pace- Sicilia*

The widespread procedure of land cultivation for education, re-education and rehabilitation, can be observed in many countries in contemporary times, even in very different cultures. The pedagogical model of reference is that of the integrated education system. Outdoor educational experiences and horticulture for academic-educational, therapeutic, rehabilitation, re-education purposes, and building a culture of shared land in urban areas, represent opportunities to stimulate and strengthen individual skills within the cognitive, affective, and kinaesthetic domains (Wattchow B., Brown M., 2011). But outdoor education can also help to reclaim the urban city as a place with space for communal interaction and collective memory.

With regards to the educational, didactical and pedagogical fields, the use of metaphors, borrowed from the practice of the cultivation of the earth as a complement in the expansion of educative experiences is well known. Interesting implications for formal and informal expansion of anthropological, linguistic, methodological, educational, and cultural education experiences are linked to outdoor education (Gilbertson, K. & Bates, T. & McLaughlin, T. & Ewert, A. 2006). Recently it seems as if pedagogy is most often called upon to reflect the limits of the existing body of knowledge; knowledge acquisition via standardization of expected education outputs. This type of education leads to a very superficial, and mislead-

Gabriella D’Aprile, Maria Tomarchio – *Nature-Culture, Link Educational Design, Integrated Learning Process, Landscapes*



ing reconstruction of learning and it disregards what it means to live in collaboration with one's environment in ways that are sustainable.

The term *Orti di Pace*, comes from the marine biologist and educator David Levi Morenos (1863-1933) (AA.VV., 1923, 1937). Among his many philanthropic activities (it should be noted the commitment he spent educating and organizing the fishing lagoon and rescuing orphans of sailors) from 1919 there was even the Young Workers establishment of colonies including the so-called *Orti di Pace*, at Villa Doria Pamphilj in Rome. It was on the farm adjacent to the historic Villa, on land donated by Prince Don Filippo Doria Pamphili. The current iteration of the idea based on the current research project *Orti di Pace – Sicilia*, launched through the initiative of a group of university researchers, teachers, educationalists, educators, responsible for education and health and social promotion intends to fully exploit the many and variously articulated learning experiences, educational, social and health care present in Sicily, from teaching outdoors to diverse social practices and promoting democratic legality, health, environmental protection procedures and teaching strategies designed to increase the value of processes physical and mental development, the potential learning abilities of people with disabilities.

The different integrated education experiences implemented in the five years of the program, have included many active promoters and engaged a number of educational institutions. Annual training and meetings with associated laboratory activities are set up in collaboration with the University of Catania, which are also open to external participants, in order to expand the network of schools and community groups involved and engage in the exchange of ideas. Through *Orti di Pace – Sicilia* schools have once again played the role of a cultural growth agent, which enriches but also reinterprets the regional peculiarities of the various communities in Sicily. Art.4, in accordance with the activities promoted by *Orti di Pace-Sicilia*: values and accommodates biological and cultural differences in an integration perspective; designs an environmental education by promoting the use of environmentally sound technologies and the practice of environmentally sustainable behaviour; – triggers knowledge of the plant world, its species, its characteristics, the operating mechanisms and interaction with the ecosystem; – gets to know the most important plant species grown in the territory, employs cultivation techniques and tools, the evolution of crops; – creates a meeting point and working transgenerational, promotes human contact with the elderly and valuing their historical and cultural memory; – promotes experiences of aesthetic education through design, creation, care and use of gardens, arboretums, gardens, floral, herbs; – promotes rural knowledge (villas, houses, farms, mills, millstones); – creates pathways to provide professional training and develop skills which can be used in the context of ecological outdoor classrooms, farms, gardens and arboretums teaching, social agriculture initiatives; – designs environments and environ-

Gabriella D'Aprile, Maria Tomarchio – *Nature-Culture, Link Educational Design, Integrated Learning Process, Landscapes*



mental education, promoting the practice of environmentally sustainable behaviour and the use of environmentally friendly technologies.

Without losing sight of the central goals related to the education and teaching discipline, at a time when 'green' is a place attended by more individuals at multiple levels, schools have proposed themselves, in close cooperation with other parties, as a guider in promoting active citizenship procedures which is important for the recovery of urban and suburban in a state of decay, abandonment or social marginalization. On the grounds of special educational needs, in particular for disabled individuals; for schools, for the workplace, for the quality of social relations. On land application, the development envisaged by the practices of the *Orti di Pace* urges, in this case, activation of specific pathways through which set in motion forms of virtuous circularity between being able to, and objective conditions within which these capacities can, in fact, mirror; calls to prefigure the same territory and the living environment in terms of feasibility of context.

In reference to the specific needs of sick people, *Orti di Pace* - Sicilia has resulted in land cultivation activities within the department of neuropsychiatry at the University-Hospital 'Polyclinic Vittorio Emanuele' of Catania. This garden in the hospital grounds was aimed at testing whether it could improve the quality of life of sick children. Hoping that by having direct contact with nature would create conditions that favour the development of sensory capacities, overcoming isolation and the sense of uselessness, which is often accentuated by the hospital stay. A small space on hospital grounds reserved for planted aromatic herbs, flowers and vegetables has created a place where children can be engaged in fun, creative and stimulating educational outdoor activities that become rehabilitative. It is a kind of "hospital free zone", which could also be useful for supporting parents in difficult situations, especially in long hospital stay cases where ordinary family life conditions are far removed. It is no coincidence that at the schools belonging to the of the *Orti di Pace* network, the special education teachers have been among the first to tap into this mechanism for active learning that promote alternative strategies to the usual school practices of knowledge acquisition in order to benefit students. Regarding those with special needs, who cannot do without specific individual help, measures should be taken in order to direct the learning process towards natural environmental resources. After the first experiences with this learning process, its promoters have seen that the educational project has the potential of triggering a reconversion process in humankind, from a passive recipient to an aware producer, leading spontaneously to practice peace on both a personal and collective level.

Gabriella D'Aprile, Maria Tomarchio – *Nature-Culture, Link Educational Design, Integrated Learning Process, Landscapes*



Notes

¹ Paragraph n° 1 and n°2 edited by Gabriella D'Aprile; paragraph n° 3 and n° 4, edited by Maria Tomarchio.

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Gabriella D'Aprile, Maria Tomarchio – *Nature-Culture, Link Educational Design, Integrated Learning Process, Landscapes*



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Gabriella D'Aprile, Maria Tomarchio – *Nature-Culture, Link Educational Design, Integrated Learning Process, Landscapes*



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Gabriella D'Aprile, Maria Tomarchio – *Nature-Culture, Link Educational Design, Integrated Learning Process, Landscapes*



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Gabriella D'Aprile, Maria Tomarchio – *Nature-Culture, Link Educational Design, Integrated Learning Process, Landscapes*

