CO-DESIGNING PATHS OF THE "PUGLIA REGIONAL LAW ON EDUCATION IN NATURE: AGRINIDO AND AGRINFANZIA"

PERCORSI DI CO-PROGETTAZIONE DELLA "LEGGE REGIONALE DELLA PUGLIA SULL'EDUCAZIONE IN NATURA: AGRINIDO E AGRINFANZIA"

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ABSTRACT
Maximum The article documents a systemic Participatory Action Research (PAR-s) process that led to the enactment of the first regional law in Italy on nature-based education. The initiative involved the Apulia Region, universities, educational services, and families, fostering the legitimation of outdoor educational practices and activating pathways for awareness and formative co-design.

L'articolo documenta un'esperienza di Ricerca Azione Partecipativa a curvatura sistemica (RAP-s) che ha condotto all'emanazione della prima legge regionale italiana sull'educazione in natura. Il processo ha coinvolto Regione Puglia, Università, servizi educativi e famiglie, promuovendo la legittimazione di realtà educative in natura e attivando percorsi di consapevolezza e co-progettazione formativa.

KEYWORDS
Nature education, participatory co-design, educational ecosystems, resilience, sustainability
Educazione in natura, co-progettazione partecipativa, ecosistemi educativi, resilienza, sostenibilità

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Introduction

In the study of the relationship between the environment and human learning, there is a growing urgency to identify practices and devices that promote ecological, inclusive and supportive thinking. It is crucial to develop awareness of the interconnection between nature and culture, as well as between ideas and forms of the imaginary, highlighting the relevance of sustainability and harmonious behavior. In this context, the article outlines the participatory action-research (R.A.P.) process that led to the enactment of the first regional law on education in nature. This process involved various social actors, including the Apulia Region, universities, kindergartens, preschools, educators and families, emphasizing the importance of participation in promoting education that integrates the ecological dimension into the school system.

This approach not only underscores the importance of environmental education but is also a significant step toward creating a community that is more aware of and responsible for ecological issues.

The road we have described, which began in 2019 and is still ongoing, is part of a broader, nationwide horizon where education in nature takes on legitimate, significant and scientific prominence1. We acknowledge this by the noticeable increase in the number of scientific publications2 on the subject and the renewed and widespread interest, the organization of many conferences and seminars, the requests for initial training, which have enabled the creation of specific university higher education courses3, and those for in-service training that have involved numerous educational services throughout the country.

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[1] The Outdoor Education has been fully recognized in the recent pedagogical guidelines for the integrated system "zerosix", promoted by the National Commission for the educational and schooling system (MIUR, 2021).

[2] Mentioning just a few of them: Del Gottardo E., Paparella N., *Bambini intraprendenti. La scuola in campagna*, Franco Angeli, Milano, 2023; M. Schenetti, R. D'Ugo, *Didattica, Natura, Apprendimenti. DNA, strumento di valutazione per la qualità dell'educazione all'aperto,* Franco Angeli, Milano, 2022; A. Scarinci, *Il bosco nell'aula. Progettare l'educazione ambientale*, Progedit, Bari, 2021; A. D'Antone, M. Parricchi, (a cura di), *Pedagogia della natura. Epistemologia, prassi, ricerca,* Edizioni Zeroseiup, 2018; M. Antonietti, F. Bertolino, *A tutta natura! Nuovi contesti formativi all'aria aperta per l'infanzia di oggi,* Edizioni Junior, Parma, 2017; M. Guerra (a cura di), *Fuori. Suggestioni nel rapporto tra educazione e natura,* Franco Angeli, Milano, 2015, L. Mortari, *Per una pedagogia ecologica,* La Nuova Italia, Milano, 2001.

[3] Specifically, in the Academic Year 2023/2024 the following advanced training courses have been recorded: training course *"Progettare spazi inclusivi all'aperto*", Università degli Studi

We are also thinking of the spread of services in nature as diverse as agrinido, agriasilo, kindergartens and schools in the woods, kindergarten by the sea, and the birth of the National Network of Public Outdoor Schools4, which reminds us of the importance of promoting initiatives with educational continuity, to work on the school system, creating synergies between different stakeholders and professionals.

All this has facilitated the implementation of educational and teaching practices outdoors, from zero-six services to primary schools all the way to significant experiences in secondary schools (first and second grade).

Obviously, like any new activity, agrinido/agriasilo will have to face several obstacles to become well-established, the most obvious of which are the uncertainty of the potential market, the identification of competent staff, the reorganization of the educational organization, as well as the evolution of pedagogical thinking into a systemic-ecological perspective.

1. The meaning of participation.

To properly understand the process that has been activated and is still ongoing, we need to dwell on the word participation, which often in common-sense representations takes on the traits of a pervasive and protean phenomenon, which in the first instance consists of stepping out of one's own particular, of working for something that transcends one's own direct and immediate interests; in essence, it is reduced to a simple "taking part" in a given act or process, a form of sterile and often solely shouted "presenteeism."

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di Bologna; interuniversity training course *"Educazione e natura. Fondamenti, prospettive e approcci metodologici per un professionista all'aperto"* (128 hours, 20 CFU), which reached its sixth edition; under convention among Università della Valle d'Aosta, Università degli Studi di Milano – Bicocca, Università degli Studi di Bologna and Università degli Studi di Parma, converted in a Master of first level "Educazione e Natura: Competenze per una Formazione Ecologica e per la Sostenibilità", Training course in "*Outdoor Education"* third edition (200 hours, 12 CFU) – Università LUMSA, Roma; training course in "Educazione in natura: conoscere e progettare esperienze educative in natura (outdoor education) – Università del Salento.

[4] The National Network of Public Outdoor Schools has been established and has taken its first steps during 2016, based on some educational experiences in the Bologna territory and at regional and national level. At present date it includes 91 public schools from the entire national territory: Cf. https://scuoleallaperto.com (visited on the 13th of April 2025).

No wonder then that N. Paparella (2009) includes the word participation among the passe-partout words, which serve to ensure consensus rather than to open a dialogue, serve to narrow rather than to broaden the horizons of thought; they constrain the truth, instead of making it shine in its epiphanic force.

From the experience of the "Schools in Nature" and then in the family groups that worked in support of the regional law, we worked according to an idea of participation to be interpreted as "being a part," not simply as part of an organism, a group, a community, but as taking responsibility within a process, an act, a task.

When fully involved everyone is called to "put in something of their own" to make a commitment, in the logic of reciprocity and interdependence. In participating, roles do not disappear, but they lose sharpness in their boundaries, which do not serve to distribute tasks.

For in participation, we are dealing with projects with a view to which each person carves out their own space of service, not in the sense of a fruition of services, but to situate themselves in service, according to a logic that postulates gratuitousness and oblateness and thus also openness and hospitality.

2. Goals and objectives of the PAR process

In accordance with the rationale set forth above, a participatory action-research process involving all social actors was launched and defined the following goals:

- *School and ecological transition*: creating the conditions for the growth and rise of a new ecological consciousness and careful naturalistic awareness in the younger generation;
- *School as a complex context*: recognizing the need for a redefinition of school structures, knowledge and cultural impact to effectively meet the challenges of the future.

These goals have been detailed in the following objectives:

- establishing the conditions for a process of legitimizing the existing realities in the Third Sector that work as "Outdoor Schools," "Schools in the Woods," Agrinido and Agrinfanzia in the Apulia Region.
- possibility of improving the awareness of actors (educators, families, - third sector bodies, businesses, citizen groups, etc.) about educational practices in nature and the pedagogies underlying these practices.

3. The Participatory Action Research (PAR).

About the methodology employed, from our point of view, educational research finds its foundational reason in the need to better guide practice (Dewey, 1951) by assuming a transformative function in relation to the awareness that the actors involved can mature from what emerges from the results of the research itself (Mortari, Valbusa & Ubbiali, 2020).

Educational research, therefore, responds to the need to explore and understand reality by also providing operational indications that can help opening a reflection and raising awareness about the possible transformations that can be achieved for the context and the actors involved in creating a research path (Fabbri, 1994).

The importance of conducting educational research in children's services refers to the possibility of improving the actors' awareness (educators, families, stakeholders) about educational practices and the pedagogies underlying these practices to reorient them in the perspective of formative evaluation.

For this reason, the decision to undertake participatory action research (PAR) was aimed at bringing different instances into dialogue within a concerted collective process, however aimed at the production of knowledge, decisions and shared actions through methodologies and techniques specific to participatory planning and evaluation.

In the PAR, the participatory dimension is neither spontaneous nor accidental but is focal, since it is intentionally structured according to whether the emphasis is consciously placed on different degrees of participation and how to achieve them by subjects and/or groups (e.g., Arnstein scales or McIntyre scales).

From a procedural perspective, we use methodologies and techniques specific to participatory planning. These are intended to define the outcomes of co-production processes of knowledge and decisions, as well as action and intervention projects aimed at achieving change.

On the other hand, we also use approaches, methodologies and techniques peculiar to participatory evaluation aimed at bringing into dialogue the value perspectives inherent in instances represented by subjects along a triangulation of viewpoints as a consensus-building-oriented process of cross-cultural confrontation. This is consistent with Fourth Generation Evaluation (Guba, Lincoln, 1989; Cousins, Earl, 1992; Whitmore, 1998; House, Howe, 1999).

In addition to the procedural dimension, which in itself already takes on a substantial character, it should be emphasized that the evaluation process that

accompanies PAR, serving as feedback to calibrate the progress of the work, becomes an increasingly intentional and structured activity, configuring itself as a process of meta-reflection on PAR itself - on its processes, impacts, results and achievements.

The meta-reflection activated through evaluative research on PAR takes the form of a learning process aimed at both the development of evaluative strategies and the progressive reorganization of practice. In a nutshell, evaluation, in its formative (learning) function, is expressed as co-assessment within the PAR group, focusing on the process and the results generated. In this context, evaluative research, understood as a reflective act accompanying the PAR journey, takes on the role of participatory monitoring of the process, project and its outcomes.

PAR is characterized by a systemic curvature (PAR-s) into the fact that it considers the importance of involving, along a participatory design and evaluation process, both top-down instances of established groups (Apulia Region) and bottom-up instances of establishing groups - territorial entities (Del Gottardo, Patera, 2022).

The goal is to achieve dialogic and "win-win" consultation, based on reaching an intersubjective agreement that supports the process of change related to the issue-problem identified in the research question. The process of participatory evaluation and planning, therefore, concretely and in a structured and intentional manner directs the dialogue and consensus-building among the different instances.

Starting from this brief analysis, the organization initiated a Participatory Research-Action (PAR) process with a twofold objective. On the one hand, to make explicit and conscious the intentionality of its educational action, particularly with respect to the possibility of increasing the awareness of the actors involved (educators, families, third sector realities, businesses, citizen groups, etc.) regarding educational practices in nature and the pedagogies that inspire them. On the other hand, the path focused on the definition of shared standards, criteria and procedures, aimed at defining the necessary conditions for a legitimization process of the Third Sector realities active in the Region of Puglia such as "Outdoor Schools," "Schools in the Woods," Agrinido and Agrinfanzia.

4. Stages of research.

Briefly, the process of evaluation and participatory planning promoted within the PAR has allowed actors to gain a better awareness (educators, families, - third sector entities, businesses, citizens' groups, etc.) about educational practices in

nature and the underlying pedagogies, and also, help reaching the sharing of common standards, criteria and procedures useful to qualify the conditions for a legitimation process of the existing Third Sector bodies working as “Outdoor Schools,” “Schools in the Woods,” Agrinido and Agrinfanzia in the Puglia Region.

In the five years of the project (as of 2019) the PAR has been structured in 5 macro-phases:

1. Mandate construction (customer analysis);

2. Access negotiation in researchers' organizations;

3. Educational activation of the PAR Group (PAR Group establishment, goal setting according to the topic-problem and research question, PAR Group training);

4. Evaluative research:

4.1. Production of shared knowledge (participatory evaluation).

- demand analysis: PAR group representations analysis; training needs analysis;
- desk analysis: policy analysis; secondary data analysis of various entities involved; documentary analysis on educational practices of education in nature;
- context analysis: stakeholder analysis involved; organizational ethnography on educational activities, consultative settings through evaluative focus groups and semi-structured interviews to produce shared knowledge on the issue-problem

4.2. Generation of shared decisions (participatory evaluation).

- Sharing the results of step 4.1; hypotheses for action: deliberative settings for the concerted definition of: education in nature, vision of school in nature, educator's competencies; professional standards; training standards; code of ethics; planning, design, teaching, evaluation with reference to educational offer.

5. Intervention:

5.1 Generation of shared actions (participatory planning):

- planning and organization of participatory tables with the regional institution through GOPP/PCM, for drafting the regional law on education in nature;
- redefining the organization and PAR group through GOPP/PCM;
planning and implementation through GOPP/PCM of educators' competency maintenance system.

5. Research Methodology

The methodology of evaluative-type case studies (Bassey, 1999; 2003; Yin, 2011) has enabled us to capture the relationship between the intervention implemented and the effects of the intervention over time (evaluative case). In PAR, evaluative research methodology is conceived as a second-level investigation of PAR itself and thus of the training processes and the actions needed for changes within them (learning evaluation). In this regard, the "ecological" evaluation model (Alvarez et alii, 2004) considers both variables for the evaluation of training outcome (evaluation training) and variables for the effectiveness of training transfer (effectiveness training). As Orefice (2006) argues, PAR uses three methodologies: that of inquiry (in this case evaluative), proper to the rationality of thinking; that of involvement, which relies on the meanings of feeling: that of acting, through which the transformations to be promoted in the context are agreed upon. Therefore, transversally to the 5 macro-phases of PAR, evaluative research of third-generation socio-constructivist approach (Stame, 2001) scanned in phases of: ex-ante, in itinere, final, ex-post evaluation (Palumbo, 2001) was prepared.

5.1 The Timing of the Research

The evaluative research project that accompanied the implementation of the PAR began in September 2019 and is still in the final stages of processing the results and the five-year report.

5.2 Research team, subjects involved, gatekeepers

The research team was made up of Ezio Del Gottardo and Andrea Tarantino. The subjects involved were fifty-five educators and seventy-two families from different schools in nature in the region. The educators and educators were involved through "snowball sampling" [5], referents called gatekeepers (Collins, 1986) (three representatives of some schools) involved and allowed to build contact between the research team and the different schools in nature and their families. All the stakeholders involved formed the "Regional Committee for the Promotion of

[5] The snowball sampling is a research technique in social sciences; researchers begin with a small group of participants and ask them, afterwards, to recruit other participants among the people they know, thus creating a chain effect just like a snowball that becomes bigger.

Education in Nature" which subsequently the first phases (1-2-3-4) dialogued with the regional institution.

5.3 Analysis Methodology

In summary [6], the PAR process enabled the "Regional Committee for the Promotion of Education in Nature" to share a concerted model of evaluation and awareness of educational practices in nature and the pedagogies underlying these practices, with reference to the definition of professional and organizational standards and training standards as the outcome of a collective process aimed at the co-production of knowledge, decisions, and actions in the realm of participatory planning and evaluation.

We highlight some of the outputs produced by the process because of the research aims and objectives reported in the third paragh for the purpose of this publication.

As a result of the process put in place in the "Regional Committee for the Promotion of Education in Nature," with reference to the identification, recognition and definition of the model of education in nature, the PAR group developed a semi-structured interview (Bichi, 2002, Zammuner, 1998) that explored three thematic cores in relation to the research objectives: knowledge, decisions, actions within the framework of participatory planning and evaluation.

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As a function of the process put in place in the "Regional Committee for the Promotion of Education in Nature" with reference to the identification, recognition and definition of the model of education in nature, the PAR group developed a semi-structured interview (Bichi, 2002, Zammuner, 1998) that explored three thematic cores in relation to the research objectives:

- visions and representations of educational projects in nature;

- educational gains of children;

- school-family-territory relationship;

[6] For reason of space, we do not mention the details regarding the diverse PAR phases and the results of the educational research with evaluative scope that led the process; for these latter we refer to the study that will soon be published.

We selected 55 educators and professionals who have developed educational pathways in nature over the past three years, based on their accessibility and expertise in the topic and educational model.

The unit of analysis is the textual corpus of 55 interviews.

The corpus followed the stages of collection, processing and construction of the empirical base from the interview transcripts (Kvale, 2007).

The analysis strategy is exploratory with a non-theory-driven inductive approach oriented to the context of discovery (Guba, Lincoln, 1989; Silverman, 2016). The methodology of analysis is interpretive (Richards, 2005) with "Thematic Coding" analysis technique (Creswell, 2014; Kuckartz, 2014) structured as follows: reading the corpus, identifying thematic subcodes, grouping these latter into higher thematic codes (CTS) and subsequent construction of the interpretive categories.

Results were validated both on the 5 quality criteria of qualitative research (credibility, transferability, reliability, authenticity, confirmability) (Seale, 1999) and through two specific phases: (Creswell, Miller, 2000):

- *Collaboration* (initial stage, referring to instrument design and piloting);

- *Member checking* (final phase, following the production and return of results).

For reasons of space, we do not report the details of the qualitative research quality assessment procedure or the validation of the results.

6. Analysis of the interviews

The analysis with thematic coding on the textual corpus of interviews resulted in the construction of the higher thematic codes (CTS) which group the 21 subcodes with which the corpus excerpts were labeled. Subsequently, we built up the interpretive categories analyzed in the next section.

Table 1 shows the outcome of thematic coding: in the first column are the top thematic codes, in the second column the subcodes, and in the third and fourth columns, respectively, the number of segments coded in all documents in absolute value and percentage. The last column, on the other hand, shows in how many documents were found the individual subcodes with which the corpus was labeled.

Top thematic codes	Subcodes	Segments coded in all documents (N.)	Segments coded in documents (N.)	Documents (N.)
Educational offer	Real and not artificial learning environments	72	6,0	51
	Authentic relationship with the natural context	70	5,9	50
	Predominance first of doing and then of saying	68	5,7	49
	Experiential and exploratory dimension in nature	67	5,6	49
	Socio-cultural dimension of the garden	67	5,6	49
	Educational offer: synergy between body, mind, emotions	65	5,5	50
	Spontaneous play and structured outdoor play	54	4,7	37
	Use of unconventional objects and materials	42	3,8	30
	Environmental education as the order of things in the world	37	3,4	21
TOT CTS		**542**	**46,2**	**n/a**
Learning outcomes	Increased self-esteem in children	45	5,1	35
	Children's positive emotional state	44	5,0	34
	Awareness of limits and autonomy in children	44	5,0	34
	Increased creativity and inventiveness in children	36	4,5	32
	Reduced interest in the use of digital devices (smartphones, tablets, television, etc.)	34	4,3	26
	Enhancement of bodily related features in children	34	4,3	26

	Propensity for sociality and relationship building	32	4,1	23
TOT CTS		**269**	**32,3**	**n/a**
Relationship school-family - territory	High attention to harmony between school and family	55	5,3	35
	Presence of educational activities with and for families	45	4,5	33
	Sharing school activities with families	45	4,5	33
	Psycho-pedagogical support to families	39	4,1	28
	Involvement of local entities in educational planning	39	3,1	28
TOT CTS		**223**	**21,5**	**n/a**
TOTAL		**1034**	**100**	**n/a**

Table 1. Thematic Coding on a textual corpus

In summary, Table 1 shows that:

- The corpus of interviews was coded with 1034 extracts deemed significant for the purpose of analysis;
- 3 CTSs were produced that qualitatively saturate the interpretation of the corpus with respect to the research objective;
- The CTSs reported in order of quantitative saturation (segments coded in the corpus in absolute value and percentage) are “educational proposal” (46.2%); “educational gains” (32.3%); and “school-family-territory relationship” (21.5%);
- The distribution of subcodes in the entire corpus of interviews is almost homogeneous (Medium = 4.6).

The interpretive categories produced were formulated because of the subcodes and CTSs while making explicit the significant excerpts that saturate each interpretive category.

Conclusion

The delivery and analysis of interviews represents one of the different phases of the participatory action research project (as described in Section 5), specifically it falls under Section 4.1 *Shared Knowledge Production (participatory evaluation*): *"*

"Involved stakeholder analysis; organizational ethnography on educational activities; consultative settings through semi-structured interviews to generate shared knowledge on the issue-problem."

Three interpretive categories emerge from the analysis, representing as well as three criteria for an education in nature.

With respect to "educational proposal" we refer to affective ecology as an inescapable educational task. Affective ecology is "the study of both affective and cognitive relationships that human beings establish with the living and nonliving world" (Barbiero, 2017, p. 24).

Educating in affective ecology means creating conditions for a child to refine their ability to understand the natural world while developing affectivity, awareness and naturalistic intelligence. Experiencing in contact with nature, in dialogue with what field life proposes, offers children the possibility of noticing a multiplicity of relationships and relations As Lombardo Radice had noted, it is not so much the tree, or any part of it, that is important, but the forest or rather "all that whole of life that is the forest" (Lombardo Radice, 1954, p. 64).

Referring to "formative gains," children are engaged in exploring the world by learning to become their own masters rather than masters of things.

They care for people, objects, plants, animals, and everyday rituals like washing, setting the table, arranging objects, and organizing the art gallery for created artifacts.

Thanks to these actions, children perform exercises in: seriation, classification and distribution; they can: make their own choices, create their own "naive" theories about the world, fill their industrious, collaborative, supportive lives with content; practice the use of denotative and connotative language and learn to read contexts and their systems of rules.

The relationship between school, family, and territory suggests that educational quality is seen in how it serves as a lab for children's development through ongoing exchange of ideas, practices, and environmental organization. Educational

specialization should stem from collaboration among researchers, coordinators, operators, managers, and local stakeholders.

By specialization is meant the service's adoption of an agreed “educational model and method” responsive to the educational needs of all social actors participating in the service: children, families, operators, institutional managers, local stakeholders. From this follows two facts that affect the construction of indicators and their organization into a system. On the one hand, indicators represent not only phenomenal and observable variables but also dimensions inherent in experiences, images, motivations and expectations. On the other hand, children, educators and families have crucial importance in such a system, as subjects with rights vis-à-vis the educational center. In the case under consideration, specialization is configured as the result of an experience sustained and legitimized by a community of like-minded individuals.

This first phase of shared knowledge creation generated a few additional results, culminating in the drafting of the Apulian regional law, a unique document, which we summarize below:

- *Creation of a Regional Committee of Education in Nature and linking it to the National Committee;*
- *Definition of the model of education in nature that integrates all actors' instances and draws on scientific literature and the current regulatory framework;*
- *Definition of the educational proposal and offer (Agrinido - Agrinfanzia);*
- *Definition of a model for monitoring and evaluation of the educational offer quality;*
- *Drafting of the Regional Law of Education in Nature (R.L. No. 2 of March 21, 2023, Integrated System of Education and Schooling for Children);*
- *Training of educators in outdoor settings (creation of an advanced course: “Education in Nature: knowing and designing educational experiences in nature (outdoor education)- Department of Human and Social Sciences - University of Salento”.*

These achievements demonstrate progress toward implementing an educational model that promotes education in nature and a holistic and integrated approach involving all stakeholders. The creation of the Regional Committee indicates institutional support for sustainable and innovative educational practices. Similarly, defining a nature education model and educational proposal shows an awareness

of the educational needs of children and families. Additionally, drafting regional law and training educators for outdoor settings aim to provide quality educational opportunities that foster a relationship between individuals and the natural environment. These elements contribute to building a community committed to sustainability and the growth of future generations.

Author contributions

1 Author of paragraphs 3, 4, 5, 6.
2 Author of introduction, paragraphs 1, 2 and Conclusion.

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