

# A NEW REALITY FOR ITALIAN RURAL AREAS: EDUCATIONAL FARMS

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## 1. Introduction

The educational farms that have existed in Italy for over twenty years are working farms, most with rural tourist facilities, offering educational activities as part of their normal work. They were created in order to supplement income in an agricultural world that is struggling with low farm budgets and encourage young farmers in the sector. They are based, to a large extent, on similar experiences abroad particularly in France, Spain, Belgium and Germany, that have aroused considerable interest also at community level through a series of reference standards that are clearly referred to in the last Rural Development Plan (2000-2006)<sup>1</sup>.

Italian regulations on the subject currently apply to a limited number of regions including Emilia-Romagna, Lazio and Friuli-Venezia Giulia and highlight a sensitivity that, with only a few exceptions, must still be consolidated or has yet to be developed. On the whole, the country is covered by a series of projects that bring together a significant number of farms with one common aim, that of enhancing their land, identity and typical products through carefully planned educational tours.

This is not extemporaneous but part of a reassessment of ideas behind land use theories that, for the last few decades, have considered the rural landscape as a resource to be protected and enhanced as far as the identity and quality of places are concerned in order to promote its economic growth rather than being surplus to requirements<sup>2</sup>.

This argument has not taken geographers by surprise and, for some time, they have been affirming the need to examine land using sectorial criteria so that the sciences of Nature and the sciences of Man can be effectively coordinated, as was also stated in Seoul in 2000, at the 29th International Geographical Congress<sup>3</sup>, when the concept of "diversity" as the main idea behind the study of territorial realities was the subject of debate.

Educational farms fall perfectly in line with this concept of geography. Even when fulfilling farm objectives, their intention is to give Man a sense of Nature and the existence of Nature including the ecosystem, economic organization, cultural heritage and the local system when he participates in these guided tours.

## 2. Diversity and rural landscape

### 2.1. The concept of diversity: innovations and educational perspectives

The concept of diversity is not new to geographical thought and in the last century, it belonged to both classical and functionalist geography in varying degrees.

Classical geography, developed in the first half of the 20th century by Vidal del la Blache, considered the environment as a series of non-homogenous areas in which the interdependence between the physical environment and human community was expressed in a number of different ways. Each area therefore had its own geographical personality with its own unique and original features<sup>4</sup> Functionalist geography, led by Hartshorne and especially

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<sup>1</sup> The plan is better known as E.C. Regulation no. 1257/1999. Reference to the educational farms is not included in the regulatory framework that encourages diversification of the complimentary functions but is limited to regional applications.

<sup>2</sup> Interpretation of the countryside that goes from a "support of functions" to a "heritage to be exploited", is clearly expressed by Magnaghi, 1988, pp. 13 onwards. In the text the author criticizes those who favoured "use of the land in line with economic growth" especially when drafting planning schemes.

<sup>3</sup> A detailed account of the results of the congress is given by Vallega, 2001, pp. 3-10.

<sup>4</sup> Vallega, 2001, p. 3. The article describes how classical geography has paid special attention "to the diversity of the territory consisting of interaction between nature and culture and expressed by the variety in landscape".

popular in the 1950s and 1960s, aspired to searching for homogeneity between geographical areas although it was based on the conviction that in every area physical and human elements and the relationships that are established contribute to generating different spaces<sup>5</sup>.

The study approaches of both these schools were surpassed recently with the work at the 29<sup>th</sup> International Geographical Congress at Seoul, in particular, that focused its attention on diversity and proposed conceptual innovations and educational perspectives.

These innovations concerned the nature and extension of the concept of diversity and were inspired by the ideas that emerged from the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development held in 1992 in Rio de Janeiro where the principle of sustainable development was adopted<sup>6</sup>. In addition to other topics, it focused on territorial manifestations of the interaction between ecosystems and human communities and concluded with the need to develop a diversity policy consisting of measures taken to preserve the ecosystems and cultural identity placed at risk by increasing human pressure and the spread of standardized life models (Vallega, 2001, pp. 3-4).

By accepting these premises, the concept of diversity in geography has enriched territorial descriptions that are based on the interactions between the natural environment and human communities in an area and aim to protect the ecosystems and quality of life. In other words, diversity has been recognised, in the context of territorial management, as the main quality of the ecosystem and geography has been called upon to investigate and represent the territory in its ecological, social and cultural manifestations in an itinerary that no longer separates physical, human and cultural aspects but fully integrates the sciences of Nature and the sciences of Man on an epistemological and methodological level in order to understand the identity of places and the ways that they interact with global change and globalization<sup>7</sup>.

This conceptual development has opened up significant educational perspectives that give geography a new more exalted position in schools and society in contrast with its role as a science that is limited to describing the earth's surface. The bonds between natural processes and human behaviour that are established in a given context are now at the centre of debate and Man has been called upon to find fulfilment in Nature through responsible management of the transformation of the ecosystem.

To be productive, this managerial ability must become part of individual training. For this reason, from an early age, everyone must learn how to identify ecosystems and define them through the groups of animals and vegetables that must be connected to the forms of human presence (urbanization, economic activity, industry, transport) according to how they have established themselves in time and space. In this way, geography is closely linked to other school subjects, especially history and natural sciences, and there is no danger of forming hybrid subjects.

The role of scientists, with regard to the ecosystem, is to provide the concept, organizational structure and properties and the role of geographers is to examine the ecological differences of areas once interaction with the human communities has been clarified with the help of historians who provide information on the economic organization and the social life past and present<sup>8</sup>.

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<sup>5</sup> Functionalist geography maintained that "the most characteristic task of geography did not only consist of the study of elements and relations but also the division of the territory into uniform areas, i.e. areas in which elements and relations assume uniform characteristics". Vallega, 2001, p. 4.

<sup>6</sup> With regard to the concept of sustainable development, the Conference highlighted, above all, ecological integrity, economic efficiency and social equity. The Congress in Seoul took up the theme by acknowledging the ecological, socio-economic and cultural components in the concept of diversity. Additional information can be found in Vallega, 2001, p. 3 onwards.

<sup>7</sup> The distinction between global change and globalization is summed up by Vallega, 2001, p. 9. The concept of global change is linked to the increase in atmospheric temperature and consequent transformation in biogeochemical cycles (fluvial, glacial, marine, wind erosion, cycles of elements and compounds...). Globalization refers to the set of standardized life and social behaviour models that have spread throughout the world through the advent of world networks (tourist circuits, satellite communication, the Internet, e-business, container transport,...).

<sup>8</sup> The allocation of responsibilities is proposed by Vallega, 2001, p. 8.

The argument is highly complex. Geography recognises the natural processes determined in abiotic contexts by the plant and animal communities and studies them in relationship to the links that are established with human behaviour. In this way, the subjects cover a much wider area. They include all the influences related to global change from the external environment and human development in its economic, social and cultural implications and focus on the concept of cultural heritage as a series of assets, material and otherwise, developed over the centuries by human communities and giving it its identity. This identity must be protected from the dangers of homogenization so that it can be transformed into an economic resource especially through tourist circuits.

By concentrating on cultural diversity, geography has radically changed an educational approach that was once dictated by linguistic and religious factors and is now dictated by ethnic and cultural ones.

It has moved towards pragmatism and complexity in order to generate motivation and interest (Vallega, pp. 4-11).

## 2.2 The rural landscape

As the concept of diversity has evolved, the concept of cultural landscape has also changed. Before, it was compressed in a narrow naturalistic determinism that limited study to processes through which inhabitants in an area satisfied their material needs and it is only in the last two decades that study has opened up to consider the reasons that play an important role in the characterization of human action on the area. In addition to economic reasons, reference is made to political, social, religious, ethic, psychological and ecological reasons that are equally important when interpreting the landscape as the result of the dynamic equilibrium between human and natural action.

Today, environmental equilibrium and the values of civilization that are typical of the countryside are at the heart of disciplinary research and are considered as assets that must be protected from industrialization and homogenization. The rural landscape is considered as the result of interaction between inhabitants and the land and is not studied to preserve the status quo but to have a positive effect on the construction of new landscapes (Piccardi, 1986).

Rural geography has had its part to play in this general discussion and using the ideological position of L. Waibel (1888-1951), based on the need to examine the agricultural landscape from a statistical, ecological and physiognomical point of view as a starting point<sup>9</sup>, and the ideas of P. George, (1965)<sup>10</sup>, U. Toschi (1959)<sup>11</sup> and Gribaudi (1952) in particular<sup>12</sup>, it went on to define a field of study that ranges from the examination of natural and human

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<sup>9</sup> L. Waibel's way of thinking is widely covered in Migliorini, 1968, pp. 160-169. The statistical task "concerns the distribution of cultivated plants and domestic animals" as "values related to the intensity of production and yield". The ecological task concerns the study of reciprocal relations between the individual natural factors (climate, soil, irrigation, biological world) and human factors in the various forms of economy and business (horticulture, agriculture, plantations, ...). The physiognomical task involves the "study of agricultural landscapes in order to determine a regional typology".

<sup>10</sup> Agricultural geography according to George is responsible for coordinating the results of different disciplines to reach a synthesis and belongs to the trend of human sciences. He highlights the interdependence of different factors that compete to determine the aspects of rural life that varies a great deal from country to country beginning with primitive peoples and going on to the speculative cultures of industrial civilization.

<sup>11</sup> The author (1897-1966) maintains that agricultural geography should have been based on recognition of the distribution of the rural economy in its various forms on the land surface, the investigation of the relationships between the forms of rural economy and the environment and the description of the agricultural regions. "I fondamenti psicologici della Geografia umana", in "*Rivista Geografica Italiana*", 1954, by the same author, is useful for more information on the study of forms of rural life and the concept of agricultural landscape.

<sup>12</sup> Gribaudi, 1952. In this work, the author states that agricultural geography has the rural landscape as its field of study "namely, the concrete physiognomy that derives at a certain part of the land surface from the coordination on it of all the spatial aspects that agricultural use of the soil gives rise to from crop sharing and agricultural land improvement to viability and markets (p. 12). He also states that "there can be no doubt that the forms of settlement belong to the rural landscape since they are geographically expressed through the distribution of homes" (p. 12).

factors, technical aspects and agricultural organization seen in relation to their environmental impact and the assessment, entity and value of agricultural production to the problems of its commercialization and consumption<sup>13</sup>.

It is an extremely broad line of study that is understood by a contemporary world and geared towards making geography a science that passes transversely between natural and human sciences to obtain a general awareness of the environment and a land science that is responsible for rural areas that have for too long been dismissed as superfluous when compared with urban areas.

Indeed, the problem of planning the protection and use of the rural landscape in Italy has not yet taken shape. The subject was indirectly raised for the first time by Emilio Sereni in 1961 with the publication of "Storia del paesaggio agrario italiano" (A history of the Italian agricultural landscape) at a time when Italy was affected by large-scale migration from the South to the North and from the mountains to the plains with chaotic development of urban areas and coastal and mountainous areas that would have been more suitable for tourism.

In response to this state of affairs that still felt the effects of a bimillenary agricultural culture, Sereni focused on *centuriation*<sup>14</sup>, a political instrument used in Roman times to modify the natural landscape and produce an artificial landscape with clear well-defined rules. This was the only planning experiment performed on large areas of land that had widespread control of villages and smallholdings, waterways and roads. Over the centuries, this has not been repeated and the result is currently represented by laws and development strategies that deal almost exclusively with urban development and only refer to agricultural land in relation to urban expansion and sometimes subject it to specific regulations that only apply to buildings.

Instead, the aim is to achieve global planning in which building issues and land use interact on the same level, generating rules that meet the need for preservation and development that is compatible with existing structures and resources.

It is a challenge that, on a disciplinary level, requires highly developed analytical and planning skills and, on a political and administrative level, requires the willingness to confront the countryside and the environment. However, it can be tackled and won by drawing inspiration whenever possible from other measures that have already been taken at a regional and municipal level. I refer, for example, to law no. 5/1995 of the Region of Tuscany and the development strategies adopted by some municipalities such as Cervia, Cavalese, Rovereto, Faenza and Ariccia<sup>15</sup>.

With this law, the Region of Tuscany has laid down the foundations for total control of the territory and has established principles and methods from a sustainable development point of view by acknowledging the need to protect the vital resources in the area whether they are natural (air, water, soil, animal and floral ecosystems) or human (city, settlement patterns, landscape, cultural materials and documents)<sup>16</sup>.

With an integrated study of what has been built and not built, the Municipality of Cervia has determined the measures to be taken in the area in its "Recovery plan for rural land". This study involved analytical cataloguing of the buildings for which it collected the historical – typological features and space-time variants and an examination of territorially specific phenomena (organization of smallholdings, lay-out of fields, lay-out of roads, drains and

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<sup>13</sup> Migliorini, 1968, pp. 160-169. On the same subject see Gribaudo, 1952.

<sup>14</sup> Centuriation was a method of cultivation used in Roman times to reclaim large stretches of land and make them fertile. Plots of land were formed of large squares of 710 metres each side and then divided into holdings and the road system and waterways established.

<sup>15</sup> Conti, 1998, pp. 12-13.

<sup>16</sup> The law affirms that "natural resources in the area are air, water, soil, ecosystems of fauna and flora" and that "the aforementioned natural resources, the cities and settlement patterns, the countryside and the cultural materials and documents are vital resources in the area". It also establishes that the government must work "in favour of sustainable development guaranteeing the transparency of decision-making processes and the participation of citizens", "by safeguarding the right to self-determination of decisions taken concerning life and work".

ditches) in order to define the most recurrent structures and infrastructures from a historical-typological point of view<sup>17</sup>.

The General Planning Schemes of the Municipalities of Cavalese, Rovereto and Faenza have been very careful to incorporate European trends in environmental sustainability and any work that has been carried on in the area has respected the *genius loci* and the natural environment. The alteration to the General Planning Scheme of the Municipality of Ariccia is equally explicit in calling for integration between town planning and ecology and theorizing a method of planning that places the environment, historical form of the area and plans for transformation on the same level.

The challenge has therefore already been taken up and credit for this should not only be given to the professionals in the sector and administrators but also to the pressure exerted on them by the general public who no longer want to live in unhealthy places with no memories of the past and are ready to adopt behavioural codes for social production in the area.

In this perceptive, studying a limited local context is not a banal task but provides the opportunity to understand the basic elements first of the local project and then those on a larger scale in order to transform the countryside into a resource to be exploited. This was understood by the legislators who in 1979 and 1985 drew up the ministerial study programmes for the middle schools and primary schools respectively and rejected the idea of an environment “with no boundaries, distinctions, characterization and identity” and children who had to face “a world that had become widely incomprehensible, unexplainable and ineffable, difficult to understand, explain and talk about”<sup>18</sup>. Instead, they proposed a geographical approach that focused on the acquisition “of a specific way of observing” and “an appropriate language for describing”<sup>19</sup>, in the name of pragmatism and direct observation to be implemented in the streets, the neighbourhood, the fields and the wood. Through the geographical characteristics of an area, children must be helped to acquire the critical skills that are needed to judge the urban and rural context they live in and which they must take care of.

In this educational osmosis between schools and the land, educational farms are particularly important and open up a direct channel of communication between farmers and citizens so that citizens are aware of the culture and traditions of the agricultural world. This is a difficult task in a historical context in which technological, social and cultural transformations have meant that individuals’ relationships with the world of primary production have been transformed to the point that, as indicated by the European Council of Young Farmers, a survey involving 2400 European children aged between 9 and 10 years has revealed that 51% of them does not know where sugar comes from, 27% does not know where cotton comes from and only 40% links bread to wheat and flour (a percentage that drops to 12% for Italian children)<sup>20</sup>.

### **3. Educational farms**

#### **3.1. Educational farms and city farms**

Any study of educational farms must first clarify a basic point: they are structurally very different from city farms. City farms are also known as urban farms since they are situated in cities or on the outskirts of cities. They have mostly been set up on public property and are run by volunteers. As a result, they are not profit-making organizations and propose practical activities (looking after livestock and poultry, horticulture, fruit-farming, nursery growing, cereal growing, workshops for transformation of farm products,... ), that aim to help city dwellers to rediscover the rural world, its biological rhythms and the interdependence between the city and the countryside.

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<sup>17</sup> Information taken from an essay by Conti, 1998, p. 13.

<sup>18</sup> Ministry of Education (edited by) New programmes for primary schools – Min. of Education - Rome -1985, p. 8.

<sup>19</sup> Various authors, 1979, p. 137.

<sup>20</sup> The percentages are taken from the leaflet “Le fattorie didattiche in Italia”, edited by the *Osservatorio Agroambientale* in Cesena that can be consulted at the site( [www.agraria.it/osservatorio](http://www.agraria.it/osservatorio)).

They first appeared in London in 1972 and then in Lille in France in 1974. They then gradually spread to other European countries (Belgium, Holland, Germany, Sweden, Denmark and Norway). Since 1990, they have belonged to the European Federation of City Farms based in Dilbeek in Belgium<sup>21</sup>. In Italy, at present, three are in operation<sup>22</sup>. The first to be set up in 1977 was the "Bosco Grande" belonging to the City Council of Pavia and consists of a 20 hectare lowland forest, a total of 2 hectares of land suitable for sowing and a small farmhouse on the banks of the River Ticino. The "Cascina Falchera", that has been operative since 1996, on the other hand, belongs to the City Council of Turin. It covers an area of 17 hectares situated on the northern edge of the city and consists of an 18<sup>th</sup> century farmhouse, a stall, a wood, pastures, plots of land suitable for cultivation and a pond. The last farm to be established in 2000 was "La fattoria dei bambini", at S. Vittorino near Rome. It consists of only one hectare of land, given to the Cultural Association "L'isola di Peter Pan" appointed by Rome City Council to carry out the project "Conosci la fattoria", by a large commercial farm<sup>23</sup>.

Their activities are principally aimed at schools but they also welcome adults who are attracted by what they have to offer to the whole family. In the school year 1999-2000, the farms were visited by approximately 13,000 children of primary school and middle school age. They offer a wide variety of guided educational tours and workshops run by specialized personnel (teachers, co-ordinators) in collaboration with experts in the field<sup>24</sup>.

Educational farms, on the other hand, are real working farms compelled by necessity (low incomes, abandonment of the countryside) to attempt direct communication with city dwellers and partially draw them away from the relationship they have at present with the agri-food industry. They do not have teachers and teaching staff but expert farmers who are able to arouse a critical approach and the curiosity of visitors not only towards how the animals live and the origin of farm products but also towards the social, economical, cultural and ecological value of their activities.

### 3.2 Educational farms

In 2000, there were 273 educational farms in Italy according to a survey carried out by the *Osservatorio Agroambientale* in Cesena with a contribution from the Ministry of the Environment<sup>25</sup>. Emilia-Romagna had 115, followed by Veneto (28), Lombardy (26), Trentino (25), Piedmont (22), Lazio, Marche and Abruzzo (8), Calabria (7), Umbria and Tuscany (4), Puglia (3), Campania and Basilicata (2). Almost half of the farms had rural tourist facilities (120) and even more were involved in organic farming (131). Today the number has increased and is estimated at just under 500 even if it is impossible to calculate the exact number because only a few farms belong to two organizations that are well-established in Italy (the C.I.A. (Italian Confederation of Farmers) and the Consorzio Agrituristico Mantovano (Agricultural Consortium of Mantua) whereas many others belong to small local observatories that are difficult to locate and others go out of business for a number of reasons each year.

The organization with the highest number of participants is the Department of Agriculture in the Emilia-Romagna Region (138) that, divided into nine provincial sections, is currently sponsoring the "Fattorie aperte e fattorie didattiche 2001-2003" project that has already been mentioned and intends to "promote awareness of food and agri-food products from Emilia-Romagna", "arouse interest in the discovery of the environment and agricultural activities", "propose educational support and close collaboration with teachers for 'active' food and

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<sup>21</sup> Information has been taken from the website [www.efef.vgc.be](http://www.efef.vgc.be) of the European Federation of City Farms (EFCF) in Dilbeek in Belgium.

<sup>22</sup> Information on Italian city farms have been taken from "*Le fattorie didattiche italiane. Mappa*", pp. 32-4.

<sup>23</sup> More information on the project can be obtained from the publication "Conosci la fattoria. La fattoria dei bambini", edited by Rome City Council, 2000.

<sup>24</sup> A list of courses offered by the three City Farms can be found on pp. 32-34 of the text edited by the Osservatorio Agroambientale of Cesena - *Le fattorie didattiche italiane. Mappa, cit.* The figures for the number of pupils who visited farms in the school year 1999-2000 are found on the same pages.

<sup>25</sup> Reference is made to the publication by the Osservatorio Agroambientale in Cesena that has already been mentioned.

environmental education programmes”, “support the diversification of activities in farms”, in compliance with the measures taken in support of rural development adopted by the European Union and “promote school tourism in rural areas” even if clearly the main aim is to increase awareness of the origin of food products and the path they follow from the fields to our tables with respect for the environment and our health.

The environment and agricultural activities are discovered by recovering the cultural and environmental value of the land, a knowledge of plants and farm animals and the work of farmers and the values of rural life in general. These objectives makes it clear that not all farms can aspire to be included in the regional network of educational farms. They are selected by the provincial administration in the area on the basis of a number of requirements for each farm and the person in charge of it or the person who organizes the educational activities for them. The farm must use productive systems with a low environmental impact “(integrated and organic farming)”, represent the “agricultural reality in the area”, with farm buildings or small farmyard animals and a structure that is suitable for receiving visitors. Coordinators must be strongly motivated and have strong communication skills. They must attend training courses so that they are able to interact with the teachers (who also attend training courses) and use the teaching aids they are provided with correctly. These are essential requirements for the acquisition of a work methodology based on an intense relationship with the schools that includes taking an active part in organizing the training programme and on an ability to deal with the practical activities by keeping the level of interest, reflection and critical nature of the children high and exalting the interdisciplinary nature of the activities.

This task would be difficult if a coordinated organizational structure had not be set up on an institutional level by the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Sustainable Development and on a technical level by the *Osservatorio Agroambientale* of Cesena together with the Departments of Employment, Professional Training, School, University and Equal Opportunities, linked with the Department of Tourism and made operational by the recent creation of a regional work group for educational farms<sup>26</sup>.

Faced with a commitment of this type that is capable of providing substantial support and financial help, the Emilia-Romagna Region has asked the farms that are taking part in the project to sign a “Quality card”<sup>27</sup>, that establishes, irrespective of the characteristics of the land, the quality requirements and standards needed to belong to the provincial networks and remain there beyond the period of one year required for accreditation. In particular, issues such as training for farmers who must take part in a general course and subsequent refresher courses, teaching, reception of visitors and safety are all dealt with.

As far as the educational activities are concerned, the farm must only accept a number of children that is in direct proportional to the number of staff present, provide the classes with materials provided by the Region and materials it has prepared itself, check objectives and the programme to be followed with the teachers prior to the visit and adapt the guided tour to the children’s age and school programmes so that the farm successfully collaborates with the school.

Rooms or covered premises must be provided for educational activities in the event of bad weather. Recreation areas must be sectioned off, the premises cleaned and cleared of obstructions and equipment that is no longer in use and the “farm must be seen as if through the eyes of a child”.

Safety requirements range from a general “compliance with current health and safety regulations” to supplying a fully equipped first aid box with a doctor on call, taking out compulsory insurance with third-party liability risks including the risks of food poisoning and sectioning off and clearly marking risk areas. It is also necessary to “choose the animals

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<sup>26</sup> Reference is made to the publication by the Osservatorio Agroambientale in Cesena that has already been mentioned.

<sup>27</sup> The “Quality Card” is shown on p. 20 of the publication edited by the Osservatorio Agroambientale in Cesena.

needed for the activities and demonstrations carefully” and ascertain if any children have allergies or special health problems<sup>28</sup>.

The projects proposed by other organizations are largely inspired by the same objectives. The origin of foodstuffs, old and new methods of cultivation and breeding, seasonal cycles, relationships with the past, the basic principles of ecology and the formation and protection of the landscape are recurrent themes in all the statutes. The quality requirements that the farms must meet are always the same.

Without a doubt, educational farms are not so strongly supported by the political system and quality checks are often ineffectual outside Emilia-Romagna. It is evident that other regions prefer quantitative expansion whereas Emilia-Romagna is already at an advanced stage in which it must consider the qualitative aspect and tends to select farms to recompense the organizational efforts of the farmers with a higher income and optimize financial investment. To do this, it organizes training courses for the farmers on an annual basis, meetings with the teachers to produce educational and informative material, publicity campaigns and subsidizes class transport. The fact that there is a problem of selectivity is shown by the fact that at the end of the school year 1999-2000, farms in Emilia-Romagna had an average presence of 14 classes each and only exceeded farms in Veneto (10.9), Abruzzo (10.5), Trentino (2.7) and Basilicata (2): Results in Puglia (183.3), Piedmont (96.2), Lazio (67.5), Lombardy (44.8), Campania (25), Marche (23), Calabria (18.1), Umbria (15.6) and Tuscany (14.7) were more positive.

In the following school year, however, projects undertaken by the two national organizations (Region and *Osservatorio Agroambientale*), led to a sharp increase in attendance that reached an average of 30.4 classes per farm thus demonstrating the soundness of the strategies that have been adopted. This is highly positive especially if we consider that the high attendance in some regions is sometimes made less significant by the low number of educational farms operating in the area<sup>29</sup>.

#### 4. Methodology

Each farm is in itself somewhere where there is much to learn including the rediscovery of the peasant culture and civilization, reflections on the agricultural landscape, problems of ecocompatibility and market trends, safeguarding of the local characteristics and interference from globalization. However, if a close relationship with the schools is to be instilled, an organizational structure that is geared towards learning is required. In other words, the person who co-ordinates activities in each educational farm must find their own method of presenting the rural world. It must not simply repeat what has already been studied at school. School teaching methods have no place on the farm and children and young people with their own expectations want to enter a different reality and be stimulated by it.

If this is to occur, whoever welcomes the children to the farm must experience the same emotions and love and know the countryside. They must be capable of selecting activities, preparing educational areas, using equipment and teaching materials and organize activities and manage human resources and group dynamics efficiently. This is not an easy task but one that the co-ordinators on educational farms usually perform well with the help of training courses (where attendance is compulsory) and support from the institutions. In this joint project, we have already drawn attention to the effectiveness and efficiency of the Emilia-Romagna Region. It is a landmark that is recognized throughout the country by virtue of its

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<sup>28</sup> Objectives, characteristics, organizational structures and quality requirements for the educational farms in Emilia-Romagna have been taken from the publication by the Osservatorio Agroambientale (edited by), op.cit., pp.17-20, and the brochure 'Fattorie didattiche: a scuola nella fattoria ecologica', a guide for the school year 2001-02 written for the Province of Forlì - Cesena by the *Osservatorio Agroambientale*, Cesena.

<sup>29</sup> These figures refer to processing effected with indications supplied by the publications mentioned in the previous note.

training courses organized in nine stages of theory-practice (60 hours), three intermediate stages (34 hours) and a study trip abroad<sup>30</sup>.

The stages cover presentation of the course, management of human resources, communication techniques, organization, logistics and accommodation, study of community legislation and assessment of operational effectiveness. The intermediate stages are dedicated to individual study, planning a food education service and publicity, logistics and accommodation. The study trip (usually in France and Spain) covers the adoption of measures for developing quality production and agricultural realities as well as techniques for organizing the educational tours. Undoubtedly, the courses are structured so that importance is also given to farm image and, for this reason, diversity of landscapes, promotion of typical products, marketing, tax, social security and insurance regulations are all taken in due consideration. However, the school as client is undeniably a primary concern not only because it is an important means of promoting tourism in the sector but also because it promotes the farms to potential users in the area who guarantee a continual presence and source of income and are therefore desirable. For this reason, training is focused on communication and socializing techniques, relations with teachers, the simulation of recurrent cases of management of services and activities and the general principles of teaching.

As a result, when they return to their farms, the co-ordinators know how to organize areas and structures, equipment and teaching material but are also aware of the fact that farm rhythms must be gauged according to teaching requirements. For this reason, all stages of the educational tours must be carefully selected and prepared and the way that they are organized and visitors are welcomed as well as methodological skills are extremely important. The methodological skills, assessed by direct controls and the examination of teaching materials, are based on the principle of joint management of the teaching/learning process with the school and the adoption of communicative techniques that are geared towards group development and experimental procedures.

Joint management of the teaching/learning process is the most problematic element when establishing collaboration between educational farms and schools. Generally speaking, schools are not yet ready to accept requests from outside especially when they come from a reticent rural world that is still considered subordinate to the urban areas and culturally inferior. This attitude, that is not in line with the ideas behind the reformism of recent years that prefer the autonomy of schools so that they are firmly established in the area, does not take into account the fact that the teaching subjects are the scholastic reflection of the cognitive and communicative categories that Man uses to differentiate and interpret the complexity of the environmental reality. This fact generates the tendency, that is fortunately becoming less evident, by schools to strip the visits to the educational farms of their educational content and determines the reaction of the more astute farm workers who want environmental issues to play an important part in school planning with a strong interdisciplinary component.

This demand, even if dictated by the secret wish to be part of the school tourism business, is well-founded from an educational point of view. If visits to farms are to be educationally productive, they must be an integral part of the school project and prepared by the teachers in collaboration with the farm coordinator in order to cultivate a sensitive approach and interest in the pupils for the topics they will be studying and to ensure that they have the basic knowledge and ability required to carry out the planned activities. There must also be strong collaboration between the two parties once the visit to the farm is over and the pupils return to the classroom. The visit, in which the time dedicated to learning and recreation must be carefully balanced, is not an invitation to teachers to show a lack of interest. In addition to supervising the safety of their pupils, teachers must not only keep their level of interest high by intervening with well-thought-out and timely comments but once back in the classroom, they must return to the exclusive role of teacher in summarizing and assessing what has been learnt.

Communicative techniques must be tailored to the level of maturity of the group visiting the farm and usually have different approaches depending on the different age groups. With

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<sup>30</sup> The last course, that is part of the project "Fattorie aperte e fattorie didattiche 2001-03", was approved by the Regional Council with resolution no. 137/2001 and has been developed by the regional work group "Orientamento dei consumi ed educazione alimentare" that it refers to.

children of primary school age, the importance of play is stressed and children learn by playing. The play component gradually becomes less important with children of middle school age as work activities (with all due precautions taken) come into their own. Children may, for example, be assigned a small area of land in which to grow crops. Secondary school classes concentrate on learning about specific arguments and the only moments of relax are during recreational activities. Finally, preference is given to adopting experimental methods<sup>31</sup>. This option is dictated by the need to favour a form of environmental contact of continual discovery in schoolchildren. They must be continually stimulated and assess the difference between what they know and what they still have to learn about the world that surrounds them.

In cases in which it is most correctly applied, the methodology has a precise sequence of events. It begins by *defining the field of study*. This operation, that is of an intellectual nature, involves determining the microcontext in which to direct research. The next stage, involving the observation and analysis of the aspects that characterize the field of study, is effected from different perspectives related to the subjects to be taught and is aimed at collecting information. At the same time, there is no need to explain what has been observed since this would detract from the educational value of the research activity. This then goes on to the *problemization of information* stage introduced by the co-ordinator or one of the teachers who will briefly sum up the information. This raises questions as to the type and development of the phenomena observed and analysed in the field of study.

Formalization of the problem introduces the final stage of the *formulation of conclusive hypotheses*. Children are encouraged to express themselves and intuition is favoured without the fear of making mistakes since each hypothesis must then be carefully examined and tested. The process, that uses the brain storming technique<sup>32</sup>, is highly educative since the concept of error becomes a resource.

The next step involving checking the validity of the formulated hypotheses is based on a comparison between the hypothesis and knowledge of the subject. Inappropriate solutions are rejected and the appropriate ones placed in the right context once they have been transformed from a specific to a general level.

The final stage involves the stimulation of analogical transfer in which pupils are made aware that the knowledge and methodologies used can be applied to similar situations. This is a very important step because it helps pupils to use their knowledge of a familiar situation to tackle an unfamiliar situation.

This methodology is in line with the school syllabus that is currently adopted at all levels. In primary schools, all subjects are intended to help children to be acquainted with and understand the environmental reality through systematic educational use of the land. Physical and social space is both a starting and concluding point of curricular proposals and exploratory and cognitive activities and has abandoned the fragmentariness of the school syllabus in 1955 for a more systematic approach. A careful and thorough understanding of the countryside through a methodological approach that the geography syllabus wants to base on activities "guided by problems and proposals" is desirable<sup>33</sup>.

Middle school programmes (1979) follow the same path although much less explicitly. They did not intend to conceal the main themes but make the social issue, that at that time aroused considerable general interest, more prominent. The objective of "developing one's own conscience and its relationship with the external world" is made very clear and the relationship between Man and the environment is pointed out since it is intended to identify interaction between the physical and biological worlds and human communities as a preliminary steps towards their participation in the critical and creative management of reality. Here too, the use of an experimental methodology is recommended. For secondary schools the most recent reference standards are in the final document of the Commission for the

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<sup>31</sup> The theoretical reference that is essential for determining experimental procedures is the text written by various authors, *L'educazione ambientale nella scuola del futuro*, CFSA/ENEA, Rome, 1993.

<sup>32</sup> The expression refers to group work technique in which each person spontaneously expresses individual ideas in order to inspire the maximum number of ideas that will only later be critically assessed.

<sup>33</sup> The first quotation is taken from the 1985 ministerial programmes for primary schools whereas the second is from the 1979 ministerial programmes for middle schools.

reordering of school cycles (February 2000). Here, geography, as part of a historical-geographical-social discipline, is confirmed as a human science of land and society that is called upon to decipher territorial complexity and interpret facts and problems of contemporaneity within the context of space and time through the use of experimental methods and development of the analogical transfer stage in particular.

The Moratti reform shows no signs of wishing to upturn the regulatory framework described above. It continues to insist on the importance of participating “in the values of culture, work, civilization and social coexistence” as well as “the strengthening of cultural, political, religious and territorial pluralism and the rediscovery of one’s own social identity”<sup>34</sup>.

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<sup>34</sup> The quotations are taken from Cerini and Spinosi, 2002.

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